

# SJAM

## Social Justice Alliance for Museums

Social Justice and the International Slavery Museum: An Interview with Lucy Johnson, Senior Exhibition Officer

- Could you give me some background about The International Slavery Museum?

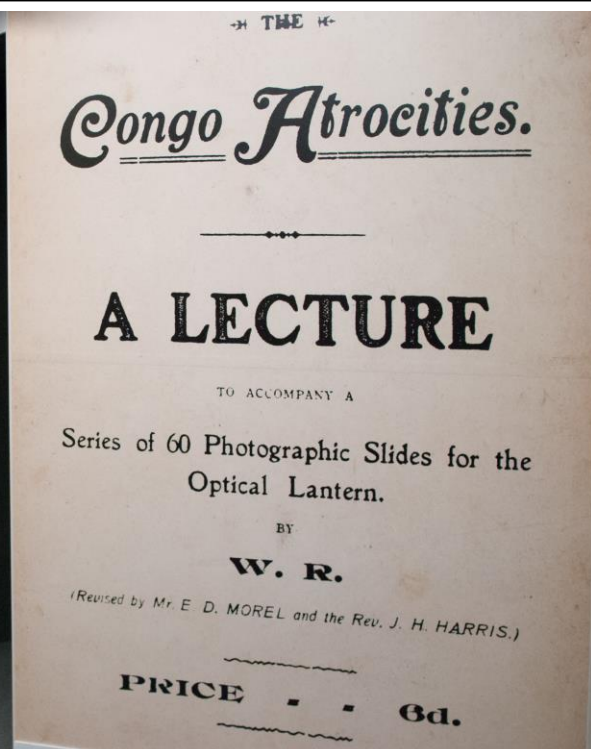
The International Slavery Museum opened on 23 August 2007. Not only was this the date of the annual Slavery Remembrance Day, but the year 2007 was particularly significant as it was the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. It is the only museum of its kind to look at aspects of historical and contemporary slavery as well as being an international hub for resources on human rights issues.

The International Slavery Museum highlights the international importance of slavery, both in a historic and contemporary context. Working in partnership with other museums and organisations with a focus on freedom and enslavement, the museum provides opportunities for greater awareness and understanding of the legacy of slavery today.

It is located in Liverpool's Albert Dock, at the centre of a World Heritage site and only yards away from the dry docks where 18th century slave trading ships were repaired and fitted out.

Our display galleries, which can be found on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum building, concentrate on the history of transatlantic slavery, its many legacies, and the wider issue of freedom.

There are four galleries: Life in West Africa, Enslavement and the Middle Passage, Legacies and the Campaign Zone. They explore the story of transatlantic slavery from the complex and vital cultures of West Africa before the coming of the Europeans, through the horrific middle passage onboard ship, to life in the Americas. The galleries demonstrate the determined and relentless resistance to enslavement, and how enslaved people themselves contributed to gaining their eventual freedom.



Brutal Exposure Installation Shot

- Your current Brutal Exposure exhibition addresses issues relating to social justice, can you tell us more about it?

Brutal Exposure (24 January 2014 to 7 June 2015) presents what was probably the first photographic campaign in support of human rights. It documents the exploitation and brutality experienced by Congolese people under the control of Leopold II of Belgium in the 1900s.

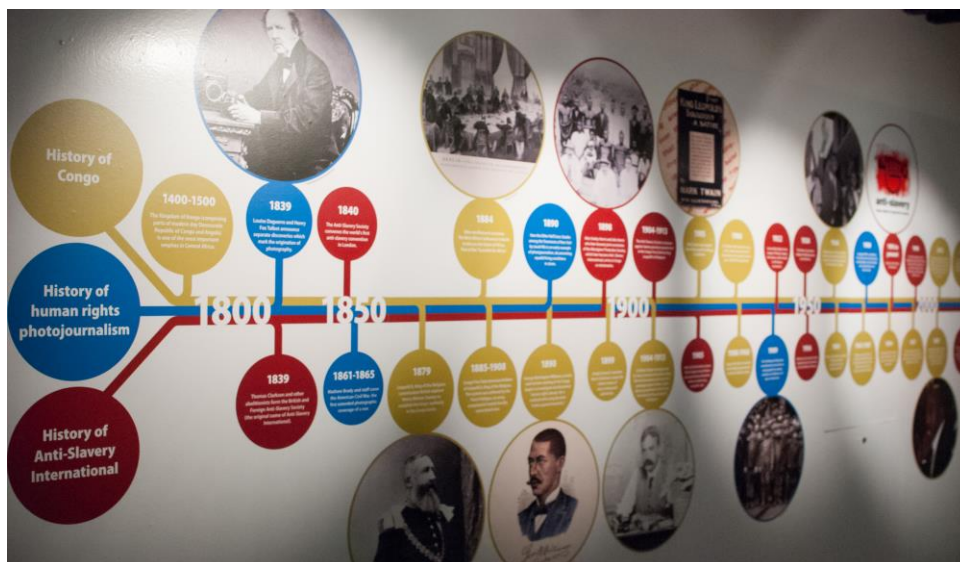
The photographs, by missionary Alice Seeley Harris, were at the time a radical and significant shift in the representation and understanding of the impact of colonial violence in the Congo, and exposed the deep-rooted hypocrisy of so called 'colonial benevolence' which cost the lives of millions of Congolese. The campaign led to public pressure and international scrutiny of Leopold's administration, which came to an end in 1909. The legacy of Belgian violence and exploitation would tragically re-emerge years later after the Congo gained independence in 1960, with the murder of the country's first legally elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba.

