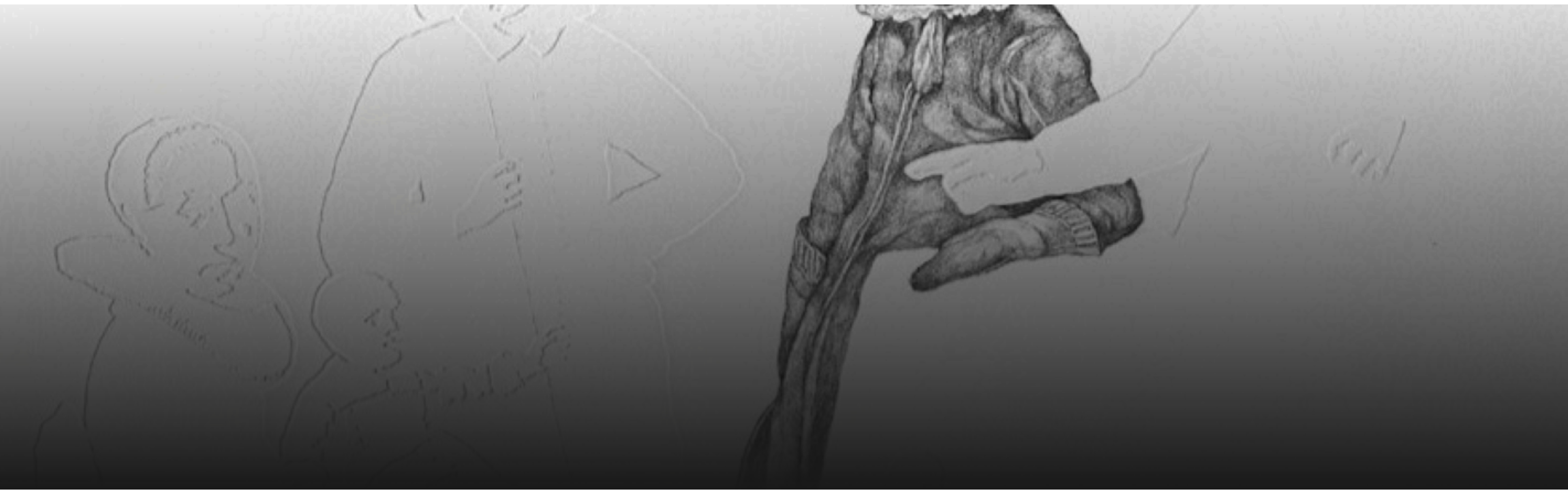


Jake Subryan Richards

October 18th, 2024

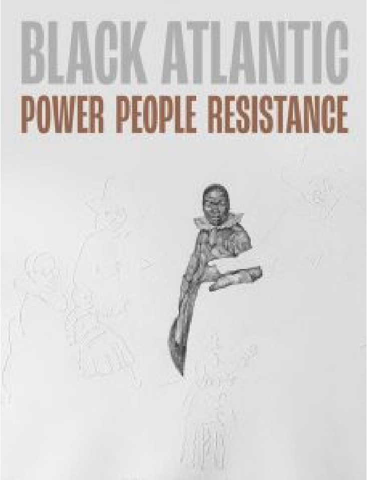
New stories from the Black Atlantic

*The exhibition and accompanying book **Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance,** edited by **Jake Subryan Richards** and **Victoria Avery,** examines the history and legacies of transatlantic slavery and resistance movements through a selection of paintings from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. In this excerpt from the book, Jake Subryan Richards unpacks what several 17th- and 18th-century Dutch paintings reveal about slavery, trade and empire.*

New stories from the Black Atlantic

LSE Black History Month Lecture | 24 October 2024

Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance. Jake Subryan Richards and Victoria Avery. Philip Wilson Publishers. 2023.



