

Clare Taylor - Yinka Shonibare, Nelson's Ship in a Bottle

CLARE TAYLOR: Hello. I'm Clare Taylor and I'm a design historian at The Open University, and I work on the area of the home and the objects designed for use within it. I'm particularly interested in the materials that decorate our homes and which we often think of only as background, such as wallpapers and textiles, and the ways in which we hang these and what they can say about our own identities.

And today, I'm going to be talking about a work of art made by an artist working in Britain, Yinka Shonibare. Its title is Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, and it was made in 2010. This is not a conventional object designed to be seen on the wall of a museum or a gallery, as for example, you might see an oil painting. Nor is it inside a display case, although it does have its own enclosure in the form of the bottle which has special significance for the piece, as we shall see.

Rather, Nelson's Ship in a Bottle is designed to be seen outside, sitting on a stone plinth. However, unlike a sculpture that you might pass in your local town, it's not carved out of stone or made out of a precious metal, such as bronze. Rather, it's made out of a mixture of different materials and the term we often use for this is 'multi-media'.

So what, then, are these materials? To start with, we see what appears to be a vast, glazed bottle, which catches the viewer's eye even on a dull day. So it's apparently a much more fragile material than carved stone or metal, and the bottle sits on a wooden stand which has a series of circular windows, imitating the port holes on a ship. In this case, Admiral Horatio Nelson's flagship, HMS Victory.

But the port holes also have a very practical use, as well, since the wooden stand encloses fans which prevent condensation building up inside the bottle.

You may also have been wondering about the title. The title refers to the ship HMS Victory and Shonibare has reproduced this as a scale model. It's about 30 times smaller than the actual ship. And there are other elements that echo the actual ship, as well. So the sails are set for a light wind, just as they were on the day of the Battle of Trafalgar.

Although the model is tiny in comparison to Nelson's actual ship, it's vast in terms of the ships models it references. This example comes from the collection of the National Maritime Museum, and it shows a model of an Italian ship called a barque. Again, with its sails set for sailing, and it was made in the early years of the 20th century. It's enclosed inside a green wine bottle, so it's tiny in comparison to the model that we see in Shonibare's piece.

These models were made in large quantities, sometimes by seamen but also by craft workers. They were designed as souvenirs to remind you of our maritime traditions, and they were often displayed in the home on a mantelpiece. So Shonibare is combining a traditional craft activity with contemporary art practice.

Both pieces, however, preserve the mystery and secrecy which often surrounds how these models actually got inside the neck of the bottle. And the neck of the bottle in the Shonibare piece is sealed with a giant cork, and round the cork there's rope wound round, and also an imitation seal, sealing wax, traditionally a material that was used in the past to seal letters.

And here, the artist uses it as a form of his signature. You can see the initials YS for Yinka Shonibare and MBE. MBE stands for Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, an award that was given to the artist in 2005 and which he uses as part of his signature.

Another important point about the piece is the choice of textiles. The sails are made out of wax resist cloth, and these reflect the artist's long-standing interest in African textiles. There are two different designs. One is a vibrant pattern printed with anchors in blue, yellow, and red on a white ground. The cloth was originally wax printed in Indonesia, from where it was imported to Holland and then re-exported to Africa.

The trade was also taken up in Britain, and there are particular links to West Africa as part of that trade. And this type of cloth is still made, sold and worn in West Africa today. And it is also sold in markets in other cities in the world, including London.

However, it is no longer just a cloth associated with colonial trade, but one that is worn as an item of dress denoting post-colonialism and identity. And the anchor design is particularly interesting as it's what's often called a memory cloth, or a fancy print used to commemorate a particular person or event. So in this case, the pattern of the anchors and the colours recalls associations with the British Navy and with the sea.

Nelson's ship in a bottle was also made for a specific site, where it could be seen from above, from below, and all around, part of a genre that we call installation. This view of the north side of Trafalgar Square in London shows two museums in the background, the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, and a long balustrade to the left leads down to a fourth plinth with Nelson's Ship in a Bottle sitting on the top.

Trafalgar Square has its origins in the 1820s, and the desire to create a focus in London for British identity and global power.

At the very centre of the square is Nelson's Column. This commemorates the British victory over the Franco-Spanish fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. As well as the column in the centre of the square, four stone plinths were placed at each corner, and these were intended for statues of military and royal figures.

However, one plinth in the north-west corner, known as the fourth plinth, stood empty for about 150 years from the 1840s. It was only in 1999 that the Royal Society of Arts commissioned contemporary sculptures to produce work for the fourth plinth.

Their very different responses ignited public debate about what would be suitable to sit on the plinth. Further commissions restarted in 2005 as part of the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group, overseen by the London Mayor's Office. And sculptors who've produced work for the plinth

include Marc Quinn, Mark Wallinger, and Katharina Fritsch. And in 2010, Shonibare became the seventh artist to exhibit.

Why, then, is this work important and why have I chosen it? Shonibare's own heritage - he was born in Nigeria and studied in Britain, where he has lived for more than 30 years - present a different kind of colonial identity and experience.

This is reflected particularly in the pattern of the textiles which dress the ships, and themselves reflect a global journey. Their presence on the ship could then be seen as telling a different story to the conventional one we know about Nelson and Trafalgar, emphasised less on supremacy and victory but on a two-way dialogue across the globe.

There are other reasons, too. After its temporary display in the square, the piece was acquired by the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. So, Nelson's ship in a bottle no longer sits in dialogue with Nelson's Column, but rather, it's in dialogue with the museum's maritime collection and its maritime site beside the River Thames.

Its popularity is evidenced by the museum advertising it as a selfie site. So a work where the museum's visitors can become not just viewers, but participants in the process of how this work is being seen.

Speaking at the unveiling of Nelson's Ship in a Bottle in Trafalgar Square in 2010, the artist focused not on Nelson's victory, but rather on London's role as a global city. He said,

'We're here really to celebrate Nelson's legacy. You know we have a diverse, and a very creative and economically dynamic city, and that economic dynamism is partly due to the creativity of this city. Which is so creative because it's a global city. This is really what I've tried to capture in this work'.

I think Shonibare's work also encourages us to look at familiar objects, familiar materials, and familiar sights with new eyes and the artist does this by using materials that are outside the conventional boundaries of fine art and sculpture. Such as using the craft materials embodied in a ship in a bottle and in the textiles, themselves. These materials allow him to question issues around globalisation and colonial legacies, but they also enable us to think about our own identity, too.