



A Monumental American Figurehead of an African King

Yellow pine covered in black tarry pitch.

43 in. H x 29 in. W.

On view at the *Mariposa Museum & World Culture Center*,

57 Circuit Avenue, Oak Bluffs, MA 02557,

in the context of the exhibition *Freedom Songs*

July 4-Sept. 30, 2020

Unlike figureheads representing women, allegories, heroes, deities, or Native Americans, which are all relatively common, ones representing Africans or African Americans are so rare that it's impossible at this stage to be sure what this monumental bust originally symbolized. One of the problems is that its details point towards competing stories.

The main clue is the circle of regularly spaced rectangular blocks around the cranium. If you look closely, you'll see traces of yellow paint on their outer surfaces, suggesting that they once held a crown away from the skull, making this the image of a king. This clue, which has been overlooked, doesn't fit previous descriptions of the work, which appeared in a show called *Folk Sculpture U.S.A.* at the Brooklyn Museum from March 6th through May 31st, 1976, and a book called *American Vernacular: New Discoveries in Folk, Self-taught, and Outsider Sculpture*.¹ Both the curators and authors assumed that

¹ By Roger Ricco and Frank Maresca. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002. p. 114.

the figurehead, which belonged to the Marvill Collection formed by Marvin and Jill Baten, represented “an African American man” and was made around the 1850s – possibly for “a Hudson River schooner”, because it was found in upstate New York.

Although the figurehead probably did come from an American ship - given where it was found - and might even have been carved by a black sculptor, there’s no reason to assume it portrays an African American rather than an African, especially since it represents a monarch. There is also no reason to assume that it comes from a schooner, since such vessels usually have figureheads that are only half its size - when they have figureheads at all. This means we must look for other explanations.

One possibility is that the figurehead represents **Balthazar**, who was one of the three magi and came to be seen both as the King of Arabia and dark-skinned. The transformation of Balthazar into the “black magus” occurred when Saint Bede, who lived in the 8th century AD, concluded that the magus must have come from the southern Arabian Peninsula, because that was where his gift – myrrh - was grown. This deduction and other extrapolations led to the association of each of the magi with one of the three biblical “races” – making them emissaries of all of humanity at Christ’s birth. These races were conceived as being the descendants of Noah’s three sons, Shem, Japheth and Ham - with the Hamites first being equated with Egyptians, and finally all dark-skinned people. As the black magus, Balthazar would have been seen by pious 18th and 19th century ship-owners as a man of such wisdom that he’d been able to follow a guiding star to a rendezvous with two other sages, before they resumed their journey to Bethlehem. If this figurehead does represent him, then it’s entirely possible that it came from a ship called the **Black Magus**, **Black King**, **Balthazar**, or even the **King of Arabia**.

But that’s just speculation. Some hypotheses are even more intriguing to a researcher because they are so historically problematic. My second guess is that the heroic image graced a ship that took blacks fleeing American persecution to Africa under the auspices of the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone or the American Colonization Society (ACS), which landed settlers in what became known as Liberia. If it does have something to do with one of these organizations, I like to think it was associated with its first one, which was founded by a prosperous Quaker ship-owner named **Paul Cuffe** (sometimes spelled Cuffee) – whose father was Ashanti and mother was actually a Wampanoag from Harwich. One of his ships, the **Elizabeth** (which came to be known as the **Mayflower of Liberia**) took 9 African American families to Sierra Leone in 1815/16. Even though it’s doubtful that the Elizabeth bore such a male figurehead, there’s always the possibility that one of Cuffe’s other ships, such as the 162-ton barque **Hero** or his biggest ship, the 268-ton **Alpha**, did bear it. Although it’s probably just wishful thinking, I love the possibility that this figurehead might have been commissioned by such a decisive, cosmopolitan, and idealistic man connected to Cuttyhunk, where he was born, and the Cape and Islands.

But the fact is, I haven't found detailed images of his vessels' prows or even of the first ship to take black settlers to Africa after he died in 1817 - the **Nautilus** - which the ACS sent to Cape Mesurado in present-day Liberia. This voyage introduces a thorny phase, since Cuffe was persuaded to provide the ACS with advice even though he knew it was supported by slave-owners like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe as a way of getting free blacks - who were seen as "agitators" - out of the country. If the figurehead did personify an ACS ship, then it would have simultaneously represented the settlers' aspirations and propagandistic flattery on the part of the project's hypocritical backers. Although this possibility is disturbing, it's a lesson in how idealistic movements can be co-opted by fellow travellers, and resonates with the other stories generated by this sibyllic figure.