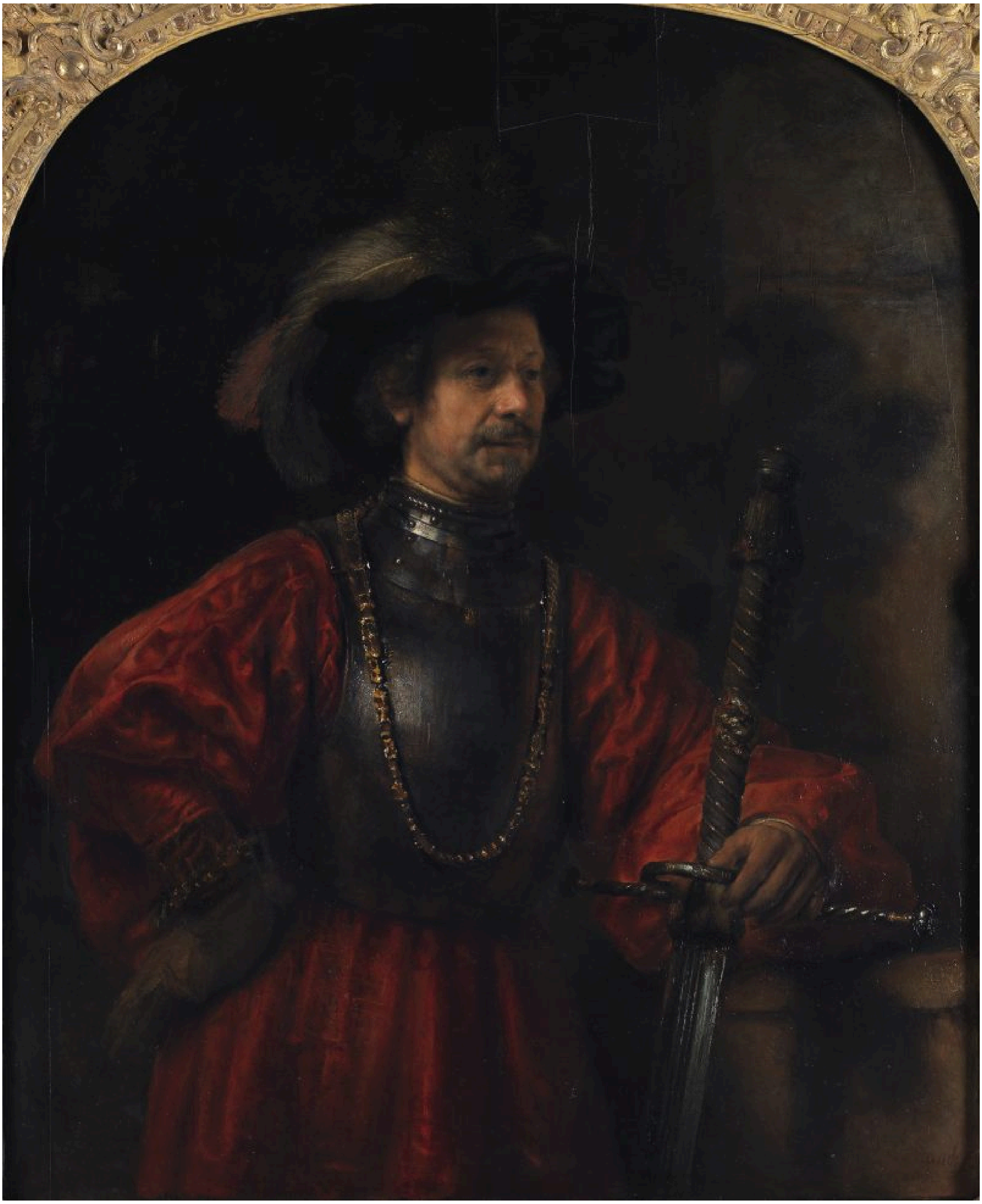
We all tell stories. Stories help us make sense of our world. They help us distinguish fact from fiction and history from myth. This story is about what happened when European empires colonised the Americas and transported more than 12.5 million people from Africa to these colonies as slaves between 1400 and 1900. Colonial enslavement affected every part of the Atlantic world, including Cambridge. Asking new questions about how it shaped the University of Cambridge Museums has led to discoveries about the objects they hold, the people who collected them and how their stories connect Cambridge to global history. These objects reveal the wealth that Cambridge drew, and continues to draw, from Atlantic enslavement. They also demonstrate that people have always resisted enslavement. By resisting colonial slavery, people produced new cultures that continue to shape our world. These cultures are known as the Black Atlantic. By rethinking our shared histories, and looking again through the lens of contemporary artists, we can create a better story: one of repair and freedom.

