

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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ART INSTITUTE ANNOUNCES MAJOR ACQUISITION OF LANDMARK BRITISH PAINTING

Simpson's Rediscovered *Captive Slave* Bold Anti-Slavery Statement

First Public Exhibition of Work in 180 Years

The Art Institute of Chicago is pleased to announce the acquisition of *The Captive Slave* (1827) by British portraitist **John Philip Simpson** (1782–1847). Purchased from Ben Elwes Fine Art in London, *The Captive Slave* is a heroically-scaled representation of a manacled slave created at an important historical juncture in the history of the abolitionist movement in Great Britain. Research reveals that the work has not been seen in public since its exhibition in London and in Liverpool in 1828, 180 years ago.



“*The Captive Slave* is a deeply compelling and historically significant painting,” said Douglas Druick, Searle Chair of the Department of Medieval to Modern European Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. “Simpson, an artist known primarily as a portrait painter fully immersed in the official Royal Academy, took a great professional risk in creating a work that expressed his deeply held anti-slavery beliefs. The painting is unique in that it combines the technical and aesthetic sophistication of the best of 19th-century portraiture—including that of his mentor Sir Thomas Lawrence—with an unflinching engagement with a politically incendiary topic.”

The painting depicts a black man dressed in deep red-orange, seated against a shallow background composed of browns and grays. The subject, his hands resting on his thighs and his wrists shackled with heavy chains, turns his head and looks upward, out of the frame. The richly nuanced palette and boldly brushed surface are hallmarks of the finest British portraiture of this era. But Simpson's choice of subject and theme was his alone. Simpson rendered his subject directly and empathetically, and imbued him with nobility, a treatment that clearly expresses an anti-slavery stance. At the same time, Simpson's portrait of despair, contrasting the resignation of the subject's pose with the intense longing conveyed by his upraised eyes, transcends the historical moment.

The Captive Slave was first exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1827, when the controversy over slavery in Britain was at its height. That same year the British Parliament declared participation in the slave trade to be punishable by death, setting the stage for the eventual passage of the Slavery Abolition Act six years later, in 1833. The painting was also exhibited in 1828, in Liverpool and again in London. Held in private collections since that time, the work has not been publicly seen in 180 years.

Simpson was born in Enfield, Middlesex, and attended the Royal Academy Schools. Trained in the British academic system as a portrait and genre painter, he began exhibiting works at the Royal Academy in 1807, at the age of 25, and would continue to exhibit more than 120 works over his 40-year career with the Academy. Around 1818, Simpson became the studio assistant to Sir Thomas Lawrence, then one of the leading British portraitists. He worked with Lawrence until the elder artist's death in 1830.

Simpson's model for the painting was the free-born American Ira Aldridge. The painting's debut in 1827 coincided with Aldridge's growing reputation as the first great black Shakespearean actor on the British stage. The son of a lay preacher, he was educated at New York's African Free School but sailed to England in search of greater opportunities in the theater. By the time the painting was exhibited, Aldridge was well on his way to being an acclaimed and recognized actor.

The Captive Slave is on view in Gallery 220. This gallery has been recently refurbished and reinstalled as part of the Art Institute's most ambitious renovation program in its history.

Image caption:

John Philip Simpson

English, 1782-1847

The Captive Slave, 1827

Oil on canvas

50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.5 cm)

Restricted gift of Mary Winton Green, Dan and Sara Green Cohan, Howard and Lisa Green, and Jonathan and Brenda Green in Memory of David Green.

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MUSEUM HOURS:

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Thursday

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

TARGET FREE EVENINGS THURSDAY AFTER 5:00 p.m.

SUMMER HOURS (from Memorial Day to Labor Day):

10:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

10:30 a.m.–9:00 p.m. Thursday, Friday

10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

TARGET FREE SUMMER EVENINGS THURSDAY AND FRIDAY AFTER 5:00 p.m.

FREE FEBRUARY 1 TO 28

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.

Please check www.artic.edu before your visit.

Admission: Adults, \$12.00; children 12 and over, students, and seniors, \$7.00; children under 12 free; members always free. Free Evenings are free to all, except for certain special exhibitions that may require full or extra admission fee. City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Check Us Out" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago. To reach the Art Institute on the World Wide Web, contact us at: <http://www.artic.edu/aic>

The Art Institute of Chicago is a museum in Chicago's Grant Park, located across from Millennium Park.