

KS3 Art and Design / Citizenship **Resource**

Kehinde Wiley Narratives



Museum
Gallery
Archive

The Box is Plymouth's new multi-million pound museum, gallery and archive. With brand new exhibition spaces alongside state-of-the-art facilities for research and learning, it's the perfect place to teach, inspire and engage students of all ages.

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About this resource

This resource explores the themes in Kehinde Wiley's 2017 film *Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools)* and the 1498 edition of *Das Narrenschiff (Stultifera Navis)* by Sebastian Brant, both from the collections of The Box.

Wiley's film was acquired through the Contemporary Art Society's prestigious Collections Fund at Frieze in 2018. Founded in 2012, the Fund is one of the highest valued contemporary art awards in the UK and is given to only one member of the Contemporary Art Society each year.

The Box was selected after a competitive application process open to the Contemporary Art Society's 70 Museum Members, working with representatives from the Collections Fund Committee to research and select the works. Along with Wiley's film, two 2018 works by Canadian artist Zadie Xa were also acquired for our collections.

This resource covers some of the broad themes that connect the works by Wiley and Brant, exploring questions of migration, 'madness' and isolation. We are delighted to include *Ship of Fools*, 2017 from the collections of Royal Museums Greenwich within this resource.

The exhibition *Kehinde Wiley: Ship of Fools* is part of The Box's opening programme. It is curated by The Box in partnership with The Arts Institute, University of Plymouth and Royal Museums Greenwich.



Who is Kehinde Wiley?

Kehinde Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977. He is now based in Brooklyn, New York and Beijing, China.

Known predominantly for his portrait paintings, Wiley uses 'street casting' or inviting individuals - often strangers - he encounters on the street to sit for portraits. In this collaborative process, the model chooses a reproduction of a painting from a book and re-enacts the pose of the painting's figure, echoing the work and processes of artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, Titian, Ingres and others.

His paintings often use the symbolism of heroic or powerful portrait paintings, replacing the aristocratic (usually) white sitters with contemporary black subjects, drawing attention to the absence of African Americans from historical and cultural narratives.

The sitters in Wiley's paintings often wear trainers, hoodies and baseball caps - clothing associated with youth culture (particularly hip-hop culture), set against ornate decorative backgrounds.

Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools), 2017 is a three-screen digital film projection first shown at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London in the exhibition 'In Search of the Miraculous', along with nine paintings that reinterpreted seascapes by J.M.W. Turner, Winslow Homer and Hieronymus Bosch.

The painting *Ship of Fools*, 2017 from the collections of Royal Museums Greenwich was also included within this exhibition. It became the first of Wiley's paintings to enter a public collection in the UK, closely followed by the film *Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools)*.



What is the Cottonian Collection?

The Cottonian Collection should be considered Plymouth's greatest gift.

It is Plymouth's only Designated Collection, a scheme that identifies and celebrates collections of national and international importance in non-national institutions.

The Cottonian Collection was formed within what is known as the 'Age of Enlightenment' – a European intellectual movement of the 1800s and 1900s – a period which saw an explosion of public discussion with the establishment of libraries, book clubs, coffee houses and fine art and antiquarian societies. Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, France and throughout Europe questioned traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason – the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness.

The collection encompasses a 2,000 volume book library, several thousand prints, Old Master drawings, oil paintings, works by celebrated artist Sir Joshua Reynolds, ceramics, bronzes and plaster sculptures.

In the spirit of the Enlightenment values of knowledge, freedom and happiness, the Cottonian Collection was bequeathed to Plymouth by William Cotton III in 1863 '*...for the purposes of amusement and instruction by the inhabitants of the towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport and their vicinity...*'

Among the 2,000 books in the Cottonian Collection is Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*.

Johannes Noordhoust me I nunt possit. 1490.

