

## Racist Mural Puts Tate Galleries in a Bind

*Problematic sections of a work painted on Tate Britain's walls have caught museum officials between the demands of activists and the policies of the British government.*



*The basement restaurant with the problematic mural is one of several eateries at Tate Britain that brought in around \$900,000 in total in the year before the pandemic.*

**By Alex Marshall**

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LONDON — Since Tate Britain reopened last month after a five-month pandemic shutdown, the museum has been bustling. Visitors in masks have roamed its galleries, halls and atrium again, enjoying the huge collection of British art, from 16th-century portraits to contemporary installations.

Yet one room remains out of bounds, and not because of coronavirus restrictions. The doors to the museum's basement restaurant are shut, and a sign outside says it "will remain closed until further notice."

The restaurant's walls are decorated with a 55-foot-long mural called "The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats," painted by the British artist Rex Whistler. The epic work, commissioned in the 1920s to entice diners, depicts a hunting party riding through a landscape of soaring mountains, ornamental gardens, castles and Chinese pagodas on a quest for unicorns, leopards and other exotic quarry. "Mr. Whistler's funny fresco will make the Tate Gallery's crumpets and London buns even more assimilable," Lord D'Abernon, Tate's chairman of trustees, said in a speech at the mural's unveiling in 1927.

Two small sections of the work, each a few inches wide, were not mentioned by D'Abernon at the time, but they are now weighing heavily on Tate's trustees. One shows a smartly dressed white woman dragging a struggling Black boy by a rope; in another, the boy runs to keep up behind a horse-drawn cart, tethered by a collar around his neck.

That mural has been the backdrop for the upscale restaurant — one of several eateries in the museum that brought in around \$900,000 in total in the year before the pandemic — for almost 100 years, yet few diners seemed to notice the boy's plight.

That changed last summer, when photos began to appear on social media, and activists called for images of the boy to be removed from the walls and the restaurant closed down.

Tate — the group that runs Tate Britain and its sister museums, including Tate Modern — says it cannot alter the mural, which is an artwork in its care and part of a building protected under British heritage laws. It has promised a formal review of the work's future, set to begin this summer and conclude by year's end.

Yet whatever the review concludes, somebody will be disappointed. The mural has put Tate in the teeth of a dilemma at a moment when tensions are running high over how to deal with Britain's legacies of racism and colonialism. The museum is trapped between activists who want the artwork removed — and whose concerns around racial justice are shared by many artists and Tate employees — and the British government, which funds the museum and favors a less interventionist approach.

Last year, Britain's culture minister, Oliver Dowden, outlined a “retain and explain” policy for controversial monuments, after campaigners toppled a statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, England. Museums should keep contested objects on display, he said. “As publicly funded bodies, you should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics,” Dowden wrote in a letter outlining the policy to the leaders of Britain's major museums.

Tate's trustees will also be treading carefully because the government's desire to tamp down on crusading seems to be influencing the makeup of museum boards. Officials must approve appointments to the governing councils of major institutions — including Tate. In January, the ministry decided not to reappoint Aminul Hoque, an academic who has called for the “decolonization” of Britain's curriculum, for a second term on the board of Royal Museums Greenwich. The chair of the organization's board resigned in protest. In March, a trustee at the Science Museum, Sarah Dry, withdrew a reappointment application after she felt pressured to support the “retain and explain” policy, she said in a letter to the museum's board.

In an emailed statement, a culture ministry spokesman said, “We are committed to ensuring our publicly funded bodies reflect the full diversity of the taxpayers they serve,” adding, “There is no automatic presumption of reappointment.”

The ministry declined to comment on the Whistler mural.



*Tate Britain is controlled by Tate, a network of four art institutions in England, which says it cannot alter the mural.*

The director of another major London museum, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not want to criticize the government publicly, said that Tate faced a tough decision. “But it’s only tough because the government is making it tough,” the museum director added. One option might be to build a false wall around the work so that the restaurant could reopen while a long-term solution was discussed, the director said, but that would go against the “retain and explain” policy.

And campaigners want more than temporary solutions. The social media furor began last July, when The White Pube — the name used by a duo of art critics, Zarina Muhammad and Gabrielle de la Puente — posted photos of the mural’s offensive sections on Instagram. “How does this restaurant still exist?” they wrote in the caption. “What interior decoration is THIS?”

