PAXTON HOUSE

Learning Resource 2: Three Objects from Paxton House: addressing the history of slavery through material evidence.

PAXTON HOUSE

The purpose of this resource is to show how material artefacts, such as those held within Paxton's collection, can be understood in terms of their transatlantic history. This resource will suggest methods for analysing three different types of material artefact, drawn from those held within the Paxton Trust's outstanding collections, encompassing fine art, costume, and furniture.

1. *A View of Paraclete Estate, Grenada*, Adam Callander (1789) [gouache on vellum].
2. *Linen Dress for an Enslaved Child* (2021).
3. *Lady's Writing Table*, Chippendale, Haig & Co. (1774).


THE
INTEREST
SCOTLAND

Object 1. *A View of Paraclete Estate, Grenada*, Adam Callander (1789) [gouache on paper].

Object type: Fine Art, Painting.

Material: Gouache on paper.

Date: 1789.

In analysing this painting, we shall focus upon three main things. Firstly, who commissioned the painting? Who was the artist? and what does the painting depict?

Commissioner

This painting was commissioned by Ninian Home of Paxton House and his wife Penelope, circa 1788. It forms part of a series of eight paintings depicting the Paraclete plantation in Grenada, owned by their friend Alexander Campbell, where the couple had lived since 1779. By 1788, in Grenada, Ninian was a powerful and influential member of colonial society; he owned a sugar plantation and rented another plantation to grow cotton, upon which 267 enslaved people in total[1] were forced to labour; he was a member of the Grenada executive; a colonel in the island militia; and a judge, among other roles.

In the year that this painting was commissioned, he and Penelope left Grenada to return to live at Paxton House. We must ask ourselves what was the purpose of this commission?

It may be that the paintings simply served as a reminder of their home in Grenada, a place that they were clearly both attached to. On the other hand, this painting by Callander falls

[1] This was the greatest number of enslaved people including babies and children recorded at any one time on the land that Ninian and Penelope controlled. However, by the time they were about to sell their share of a cotton plantation in Mustique, a total of 275 enslaved people were listed in total.

squarely within a genre of paintings which became common during this period in the late eighteenth century promoting a romanticized view of a multicultural, colonial slave society in the Caribbean through the lens of White supremacy. Paintings could act as conversation pieces and were helpful political propaganda for the 'benevolent' idea of a slave society, sometimes also termed 'amelioration', of which Ninian Home was a clear advocate and which provided a model to resist growing calls for the abolition of the slave trade.[2]

Maker

So, who was the artist? He was Adam Callander who was born in 1750 in Stirlingshire. Callander appears to have been self-trained, and little is known of his early life. His paintings suggest that he was widely travelled, as besides British landscapes, his known paintings include works depicting a voyage to the East Indies via St Helena in the South Atlantic in 1780, undertaken prior to his trip to the West Indies. It may have been a career decision to target patronage of aspiring men like Ninian Home, in a part of the world where there was little in the way of artistic competition.

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[2] A conversation piece is the term used to describe an informal group portrait from the eighteenth century. Amelioration refers to the idea, emerging in the late eighteenth century, that slavery in the Caribbean could be improved gradually and made more humane without the need for immediate abolition.

Content

Finally, we can analyse the painting itself. If we begin in the left background of the painting and move to the right the first thing that we notice are distant fields, devoid of tree cover and people. These are probably fields where sugar is being cultivated which was managed daily by the enslaved people to control weedy overgrowth, vermin and snakes, that would negatively impact the growth of the sugarcane.

Tropical forest was cleared by enslaved Africans, forced to labour under harsh conditions to create land for plantation crops. In the left foreground we see the plantation canal,

which served both aesthetic and practical functions. The canal was built by the enslaved workforce owned by the original French colonists to have the practical functions of both providing power for the machinery in the sugar mills and to float sugar cane from the fields above down to the plantation works. The canal is a key element in the designed and almost entirely man-made landscape which is clearly emphasised in Callander's composition; its construction predates the British arrival in Grenada in 1763, at a time when the island was under French control.

In the middle distance can be seen a group of buildings which were enslaved people's houses. A model of a village of enslaved people's houses can be viewed in the 'Caribbean Connections' exhibition in Paxton House. These houses were built largely from timber and thatched with waste material available freely on the estate. This housing style used substandard construction, had little to no anchors to the soil, and therefore was very vulnerable to severe environmental conditions such as earthquakes, storms, and hurricanes. There are several references to the enslaved people's homes being damaged or destroyed due to severe weather at Waltham in the Home of Wedderburn archives.

In a valuation of Ninian's Waltham estate, undertaken in 1775, the enslaved-people's houses were valued at £10 each. However, over time, as little money as possible was

spent on the enslaved people's accommodation; in 1833, Waltham manager, John Foreman Home of Wedderburn Castle, Berwickshire, boasted that 'all the new houses [for the enslaved people] cut a respectable figure and which I have put up without one shilling of expense'.