Stultifera Navis



Marragonice pfectōnis nunq̃
satis laudata Nauis: per Sebastianū Brant: vernaculo vul-
gariq; sermone & rhythmo / p cūctoꝝ mortaliū fatuitatis
semitas effugere cupiētīū directiōe / speculo / cōmodoq; &
salute: proq; inertis ignauēq; stultitię ppetua infamia / exe-
cratiōe / & confutatiōe / nup fabricata: Atq; iampridem
per Iacobum Locher / cognomēto Philomusum: Sueuū in
latinū traducta eloquiū: & per Sebastianū Brant: denuo
seduloq; reuīsa / & noua quadā exactaq; emēdatōe eli-
atq; sup additis qbusdā nouis / admirādisq; fatuor-
bus suppleta: fœlici exorditur principio.

.1498.

Nihil sine causa

Io. de Olpe.

What is the ‘Narrenschiff’?

The concept of a ship of fools can be traced back to Ancient Greece, particularly Book Six of Plato’s *The Republic*.

In this book, Socrates is recorded discussing the different models by which a government can rule wisely. He suggests that we cannot always listen to herd mentality when we make decisions as a community; we must use our smarter instincts to avoid being led into making ‘foolish’ decisions.

On a political level, Socrates appears to be suggesting that a simple democracy may descend into dysfunction and chaos. One of the main ideas of *The Republic* is that a wise captain must guide ‘the ship of fools’.