> *The legacies of Dutch slaveholding in artistic production were systemic, as a selection of artworks from the Fitzwilliam Museum reveals.*

Reimagining the Dutch connection: the Fitzwilliam Museum in a world of Atlantic enslavement and empire

Between the Dutch Republic's first break from the Spanish Empire in 1566 and the global age of revolutions in the later 18th century, the world of Atlantic enslavement expanded and deepened dramatically. In South and Central America, enslaved people worked in silver and gold mines. In South America, the Caribbean and North America, they produced major commodities such as sugar, indigo and tobacco on plantations. Consumers in Europe had access to these slave-produced goods. Merchants, scholars and statesmen devised new financial instruments such as maritime insurance to manage the risks involved in transoceanic imperial commerce. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese were the dominant imperial powers. By supplanting these empires, in the 17th century the Dutch Republic's empire became the leading force in this world.

The Dutch possessed trading forts on the West African coast for the purchase and transshipment of captive people. The Dutch West India Company (Westindische Compagnie, WIC), supported by the Dutch state, established colonies with enslaved populations in Brazil, in the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçāo, Sint Maarten, Saba and Sint Eustatius, and in New Netherland, a colony in North America. The WIC also participated in the colonisation of Suriname. In the late 17th century, Britain imported many Dutch techniques such as joint-stock companies, public debt to finance large naval and military forces, and even a Dutch monarch – William III. The British surpassed the Dutch as the preeminent Atlantic empire. By using public debt, successive British governments managed to expand the state's capacity to wage war against enemies in Europe and around the world. Britain's war-making capacity resulted in dominance of maritime trading routes and the conquest of new territorial possessions in the Americas. Instead of separate national stories, these importations and exchanges produced a shared Anglo-Dutch Atlantic world, with the two empires connected by the flow of people, capital, goods and culture.

