

## Programme

# Ornamental Blackness: The Black Figure in European Decorative Arts

## Details

Friday 14 November 2025, 18.45 - 21.00, in person at V&A South Kensington, Learning Centre, Seminar Room 3, Level 4.

## Overview

Join curator and art historian Adrienne L Childs PhD, in conversation with V&A curator Dr Madeleine Haddon, as they explore how decorative arts shaped ideas of Blackness in 18th to 19th-century European visual culture.

## Schedule

18.45 – 19.00

Arrival, Registration, and Refreshments.

19.00 – 19.10

Welcome, Housekeeping, and introduction to Dr Madeleine Haddon by Janz Browne.

19.10 - 19.20

Event overview and introduction to our guest speaker Art Historian Adrienne L Childs PhD by V&A East Curator Dr Madeleine Haddon.

19.20 - 20.00 (40 min)

Art Historian Adrienne L Childs in conversation with Dr Madeleine Haddon examine objects, porcelain figurines, clocks, torchères, and furniture that used the “blackamoor” motif and consider how these luxury items helped circulate stylised images of the African body across elite spaces. These objects speak to a taste for

exoticism, but also reveal deeper tensions: the Black body, often enslaved and subjugated, was also cast as a symbol of opulence and refinement. Adrienne discusses the codes and contradictions embedded in these designs and reflect on how they operated within the theatre of sumptuous living. This is a space for thoughtful conversation, visual exploration, and critical reflection on how art, labour, and identity intersect in the decorative arts.

20.00 - 20.30 (30 min)

Audience Q&A with speakers.

20.30 - 21.00 (30 min)

Final thoughts and thank yous followed by book signings with Adrienne L. Childs.

## **Biographies**

**Adrienne L. Childs** is an award-winning art historian and curator. Her current book is *Ornamental Blackness: The Black Figure in European Decorative Arts* was published by Yale University Press. She is Senior Consulting Curator at The Phillips Collection in Washington DC. Childs is co-curator of the exhibition *Vivian Browne: My Kind of Protest*. Recent exhibitions include *Century: 100 Years of Black Art* at MAM at the Montclair Art Museums and *The Colour of Anxiety: Race, Sex and Disorder in Victorian Sculpture* for the Henry Moore Institute. She guest curated the exhibition *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition, 2020*, at the Phillips Collection. Childs is currently curating an exhibition on the American painter Beauford Delaney. She has published widely on race and representation in European art as well as African American art. Childs served as curator at the David C. Driskell Center. She was awarded the 2022 Driskell Prize by the High Museum for her contributions to the field of African American art. Last fall Childs served as Distinguished Senior Scholar at the Lauder Research Center for Modern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Dr Madeleine Haddon** is Senior Curator of V&A East, where she leads curatorial projects across V&A East Storehouse and Museum. An art historian and curator, her work focuses on exhibitions and scholarship that explore transhistorical and cross-cultural dialogues. She has held curatorial positions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the Yale University Art Gallery, and the Princeton University Art Museum, and was formerly a Teaching Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Recent exhibitions include *Nuestra Casa: Rediscovering the Treasures of the Hispanic Society Museum & Library* at the Hispanic Society in New York, and *Matisse: The Red Studio* at The Museum of Modern Art. Her writing has recently featured in catalogues for De

Profundis: Oscar Wilde (2024), Travel, Respond, Assemble: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Betye Saar (2023), Murillo: From Heaven to Earth (2022), and The Sublime in Nature (2021). She completed her PhD at Princeton University where her dissertation titled Local Color: Race, Gender and Spanishness in European Painting, 1855–1927 was supported by a Fulbright Award. Dr. Haddon serves on the board of the Public Arts Trust of India and on advisory committees for Harvard Art Museums, CORA Foundation, Athena Art Foundation, and Photo London.