

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

## Teaching Support Sheet

**Presenter: Dr Clare Taylor**

**Yinka Shonibare, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, 2010, National Maritime Museum, London**

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-yinka-shonibare-nelson%E2%80%99s-ship-bottle-2010>

In this film Dr Clare Taylor looks at a work made by a living artist who works in London, Yinka Shonibare. The subject, materials and sites she talks about all encourage students to think of their own individual, national and global identity in new ways. The work also turns on its head traditional ideas of a sculpture on a plinth, which often commemorate a person well known in their own time, and reverses ideas about what such a work should be made out of, using a range of materials rather than stone or metal.

### *Before watching the film*

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Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here <http://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/we-recommend/attractions/grab-selfie-nelsons-ship-bottle> that you can use to work with your students.

Questions to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do the words 'Nelson', 'message in a bottle' and 'Trafalgar Square' mean to you?
2. What do you think this work represents?
3. What is it made out of? And how is it put together? Are the materials obvious at first glance?
4. What function do you think this work serves?

### *After watching the film*

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Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

1. What effects (aesthetic, social, political etc) do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work? Shonibare was trying to achieve a whole series of effects: aesthetically he created a work which caught the viewer's eye across a huge square, but his work also commented on the social position of colonizer and colonized through his choice of textiles and the way in which he gave Nelson's victory a new perspective.
2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

*Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* is made from sustainably sourced wood, other hardwoods, brass, textiles, acrylic (PMMA), LED lighting and ventilation system, and measures 300 x 535 x 250 cm.

Students should be able to spot the scale when they see the ship's model from the National Maritime Museum in the film, which is inside a wine bottle. They might also bring their own ideas about the subject and pick up more from the film- whether they are at school or college in London, by the sea or far inland. On the one hand the subject is what is says in the title: Nelson's flagship in a bottle. However, model ships are not often used by contemporary artists in installation art. Imitation glass, wax and wood are also used in this multi-media piece, whilst the textiles not only recall Shonibare's interest in African textiles in his work, and their wax printing method, but again subvert the subject by making the ship not just Nelson's, but one that carries global stories of relevance to us all. Sealed in its bottle, this ship is, however, 'set in stone' on its plinth, it is going nowhere but arguably it also reminds us of a 'message in a bottle', one carried to places far away by sea.

### 3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

The film explains that it was made in 2010 for the vacant fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. It was commissioned by the London Mayor's office and was a temporary installation. Since then, however, it has been acquired by the National Maritime Museum for its permanent collection, following a public appeal, so it has been popular from the beginning.

It is significant less to time period than to place, in that it related to other sculpture in Trafalgar Square, and also to Britain's past history as an island nation and the importance of the sea. Its arguments about identity are also constantly evolving.

### 4. How has this film helped your understanding of installation art?

Hopefully it should make students think about art outside of the gallery and art made out of materials that we think of as fragile and impermanent. It should also prompt thoughts about where they can walk all around sculpture in their own city, town or village- for example in a shopping centre, a railway station, beside the sea or in a place of worship.

### 5. What is its relevance for today?

Its main relevance is that it rethinks a particular period of British history through a work of art. In so doing, it makes us all think about our own identity. The piece might recall certain memories, of one's individual heritage or Trafalgar Square as a site where one might have seen political protests take place as well as the annual ceremony where the people of Norway donate a Christmas tree to commemorate the help given by Britain to their country during the Second World War.

## Comparative analysis

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One comparison would be with other works by Shonibare: *Mrs & Mrs Andrews Without their Heads* is one example detailed below. It takes as its subject an oil painting by the eighteenth-century British landscape artist, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), *Mr & Mrs Andrews*, 1748-9 (National Gallery, London) re-visioning the couple as mannequins clothed in African prints. Yinka Shonibare, *Mr and Mrs Andrews without their Heads*, 1998, two mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, dog mannequin, painted metal bench, rifle, 165 x 635 x 254cm with plinth [http://www.yinkashonibarembem.com/artwork/sculpture/?image\\_id=14](http://www.yinkashonibarembem.com/artwork/sculpture/?image_id=14)

Students could also look at examples of prints in paper or textiles; the work could even be linked to practical projects for A Level Art.

1. To help contextualise the work and think about changing attitudes to gendered identity and military heroism: Search for other sculptures in Trafalgar Square, which are glimpsed and mentioned in the film, not only the column itself but the reliefs around the base, the fountains and the three sculptures on the other corner plinths around the square.
2. To think about installation art and public participation: Search for other examples of works conceived for the fourth plinth; start with the links below

This work presents many opportunities for working with art local to you and your students, including sculptures and plaques in public spaces which students might pass on their way to school/college as well as in a gallery or historic site local to you. You could walk around a piece, thinking about scale, colour, choice of materials and the experience of you as the viewer, using the comparison grid below as a guide. What does the piece say about local/regional/national/global identities?

You could also look at examples of earlier sculpture from a library book and/or online resource and compare these with Shonibare's work.

You can find a definition of installation art in Tate's Art Term Glossary here:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/installation-art>

## **Bibliography**

Rachel Kent, ed, *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, Prestel, 2013 edition

Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rebecca Schneider, *Yinka Shonibare MBE Fabric-ation*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2013.

## *Resources online*

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London.gov.uk/shortlist- website of the Fourth Plinth Commission:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/art-and-design/fourth-plinth-2016>

National Maritime Museum:

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/discover/behind-the-scenes/blog/yinka-shonibare-mbe-greenwich>

Yinka Shonibare's website:

<http://www.yinkashonibaremb.com/home/>

Information on Shonibare's *The Swing, After Fragonard*, 2001, Tate, and further context:

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/shonibare-the-swing-after-fragonard-t07952>

<https://smarthistory.org/yinka-shonibare-the-swing-after-fragonard/>

*Comparative Analysis Table*

<b>Yinka Shonibare, <i>Nelson's Ship in a Bottle</i>, National Maritime Museum, London</b>	<b>Yinka Shonibare, <i>Mr &amp; Mrs Andrews without their heads</i>, National Gallery of Ottawa, Canada</b>
2010	1998
Sustainably sourced wood, other hardwoods, brass, wax print cotton textiles, acrylic (PMMA), LED lighting and ventilation system	Wax print cotton costumes on mannequins, dog mannequin, painted metal bench and rifle
300 x 535 x 250 cm	165 x 635 x 254 cm
Scale model (1:30) of Nelson's flagship, HMS Victory, enclosed in an imitation glass bottle on a wooden plinth	Life size mannequins of two figures and their dog, positioned around a bench
Original location: Fourth plinth, Trafalgar Square	Based on Gainsborough, <i>Mrs &amp; Mrs Andrews</i> , 1748-9 (National Gallery, London)