Another possibility is that the figurehead was posted on an actual slave ship before such emblems were hidden in an effort to keep British naval officers, who started implementing a ban on the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1808, from recognizing such vessels. At first the idea of placing the image of a proud African king on the prow of a ship used to carry African prisoners seems counter-intuitive. Why on earth would the owner of a "slaver" do that?

The answer is that it might have killed three birds with one stone. First, by paying homage to rulers of such states as Benin and Kongo, who sold captives from the interior in return for such things as guns and brass torques known as manillas (which were used as currency). Second, by potentially persuading prisoners, who had just undergone the worst weeks of their lives, to board a ship, although they knew people disappeared that way. These prisoners had been captured while some of their friends and family members were killed and raped. In many cases they'd been chained together and forced to carry heavy elephant tusks to the coast, where both they and the ivory were sold. They had then been kept in cells till the local monarch's clients appeared from across the ocean. So it's just possible that such a figurehead would have helped to lull such captives - most of whom had never even seen such huge vessels, if they lived in the interior - into believing the future might not be any worse than the present.

Then the hypothetical slave ship would have sailed into a port like Charleston or New Orleans where buyers were waiting. That's when the figurehead would have fulfilled its third function by advertising the strength and "breeding" of its captives as opposed to the "merchandise" brought by competing slavers. According to this monstrous possibility, the figurehead would have been a triple win from the point of view of a cynical propagandist.

There is even a piece of evidence in the form of another figurehead that such a scenario might have been put into practice. The other figurehead, which either represents a man of African descent dressed as a gaucho or one of the "half-bred" mounted Indian hunters of the South American plains, who were known as Boleros,² was seized as a trophy by the HMS Sharpshooter when it stopped a suspicious ship in 1851, and found 26 women and 3 children

² Sworders' Winter Country House Sale on Dec. 9, 2014.

hidden under a hatch. After confiscating the figurehead, which the slaver's crew had indeed hidden in an effort to disguise their vessel, and saving the prisoners, the British sailors burned the renegade ship.



*The black gaucho or bolero from the slave ship "Piratenim" captured by the H.M.S. Sharpshooter in 1851.
25 in. H x 12 in. W.*

But the fact is that even such a logical hypothesis is just an educated guess developed in an effort to determine where the truth might lie. There's actually something wonderful about this phase of the research, since the bust is still the vector for many possibilities and is further ennobled by mystery. Here are some of the other stories that might explain its existence.

First, it could be an allegory for Africa, in which case the ship might have been called the **Africanus**. Another possibility is that it personified a vessel named for a literary character, in which case it might have been called the **Othello**, **Moor**, or even the **Oroonoko** or **Royal Slave**, after a tale³ by a 17th century female novelist Aphra Behn about an enslaved African prince who leads a revolt and yearns for his homeland.

Although I don't think it's likely, I like to think the ship might have even been named for the mighty **Daggoo**, who was one of the Pequod's three

³ Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave by Aphra Behn (1688).

harpooners in Moby-Dick (along with Queequeg and the Vineyard's own Tashtego).

Next, the ship could have been named for a historical hero such as **Hannibal** (like a notorious slave ship that sailed in 1694), or, if it was owned by an Abolitionist, for example, after **Toussaint Louverture**. Another possibility is that the ship was named something like the **Creole**, which was an actual ship whose prisoners managed to rebel in 1841. It's interesting to note that Frederick Douglass's novella The Heroic Slave⁴ was inspired by the leader of that revolt, the ship's enslaved cook, Madison Washington.

Finally, the ship might have had successive names, since slave ships, for example, which were known as "**Guineamen**", were often repurposed by navies and pirates after being captured, since the vessels were built for speed in order to evade capture and deliver their prisoners alive. The **USS Nightingale** and **HMS Black Joke** are examples of such repurposed slavers.

So who was this proud king? Whoever he is, he represents African strength and pride. No matter what the ship owner's motives were, he's a masterpiece capable of breaking through history's heavy seas and exerting his own dignity as he forces us to grapple with the past's turbulent paradoxes.

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⁴ The full title is *The Heroic Slave, a heartwarming Narrative of the Adventures of Madison Washington, in Pursuit of Liberty.*