Sebastian Brant took up the idea of a ship of fools in *Das Narrenschiff* (*Stultifera Navis*), a satirical, allegorical poem first published in 1494 in German in Basel, Switzerland, with woodcut illustrations by one of the most important and respected artists of the period, Albrecht Dürer.

The copy held in the Cottonian Collection is a later edition from 1498, translated into Latin by Jacobus Locher under Brant’s close supervision. The poem was first translated into English in 1509 by Alexander Barclay as *The Ship of Fools*.

Around two-thirds of the 114 woodcuts in the book are thought to be by Dürer, with the others attributed to anonymous artists.

The woodcuts helped ensure the immediate success of the book, due in part to Dürer’s rising fame and influence across Europe, but also the sheer quality of his illustrations.



Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*

In a ship laden with 100 fools, steered by fools to the fools' paradise of Narragonia, Brant satirises all the weakness, follies and vices of his time.

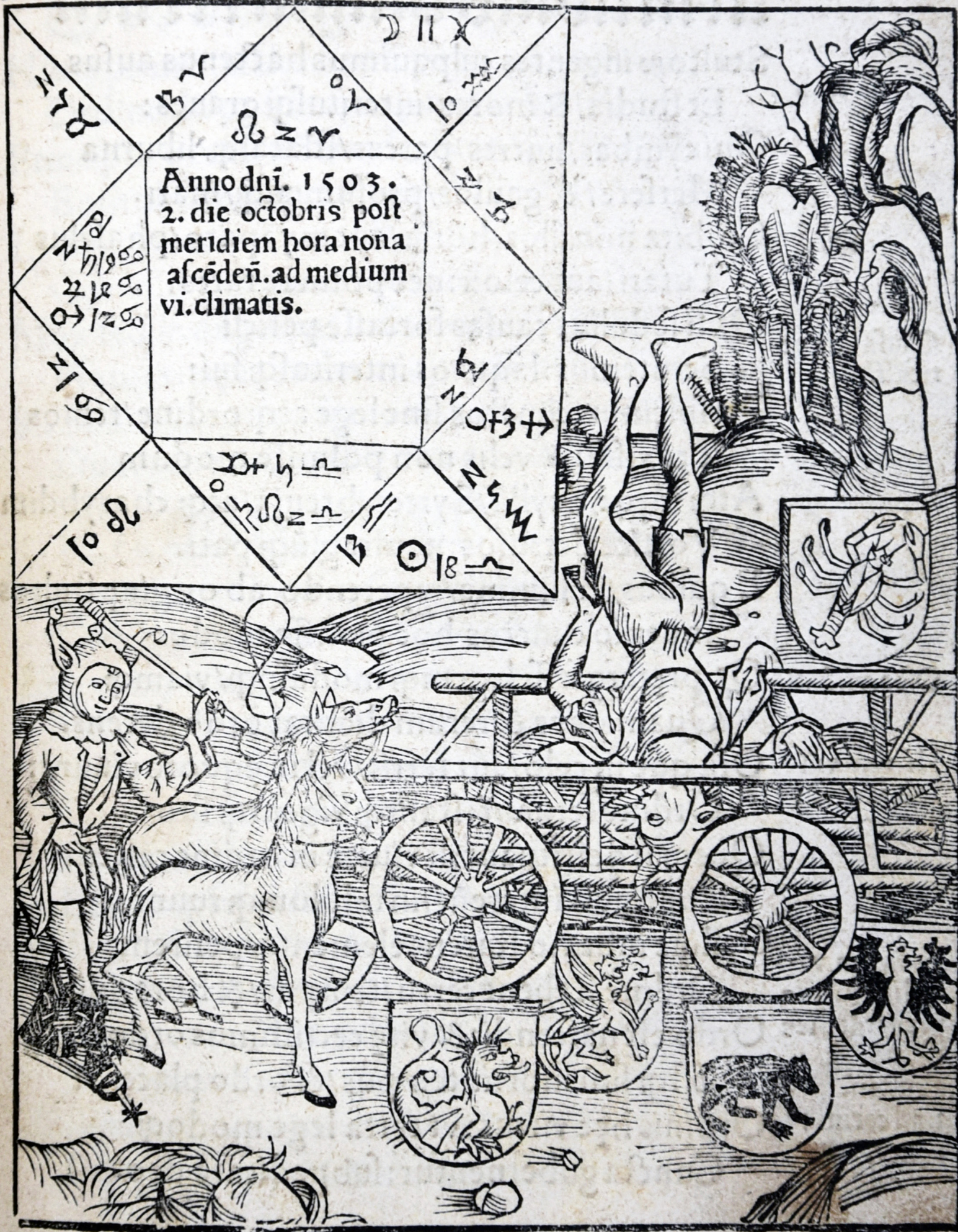
His book pokes fun at judges, politicians, clerics, academics and merchants amongst many others, but at its core is a bitter criticism of corruption in the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1503, having moved from Basel to Strasbourg, Brant secured the influential position of Chancellor, limiting his abilities to write further literary works.

