

Henrik Holm speech "I AM QUEEN MARY" inauguration March 31, 2018

By coincidence, the West Indian Warehouse today houses a very white collection of plaster casts from the Eighteenth Century.

Plaster casts are copies of original artworks, mainly sculpture.

In the past, it did not matter much, that they were only copies.

What did matter was their lack of color, their whiteness.

A few years before the warehouse was built in seventeen-eighty-three, the Father of Art History and Archaeology, Johann Winckelmann said that "beauty is white", and thereby speaking against his own knowledge of antique sculpture being lavishly colored.

Since then, whiteness and beauty has been synonymous words in western aesthetics.

Now, I want to tell you another story:

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In the year seventeen-fifty-eight, the English ship "Emmanuel" was hired by the Danish merchant Niels Ryberg to carry cargo on the routes of the transatlantic slave trade.

The ship was measured to be capable of carrying four hundred enslaved persons in its hull from the so-called Gold Coast of Guinea to the Danish West Indian Islands.

When this ship left the Gold Coast, it had four hundred and forty nine enslaved persons on board.

We know how ships were tightly packed from the drawings of the ship Brookes.

It was a drawing used by Abolitionists to argue against the inhuman conditions on board these ships.

The "Emmanuel" carried even more enslaved persons, than the drawing of Brookes show.

This makes the merchant Ryberg a slave-trader. But in the texts written in Denmark about Ryberg, he is just called a merchant, and described as a very successful one.

Ryberg was a so-called "Tight-Packer" who allowed his ships to carry more cargo than they were estimated to carry.

The idea of tight-packing comes from a financial calculation saying that if you allow for more cargo of livestock, you might be able to have even more to sell on the market, when the transport is over.

Others preferred not to overload their ships, calculating on more being able to survive, if not stacked too close together. They were named "Loose-Packers".

When the "Emmanuel" reached the Danish West Indies, only one-hundred-and-eighty-one out of the four-hundred-and-forty-nine people were still alive.

Ryberg was a tight-packing slave trader with hundreds of lives to account for.

He was one among three CEO's of the West Indian Company that erected this building.

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Ryberg and his colleagues, Ernst Schimmelmann and Ludvig Stehmann decided to have a special meeting room designed for their meetings in the warehouse.

This meeting room is still in the building, at the very top of it, with a rectangular window facing north, overlooking the entrance to the harbor.

From here, they could overlook the traffic below and have their discussions about the pros and cons of the slave trade, as seen from a purely economic point of view.

In a report to the King they highlight, that if it were not for the profits in tobacco, coffee and sugar, the nation would have more expenses than income.

Nowadays, the Government's economic advisors still have their meetings at the harbor front, in the low, rusty building next to the West Indian Warehouse.

And just like a hundred-and-one years ago when we sold off the Danish West Indies to the US without bothering to ask the citizens on the Islands their opinion, today another sale is pending.

In another attempt to distance ourselves from our colonial past, this very building is perhaps to be put on sale.

And if it is sold off to a private investor, the stores that it carries might be lost.

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However, "I Am Queen Mary" is now placed in front of the West Indian Warehouse, next to the waterways that connect Denmark and the US Virgin Islands.

It is a monument to what has been absent, neglected and repressed in the past.

This monument has made it possible for me to tell you the story about Ryberg, the Warehouse and the sculptures inside it.

This is all we need a monument to help us do.

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So, Thank You, LaVaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, for creating the monument "I Am Queen Mary" and for placing it right here, next to the Royal Cast Collection and the West Indian Warehouse.