European exploitation of the Congolese people and resources has shaped the country's recent history and the effects are still evident today.

- Can you tell us about the development of the exhibition and the partners?

This exhibition was developed in partnership with [Autograph ABP](#) and [Anti-Slavery International](#). Autograph ABP is a charity and gallery space which focuses on human rights, race and identity through photographic projects. Anti-Slavery International is the world's oldest international human rights organisation and the only charity in the United Kingdom to work exclusively against slavery.

Anti-Slavery International and Autograph ABP began working in partnership on developing an exhibition using the photographs taken by Alice Seeley Harris. Anti-Slavery International own the Alice Seeley Harris archive and Autograph carried out extensive research of the images. As 2014 was Anti-Slavery International's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the International Slavery Museum was approached to mark this significant date and to join the project. An exploration of the archive, history and legacy of colonialism in the Congo linked well with our permanent collection. A joint exhibition was therefore proposed and developed to mark the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



Brutal Exposure Exhibition Congo Timeline

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- Did you work with any other partner organisations?

Yes, we had other partners that became involved as the exhibition developed. We have a resource area at the end of the exhibition where we wanted to show contemporary issues in the Congo. This was so our audience could understand the direct legacy of what happened in the early 1900s.

Through our research for the resource area, we came into contact with [Women for Women International](#) who have a project currently in the Democratic Republic of Congo, providing year long training programmes for women, as well as men. We approached them with the proposal of using our resource space to raise awareness of issues facing the people in the Congo today. In 2013 Women for Women International were involved in a project called 'I dream of Congo', which asked Congolese women from rural South Kivu to take photographs to represent their dreams and aspirations for their lives and the country. The responses included wishes for education for their children, owning their own cooking equipment and protection from the country's authorities. We are showing a slideshow of the photographs in the exhibition and it is a very powerful display. This partnership allowed the charity to raise awareness of their work and also provided visitors with an insight into life in the Congo today. The partnership provided us with content and resources that we wouldn't have had access to otherwise.

We were also in touch with the [Congolese Association of Merseyside](#) and we ran a number of events with them in response to the exhibition. The Association met with our Education team and in collaboration helped to develop an events programme. This included, 'Discovering the Congo', a family day looking at contemporary culture in the country. It was an opportunity for families to discover Congolese culture through food, music and activities. It was a really positive event.

Engaging with these other partners has been important in developing a balanced display and events programme. It has helped to highlight the continued human rights abuses in the region whilst also acknowledging the rich culture of the country.

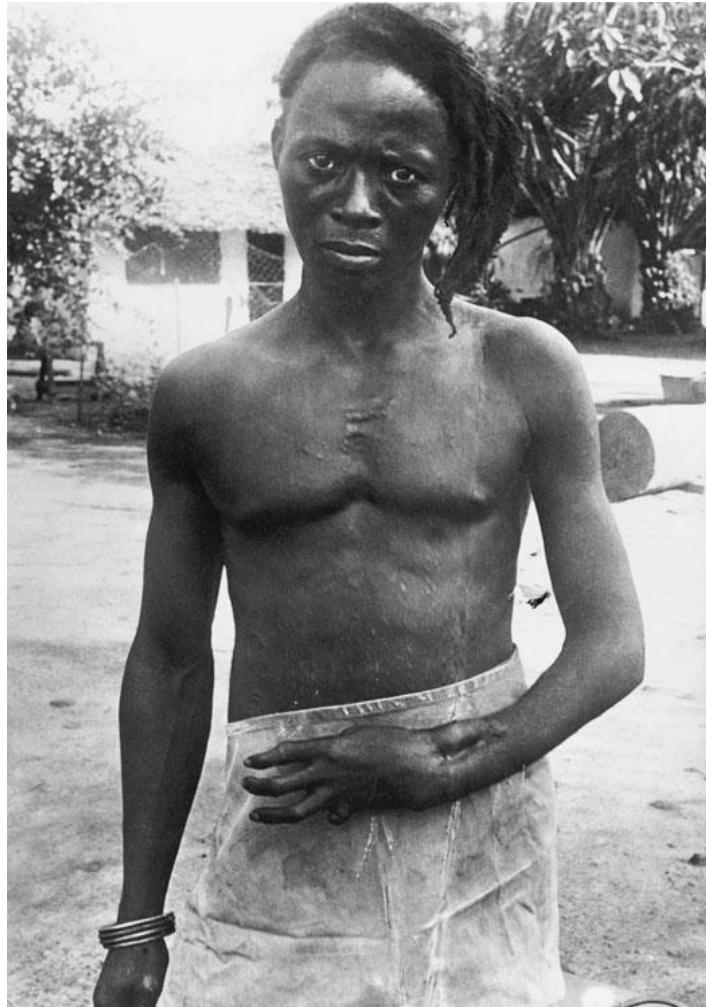
- Where there any challenges encountered in developing the project?