His political views were in favour of hard-line German cultural nationalism and he was particularly vocal about the perceived threat of the Ottoman Empire, making several petitions to the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I to drive back the Ottomans and praising Ferdinand II of Aragon in 1492 for having conquered the Moors and unifying Spain.

pereūtibꝯ. Inuēntio noua. Sebastiani Brant.

pereūtibꝯ. Inuēntio noua. Sebastiani Brant.



Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*

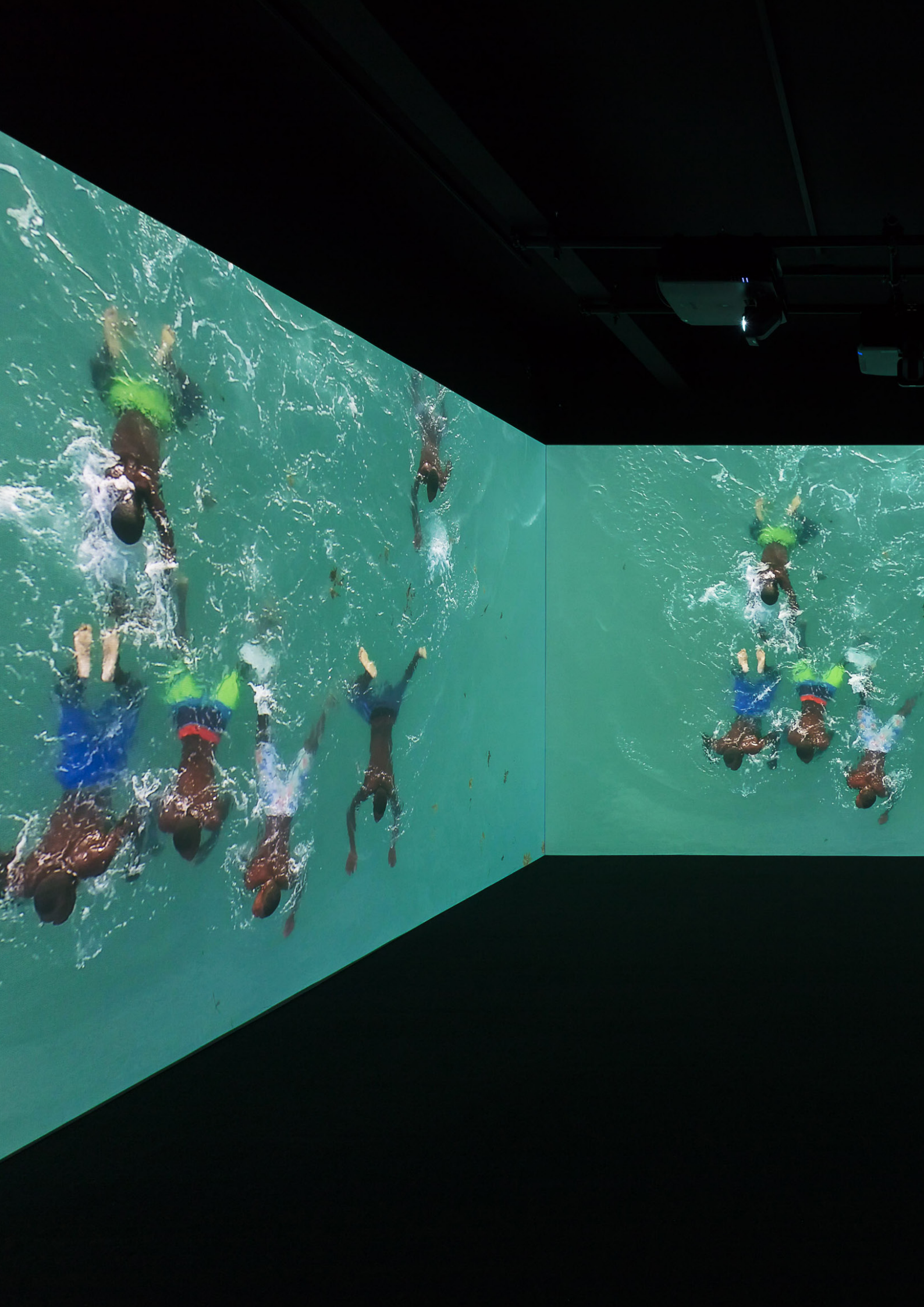
The book is notable for two further inclusions. The first edition contains the earliest literary reference to the discovery of America.

The 1498 edition is even more remarkable for what it contains aside from the *Narrenschiff* – a page titled '*De Corrupto ordine Vivendi pereūtibus. Inuentio noua. Sebastiani Brant*', roughly translated into English as '*About those who will perish from their corrupt ways of living*'.

'*De Corrupto*' was actually a separate full length work, so this page acts as an advert. The woodcut depicts an upside down fool, with another fool driving two horses into the cart.

The upper left-hand corner of this illustration contains an astrological drawing. The small woodcut is a map of the skies. It predicts that at 9pm on 2 October 1503 a great disaster would happen in Germany. It was widely believed that this great disaster would be an invasion by the Ottoman Empire.

Effectively, this book amounts to anti-Islamic propaganda legitimising the power of Maximilian I through astrology, which was a significant and respected practice at the time.



Wiley's *Narrenschiff*

Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools), 2017 by Kehinde Wiley is a three-screen digital film projection that produces an immersive experience for the viewer.

Wiley's film is an emotionally affecting and visually compelling portrait of a group of black men at sea and captures the full spectrum of the human condition.

The film features an original score by composer Maxim Budnick. It is narrated by acclaimed Emmy-nominated actress CCH Pounder.

The narration quotes the French philosopher Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and the Martinique-born philosopher and activist Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

It explores a feeling of 'otherness' brought about by colonisation or imposed on those with a mental illness, as well as the 'ship of fools' and its search for a sense of identity. The film doesn't portray the central figures as 'fools', rather it reflects on aspiration and glorification, with Wiley himself seeing the ocean as '[a metaphor for people going out into unknown territory and desiring what they consider to be the best of themselves](#)'.

We can make associations between the film and news footage of refugees in the Mediterranean, or those attempting to make journeys across international borders in recent years. The portrayal of these desperate humans as 'others' has alarming historic connections to the language used during the height of the transatlantic slave trade, where Africans were portrayed as 'uncivilised' or worse, 'sub-human'.