Beyond the houses, at sea, Callander has depicted two sailing boats. These do not appear to be large ocean-going vessels but rather fishing boats or vessels plying trade around the coast of the island. In his letters, Ninian mentions that he often travelled by boat when journeying between the capital of Grenada, at St George's, and his plantations; the roads were notoriously poor in Grenada and plantation stores and produce, such as sugar and rum, would have also travelled this way to reach the main harbours or ships waiting offshore.

In the middle foreground are manicured lawns, being tended to by enslaved Africans dressed in white linen. This sanitised image stood in contrast to the reality that the majority of enslaved field labourers were forced to work in dirty, bloodied, and torn clothing that was only replaced once a year.

Callander has chosen not to depict the horrors of enforced labour on the plantation, instead, his vision is one of gardeners (probably enslaved children from the plantation's grass gang) quietly going about their work in harmony with their surroundings, while their white master watches on, seated under the shade of a tree with his dog. This European

figure is probably Ninian Home. He wears a red woollen coat, a plainer version of the one held in the costume collection at Paxton.

It was a common compositional feature in artwork of this period (along with advertisements for colonial produce) to show enslaved people labouring alongside a resting European. This probably helped to assuage European fears about society in the colonies by presenting it as orderly and hierarchical.

Object 2: Linen Dress for an Enslaved Child

Object type – Replica costume.

Material – Unbleached linen.

Date – 2021, after an eighteenth-century design.

We shall focus upon who made this item of clothing, the material that it is made from and who would have worn it.

Maker

This dress was made by Stefan Romero as part of a research project for Paxton House in 2021 whilst studying on the Art History: Dress and Textiles MLitt course at the University of Glasgow. It is based on evidence drawn from paintings and eighteenth clothing patterns, particularly one from 1769. The original garment would have been made by an enslaved woman on Waltham plantation in Grenada from their annual allowance of cloth sent to Grenada from Scotland. The enslaved people on the plantation were expected to make their own clothing besides labouring on the plantation and growing their own food.

Material

This dress is made from unbleached linen which would have originated in Scotland. Linen weaving was Scotland's biggest industry and second largest employer after agriculture. Loosely woven, linen cloth, like this, was known as osnaburgs due to the fabric originating in the German town of Osnabruck. This type of textile was manufactured in Scotland from the 1730s. It was often colloquially referred to as 'slave cloth' due to ever-growing demand from the plantations; by the 1790s nearly 90% of linen exported from Scotland was bound for the colonies where much of it was used to clothe enslaved people. This trade was boosted by a bounty paid by the government, per yard of cloth, to exporters and

manufacturers. Low wages in Scotland, compared to England, also gave Scottish manufacturers a competitive advantage.

Documents in the Home family archives reveal the amount of cloth allocated to each enslaved person annually on the Home family's Waltham plantation: a young child, such as the one represented here, was given four yards of Osnaburgs and a handkerchief each year, compared to a woman in the field gang, who was given eight yards of osnaburgs and two yards of blue baize. Enslaved people who worked as tradesmen and slave drivers received up to twice as much fabric as a field hand, whilst everyone received a hat, needles and thread. Although the enslaved people only received a limited amount of textile from their owners (which was expected to last all year) evidence in letters in the Home family archive suggests that enslaved people were able to obtain material to make 'fine clothes' of their own from the sale of surplus produce from their provision grounds. The coarse and tough linen osnaburgs would have deteriorated quickly both in the humid tropical heat of the Caribbean and under the stresses of enforced labour. The linen used in this dress is slightly finer than that used in the replica shirt belonging to the mannequin representing the slave driver and boiler, Gill, reflecting its intended use.

Wearer

This linen dress would have been worn by an enslaved child named ‘Janett’ who is listed in the inventory of enslaved people at Waltham plantation from 1815. Janett was then aged six or seven, the inventory records that she ‘works in the grass gang and keeps the hospital nurse house’. Children worked at Waltham doing weeding, and in the grass-gang gathering fodder for animals, usually from the age of seven, but occasionally from as young as five. In 1807 it became illegal to traffic people from Africa to the British colonies. With the supply of legal new enslaved people stopped, slave owners, like George Home of Paxton (who inherited both Waltham and Paxton House from his brother, Ninian, in 1795), obsessed over how to maintain the number of enslaved people on their properties.

Enslaved children, like Janett, became prized possessions; they were especially valued as they represented the future workforce of the plantation. However, like adults, their age did not necessarily spare them from cruel torture practices or corporeal punishment.

Much of the correspondence between George Home and his plantation manager from this period concerns their worries about the declining number of enslaved people. Methods were proposed to increase fertility by promoting regular marriages and to ‘discourage promiscuous connexion’, including a scheme whereby unmarried and married slaves

would be swapped between estate owners to encourage morality, thereby cruelly separating and dispersing friends and families.