“How do these rich white people still choose to go there to drink from ‘the capital’s finest wine cellars’ with some choice slavery in the background?” the post added. An online petition demanded Tate remove the mural from the wall, or the restaurant from the room.

Overnight, Tate changed its website to remove a reference to the restaurant as “the most amusing room in Europe,” and a few months later, Tate’s trustees discussed the mural. The museum’s ethics committee was “unequivocal” that the work was offensive, according to the meeting’s minutes.

In December, Tate promised the review of the mural’s future. “We would not want to pre-empt this process with any further speculation,” a Tate spokesman said. Tate declined several interview requests for this article.

The White Pube said in an email that it was bizarre that Tate was taking so long to find a solution. “We think Tate’s inability and unwillingness to actually DO anything about the mural, beyond vague abstract pondering, is a sad, sad indictment,” they said.

Yet the problematic images have been under discussion within the museum since well before The White Pube brought them to public attention. Penelope Curtis, Tate Britain’s director from 2010 to 2015, said in a telephone interview that in 2013, when Whistler’s mural was restored as part of a \$63 million revamp of the museum, some staff members raised concerns. Officials wrote a flier for diners who asked about the mural, she said.

“There were discussions about putting a screen over it,” Curtis said of the section showing the enslaved Black boy, “but that would have only drawn attention to it.”

In 2019, a sign was attached to the restaurant’s door, similar to the explanatory texts in the museum galleries. Four paragraphs in, the text acknowledges that “Whistler depicts the enslavement of a Black child and the distress of his mother using highly stereotyped figures that were common at the time.”

Some staff members said that sign didn’t go far enough. “The statement failed to address the racism or tackle the trauma those images cause,” Maria Kubler, a former volunteer manager at Tate, said in an email. Kubler left the organization in January 2020 because she felt a “lack of support around my efforts to address issues of racism,” she added.

Rudi Minto de Wijs, a former co-chair of Tate’s staff network for people of color, said the group’s members were “disgusted by the mural” and repeatedly raised the issue in meetings. Last summer, after the social media storm, he met online with Maria Balshaw, Tate’s director, and put forward a proposal from the network to turn the restaurant into an education space, he said.

Balshaw said the idea would be considered, “but nothing happened,” de Wijs said. “Nothing ever happens,” he added. He took a buyout from the museum in April, after he was made to feel like “a troublemaker,” he said.

Tate staff members’ frustrations jar with the museum group’s public programming, which has recently championed the work of Black artists. Last year, Tate Modern held a major retrospective for the filmmaker Steve McQueen, and it has recently presented a career-spanning show by the photographer Zanele Muholi. Soon, Tate Britain will open an exhibition exploring Britain’s relationship with the Caribbean and another by Lubaina Himid, the British artist who won the 2017 Turner Prize.

Activists were expecting Tate to change quicker than it could, said Himid, who is also a member of Tate Britain’s advisory council. “Nothing in Tate is quick,” she said in a telephone interview, “but compared to museums in France and Spain, or Italy, it’s moving at an absolute helter-skelter pace.”



*Tate's programming has recently championed the work of Black artists, including the South African photographer Zanele Muholi.*

The restaurant should be handed over to artists to respond to Whistler's mural, Himid said: plexiglass could be installed in front of the work, and artists could draw over that, or bands could perform musical responses to it.

Removing or hiding the mural would lose a chance to provoke a conversation around how Tate could change, Himid said. "I expect other artists would have different views," she added.

It was unclear, however, if that were the case: A dozen major Black British artists — including McQueen, Yinka Shonibare and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye — turned down interview requests for this article.

A major retrospective of Yiadom-Boakye's work ended at Tate Britain last month, and on a recent afternoon, Black visitors to that show expressed a range of views over what should happen to the Whistler mural.

Kevin Charles, a 52-year-old lawyer, said the restaurant should be open. "We're mature enough to be able to look at things in context," he said. Three interviewees said they liked Himid's suggestion of turning the space over to artists of color. But the most forceful views came from those who felt there was only one decision, and that Tate should have reached it long ago.

"It's totally disgusting and needs to be taken down immediately," said Vitella Thompson, 50, a lawyer.

"Cover it up," said Ione Brown, a fitness instructor. "Why do we have to be reminded of that past?" she added. "Put one of these down there instead," she said, waving at Yiadom-Boakye's enigmatic portraits of Black subjects. "These are beautiful. These are a celebration."

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