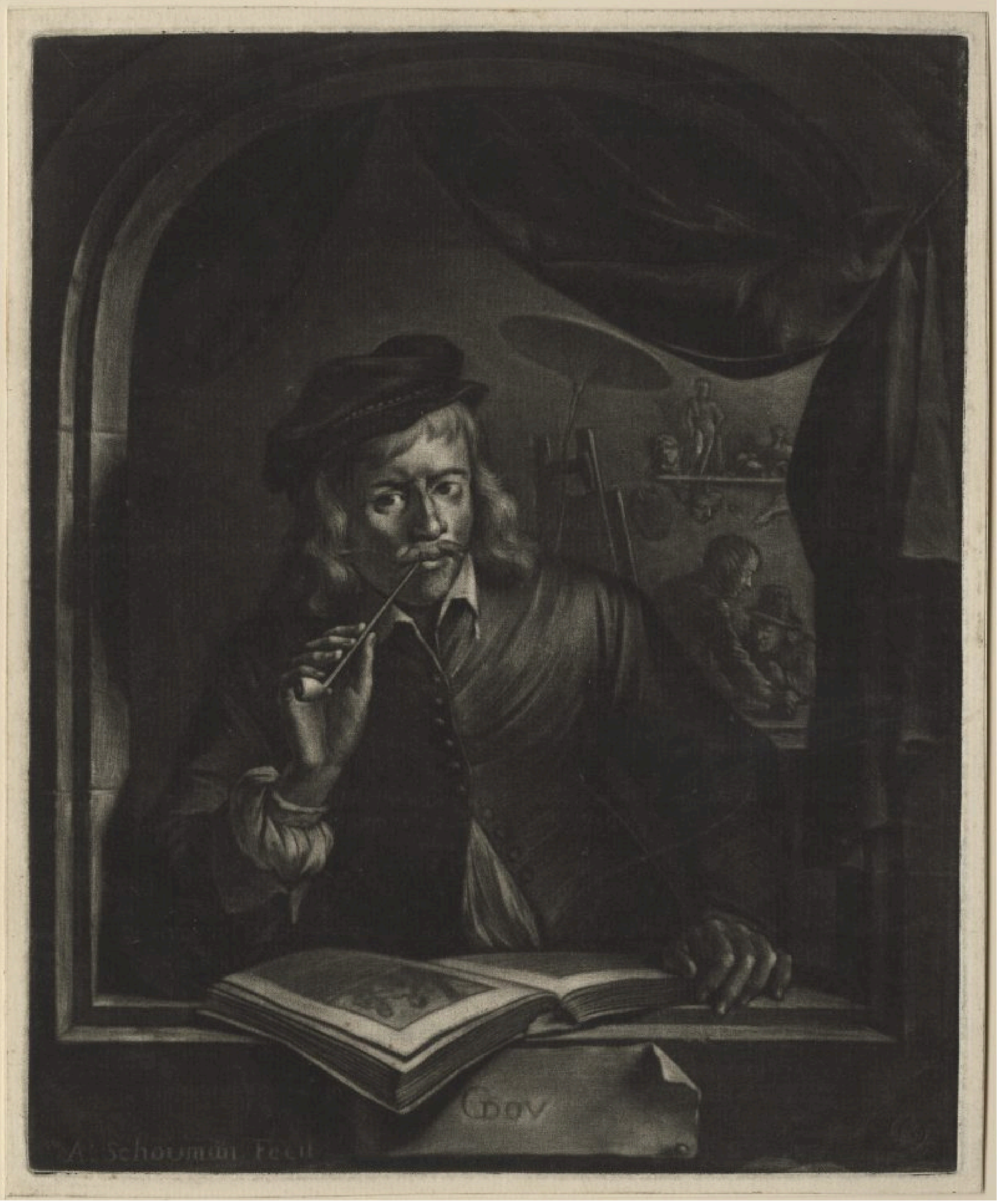


Portrait of a man in military costume. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, attributed to (Dutch, 1606-1669). Oil on panel, height 128.0 cm, width 103.8 cm, 1650. Photo: © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The legacies of Dutch slaveholding in artistic production were systemic, as a selection of artworks from the Fitzwilliam Museum reveals. One legacy was material. Enslaved indigenous and African workers cut trees and transported them from the interior of Dutch Brazil to the coast. By 1650, Rembrandt's studio had obtained some of these woods, where they formed the panel for the *Portrait of a Man in Military Costume.* The man adopts the pose of the 'Renaissance elbow', which artists used to convey a masculine desire to protect and control. Another legacy was representational. Rembrandt depicted Black people with sensitivity throughout his career, but we need to look beyond the Fitzwilliam Museum's collections to see this brilliance. In his study *Two African Men* of 1661, which is in the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Rembrandt dramatically reworks the Renaissance elbow.

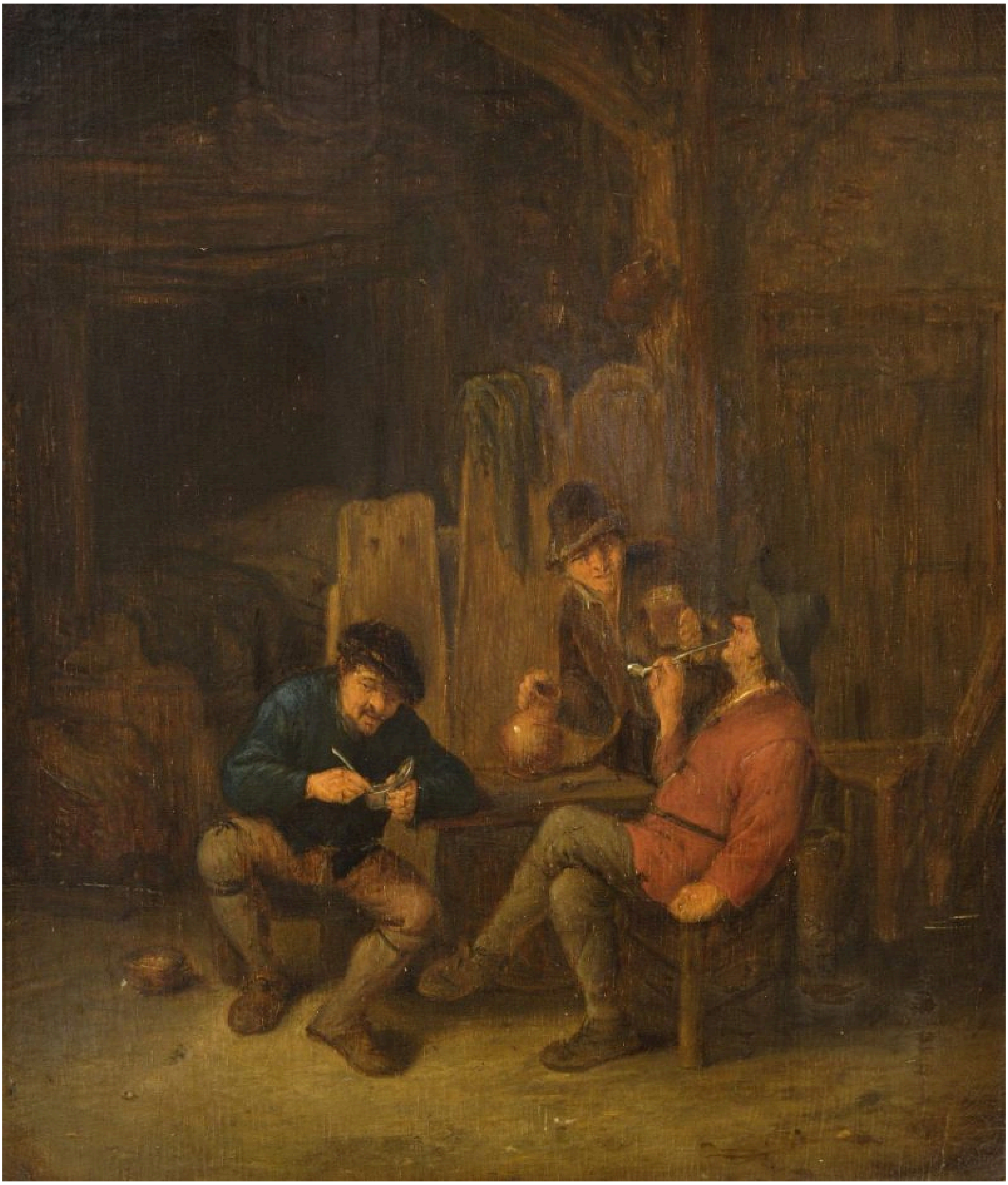
> *17th-century Dutch paintings show that a wide range of people consumed tobacco produced by enslaved people*

