

European Old Master Paintings Reexamined In New York Under A Fresh Take On Blackness And Slavery

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Juan de Pareja (ca. 1608–1670), Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, Spanish, 1650
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM WEBSITE

Across the world's finest art institutions and most prized collections, a number of exhibitions are recontextualizing what makes an old master painting. Erasure of Blackness in the Western art historical canon has been a source of anguish mentioned by many Black artists working today, such as Adebunmi Gbadebo, who recently exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art concurrently to a solo show at Claire Oliver, and Simone Elizabeth Saunders, who has a show coming up March 17th.

Over just the last few months, places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art are consciously working to change perspectives on some of the same works of art that have previously felt exclusionary. Court painter Diego Velázquez is known for his *Las Meñinas* portrait of the Spanish royals, but also for his assistant, friend, fellow artist, and slave Juan de Pareja. Juan de Pareja, Afro-Hispanic Painter opens April 3rd, with insights included by the late Harlem Renaissance scholar Arturo A. Schomburg.

On February 27th (closing just days before the Metropolitan showcase, on March 30th), *Ten True Stories of Dutch Colonial Slavery* from the Rijksmuseum traveled to the United Nations.

As indicated in the title, the Rijksmuseum show takes 10 true stories from the 17th to the 19th century, when Dutch slavery was abolished. Spanning the colonial Dutch empire in Brazil, Suriname and the Caribbean, as well as in South Africa, Asia and in the Netherlands itself, the stories are anchored by a single object called a tronco, or a wooden foot stock used as punishment and constraint.

Originally shown in Amsterdam in 2021, the Visitors' Lobby is dedicated to the art as part of the United Nations Outreach Programme on the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery, largely sponsored by the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN and the Dutch diplomatic mission in the United States. It is reported to be the first exhibition on slavery in Dutch history. Discourse with American and Caribbean experts is included in the program at its closing, then travel around the UN until December 2024.

The rawness and sorrow of traumatic histories is challenged by contemporary artists, however.



The Unicorn in Captivity, from the Unicorn Tapestries, Netherlands, 1495-1505, tapestry in wool with ... [+] CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Claire Oliver first learned of Canda-based Simone Elizabeth Saunders' work during the Black Lives Matter movement, and it wasn't long before they began working together. Saunders has a show debuting March 17th at Oliver's Harlem gallery called *Unearthing Unicorns*, in dialogue with the unicorn tapestry at the Met Cloisters.

Saunders was struck by how trapped the unicorn was...and her work sets to free it, along with Black joy, Black love, and Black magic. Through cultural mythology and a rooting in the body, her work challenges tradition and revitalizes it through a racially provocative and positive lens.



Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Break Away at Dawn*, 2022. *Unearthing Unicorns* series, Hand tufted velvet, ... [+] CLAIR OLIVER GALLERY

Ultimately, the combination of traditional and contemporary art is ushering in an exciting new era for art history, which promises further exhibitions that undo the black-and-white typification of the past.