Alice Seeley Harris' photographs of colonial violence in the Congo are explicit and chilling. We felt they needed to be displayed in a sensitive way. I think this was the biggest challenge in this project. The Congolese people featured in the images had been exploited at the time and we did not want to replicate this. We were aware of not wanting to use the images in a gratuitous way whilst at the same time we wanted to get the message across of how brutal and exploitative the Belgian regime was. There was a lot of discussion about whether it was appropriate to show images of children with severed limbs. It is still a difficult topic.

In the end, we decided to show the photographs on a small scale. We felt showing them on a smaller scale created a more intimate experience for the visitor and it gave people a choice. The audience could remain at a distance or go up to the images and look closer. Originally, the images would have been on small glass negatives so it was also replicating that historic nature.

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**Brutal Exposure Poster image**

- From your experience at the International Slavery Museum can you provide advice on the best methods of engaging with sensitive topics?

I think you need to be aware of your audience and to look at interpretation that deals with difficult subject matters in a sensitive and responsible way. Consultation and engagement with partners and community groups to deal with sensitive topics is really important.

We had a public panel discussion on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 2014, '[The Congo: now and then](#)'. We included speakers from [Save the Congo](#) and [Congolese Association of Merseyside on the panel](#). The speakers from the Congo had different opinions on the root of the problems facing the Congo today. There was an interesting debate which allowed a broad representation of voices. And it showed the difference of opinion that can come from such an emotive and current issue. The International Slavery Museum is a political space. We deal with difficult subjects and instigate discussion and debate.

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- Can you tell SJAM more about the development of such exhibitions?

We have frameworks in place for discussing exhibition proposals. Proposals can be generated internally or external organisations and individuals can submit proposals too. They are reviewed by a programming team which includes staff from across the organisation. There are many factors which determine whether we take a project on. We look at how exhibitions proposals work with our collections, if it will resonate with our visitors or if it will highlight a new and interesting topic. . We also consider key dates and festivals to tie into a potential education programme and how the subject may link to the local area.

Once an exhibition is added to the programme, the next stage is to agree the target audience, key objectives, opening dates, a schedule and a budget. A project team with all the relevant staff meet regularly to discuss the exhibition's development and update on their contributions. The exhibition officer project manages the exhibition development and delivery, and coordinates between the external partners and museum representatives.

The exhibition curator will lead on the content development. We first develop a concept brief which outlines what we wish to achieve with the exhibition. The next stage is to create the scheme design. This explores how are we going to develop our objectives and will look at different methods of interpretation. This then leads to a detailed design brief with the final text, images and interpretation materials. The exhibitions are usually designed by our in-house design team. Our Education team plan for the events programme and the press and marketing officers work up the promotion strategy. We also work closely with the Collections Management team to plan installation of an exhibition.

When an exhibition closes, we evaluate the project looking at if objectives were met and other review outcomes. This helps to plan for our future projects.



**White Gold Exhibition**

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- How does the Museum engage with a diverse audience effectively?

The International Slavery Museum has two exhibition spaces which encourage participation and engage with different audiences. These are the Legacy Gallery which looks at the African diaspora and the legacies of transatlantic slavery and the Campaign Zone dedicated to contemporary forms of slavery. This has been open since 2009 and we have held three exhibitions looking at modern slavery and campaigning.

The opening exhibition, *Home Alone: end domestic slavery* looked at the exploitation of domestic workers. The display was developed with [Anti-Slavery International](#) and linked to their current campaign. Visitors were encouraged to write to their local MP and sign a petition. The campaign was highly influential and encouraged the International Labour Organisation to adopt a new Convention for Domestic Work. The new regulation improved the protection of domestic workers from exploitation and recognised their rights as employees. Although there is still a long way to go, this was a significant step in improving domestic workers' rights.. We have found that connecting with live campaigns it is an effective way of engaging with visitors.

During *White Gold: the true cost of cotton*, a show which addressed slavery in Uzbekistan around the cotton industry, we ran a competition. We asked visitors to think of a t-shirt slogan which dealt with the issues in the exhibition. This was very positively received and we had a great amount of entries which showed that visitors had really engaged with the subject matter. The winning slogan was printed and made into a fair-trade t-shirt sold by the [Environmental Justice Foundation](#).

Thinking about clothes we wear made the exhibition relevant to visitors' lives. Everyone could relate to this and has possibly bought an item which has been made through some form of exploitation. Making this direct link helps the audience to engage with a subject. If people feel distanced from an issue, it's harder to engage with it. You need to bring it closer for it to really resonate.



Home Alone Exhibition