The right-hand man's elbow becomes a support for the left-hand man's head, as they act out a scene in costume. Rembrandt represents the fullness of the friendship between the two men in a way that would almost completely disappear from European art until the second half of the twentieth century. When placed alongside each other, the *Man in Military Costume* and *Two African Men* do not just have elbows in common. This pair of pictures also suggests how the system of Atlantic enslavement extracted raw materials from the Americas and narrowed the ways in which artists and viewers in Europe could represent Black people.



Man Smoking a Pipe. Aert Schouman (1710—1792) after Gerrit Dou (1613—1675) mid-eighteenth century mezzotint on paper. Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge: given by John Charrington, 1933. Photo: © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Many material legacies of slavery took their places through illustration within representation. Dou, who painted *The School-master,* framed his small canvases with archways, tables and windows. These framing devices set scenes in which people consumed the new goods that imperial networks supplied. In c.1650, Dou painted himself as a gentleman smoking, which was later turned into a print by Aert Schouman. Here, the man relaxes by an open window as though he has just pulled back the curtain to get some air. In fact, Schouman, as printmaker, has softened his brow compared with Dou's painting, accentuating the gentlemanly expression. The book in front of him suggests a continued commitment to learning. The man holds the pipe with composure. The pipe itself holds something just as telling: tobacco. Dou's gentleman smokes a product grown by enslaved labourers. Burgher virtue required not just disciplined study but also the refined consumption of commodities that enslaved people across the Americas had produced.



Peasants smoking. Ostade, Adriaen van (Dutch, 1610-1685). Oil on panel, height 23.5 cm, width 20.3 cm. Photo: © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Smoking was not confined to the wealthiest Dutchmen: in Adriaen van Ostade's *Peasants Smoking*, three down-at-heel men gather around a table outside a dishevelled room. The fence behind them is broken and there are rags thrown over it. One man stands while two men sit at the table immersed in their smoking. The standing man pours beer from a pitcher. The highly saturated colours, such as the blue and red jackets and the orange lighting of the entire space, add to the warmth and revelry. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings show that a wide range of people consumed tobacco produced by enslaved people, a trend that would accelerate with the consumption of sugar, coffee and cocoa in Britain in the 18th century.

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Banner Image: *Illustration from the book cover of Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance edited by Jake Subryan Richards and Victoria Avery.*

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About the author

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Jake Subryan Richards is Assistant Professor in the Department of International History at LSE. He is a historian of law, empire, and the African diaspora in the Atlantic world. His research concerns how enslaved and free people interacted with law in a world structured by Atlantic empires. His first book project analyses the history of the suppression of the transatlantic trade in enslaved African people.

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