Object 3: Lady’s writing table (1774)

Object type: Furniture, writing table.

Materials: Mahogany, oak, brass, baize.

Date: 1774.

This is the final object considered in this resource. We will focus upon the materials used in the construction of this piece of furniture, who made it, and what its function was.

Materials

This small, lightweight table is made from mahogany from Jamaica. Jamaican mahogany, known for its dark chocolate colour, was one of the most desirable colonial products and most of the mahogany used in the furniture at Paxton House came from the island.

Often considered the highest quality material to be used in cabinet making, for its fine grains, weight, and rich colour, the first piece of furniture in Britain made from Caribbean mahogany dates to 1680.

Mahogany superseded walnut as the wood of choice in the early eighteenth century, primarily due to the ready availability of supplies from the British Caribbean colonies and the failure of European walnut trees.

The mahogany trees were felled and transported using enslaved labour. The work of felling the huge trees in the tropical heat could be extremely dangerous, whilst transporting the timber, which often involved constructing roads through the bush, was exhausting, utilising the most able-bodied enslaved people.

Day and Son, *Cutting and Trucking Mahogany in Honduras*, Liverpool, England, 1850. (Chaloner and Fleming, *The Mahogany Tree* [Liverpool: Rockliff and Son, 1850]

Meanwhile, children were made to collect smaller branches and clear the debris from amidst the danger of the forestry operations; many injuries occurred.

The felling of trees for timber went hand in hand with clearing land for the expansion of sugar cultivation, as a result of which, much of the Caribbean, which had once appeared to offer an infinite natural bounty to colonisers, was largely deforested by the beginning of the nineteenth century. This deforestation also impacted species of plants, animals, and insects and has contributed to climate change and erosion.

Maker

The *Lady's writing table* was made by Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) and his prestigious firm of cabinet makers, Chippendale, Haig & Co., in their London workshops. Chippendale almost exclusively worked with mahogany from the West Indies in the construction of his furniture.

Ninian Home commissioned Chippendale, Haig and Co. to decorate and furnish his home at Paxton 'in a neat but not expensive manner' between 1774-1791. Chippendale furnished the house with a wide variety of exquisitely made chairs, cabinets, desks, beds, clothes presses, tables, as well as soft furnishings at a time when he and, in turn, his son, also named Thomas, were at the height of their success. The Chippendale firm undertook

a complete interior design scheme for the Dining Room and Drawing Room, supplying hand-painted wallpaper and enormous pier glass mirrors from Paris. This *Lady's writing table* dates from the earliest part of the commissioned. Following Ninian and Penelope Home's purchase of Paxton House in 1773; they had just returned from living in Grenada and had sought a Scottish property suitable for a couple of their wealth, status, and taste. Employing Chippendale to produce furnishings for the house was reflective of this.

Function

The *Lady's writing table's* function may be self-evident; yet, considering this in greater detail yields another insight into Paxton House's links to the Caribbean. The table's design reflects its intended use; it has a galleried mahogany top with a baize covered writing slide below and a drawer at the right-hand side fitted for pens and ink bottles. The drawer at the front is a dummy.

A direct emulation of a Louis XIV type fashionable in France c.1760-5 and produced by several ebenistes such as Jean Francois Oeben and Roger Vandercruse, this is the most playful rococo piece in Chippendale's Paxton repertoire with a deliberate feminine character suited to a bedroom, indeed, in Paxton's case, the writing table is to be found in the principal bedroom, a space especially associated with Penelope Home.

This bedroom is the largest in the house and was originally designed by John and James Adam (the architects who designed Paxton House) to be the library on their plans.

Having been acclimatised to the much warmer climate of the Caribbean, Penelope apparently did not much enjoy the British climate and usually retreated to this room, which was large enough for her to entertain her friends.

Conveniently compact and light, this table could be carried easily about a room and used in comfortably bright or warm spots. None of Penelope's correspondence survives in the Home family archives; however, references to her writing are to be found in other records. These references suggest that she was a prolific letter writer. Whether that entailed lobbying her husband's

brother (George) to aid his campaign for political office in the West Indies, or catching up with her friends in Grenadian society, she was probably as active as her husband Ninian in colonial affairs. She certainly co-owned most of the property in the West Indies. Penelope is representative of a class of women whose life straddled upper-class life in Britain and the stratified slave society of the colonies.

Unfortunately, prolonged periods of ill-health often left her bed-bound and unable to write; however, this specialist item of furniture attests to the central role that letter writing played in Penelope's life, especially as a result of a life spent living between Britain and the Caribbean.

The sack back dress in this image was created in 2023 to represent the type of gown Penelope wore at Paxton House in the 1770s. It is on display at Paxton House.

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