Wiley's *Ship of Fools*

Ship of Fools, 2017 is the first work by Kehinde Wiley to enter a public collection in the United Kingdom.

From the collections of Royal Museums Greenwich, this large oil painting depicts a group of four migrants in a rickety boat with a tree trunk growing where the mast would be - hindering their chances of a successful journey. Like many of the artist's other works, *Ship of Fools* responds to and borrows from an old master painting - in this case, Hieronymus Bosch's panel (painted c. 1490–1500) now in the collection of the Louvre, Paris.

The panel was painted around the same time as Sebastian Brant's book was first published, meaning that the work could be a direct satire of the Dürer woodcut on page 9.

'(Ship of Fools) is a response to the history of Maritime painting, and in a very strong way is about trying to come to terms with the project I have had over the past ten to twelve years, which is to delve into the history of painting: Gainsborough, Turner, Bosch, to delve into those people whose shoulders I try to stand on to justifiably create a space for myself.'

- Kehinde Wiley

Both the painting and film make visible not only the problems that confront contemporary migrants, but also the invisible legacies that informed maritime history and indeed the genre of marine painting.

Both The Box and Royal Museums Greenwich hold important collections of maritime paintings. Many of these relate to subjects that celebrate the British Empire, colonisation or patriotism, rather than reflect the violence or survivors of our maritime activities as a nation.

Ideas for activities

Why, why, why?

Kehinde Wiley's *Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools)* raises some fundamental questions about global citizenship, identity and equality. Using questions that begin with the word 'why', encourage your students to think about the underlying causes of an issue and begin to make links from local to global. This activity is best done in pairs or threes, or as a whole-class discussion activity. Sticky notes, pens and a big piece of paper will be needed.

To begin, write an 'ISSUE' (for example 'why do people follow a herd mentality?', 'why is there corruption in decision making?' or 'why do nations attempt to extend or retain their authority over other people or territories?') on a sticky note at the left-hand side of the paper. Imagine there are a number of columns across the paper. Then, ask your pupils to write 'WHY?' on each of their sticky notes and think of all the direct reasons for the issue. Link these to the 'ISSUE' sticky note by arrows.

Ask your students to think through the possible reasons behind this first set. Each reason may have more than one contributing factor, so your sticky notes can have more than one arrow. Repeat the process as many times as the issue will allow, each time starting a new column to the right of the previous one. The end result is a flow chart which highlights the complexity of a single issue.

You could then ask your students to distinguish between links they can support with evidence and those they cannot. You could explore bias and prejudice as part of this activity, along with 'fake news', misinformation and the reliability of sources.

Encourage your students to ask: 'Is it fair that this is happening?' and 'What can be done to change things?'

Ideas for activities

Ten words

Both Kehinde Wiley and Sebastian Brant use metaphor within their work. With this activity, your students can develop their literacy skills using metaphor and the careful choice of words.

This activity is best done in pairs or threes.

Think carefully about ten words. These will be the only words you can use for the activity. They can be repeated as many times as you want, but you can't add any more to your list.

Write down the ten words you'd choose. Remember the types of word available – nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions or determiners, for example.

Next, make five sentences with your ten words. At the same time, write what you are actually attempting to say with sentences (they can use different words!).

Communicate these sentences to your partner or group. Use feeling and gesture when speaking. Measure how well the others understand your message by referring to their 'actual' meanings.

Remember, you've only got ten words to use, so choose them well!

Ideas for activities

Who runs the world?

We live in a society that is constantly evolving. Changes in attitude and lifestyles, new inventions and medical advances are just some of the things that might prompt the need to create a completely new law or make changes to existing laws.

Calls for a change in the law may come from an individual, a pressure group, businesses, charities, the medical profession, the police or lawyers.

Imagine that you get to make three laws that everyone in the world must follow.

What laws would you make and why?

Key words and themes

Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison.

A metaphor states that one thing is another thing. It equates those two things not because they actually are the same, but for the sake of comparison or symbolism. If you were to take a metaphor literally, it will probably sound very strange (does it actually rain cats and dogs?).

Allegory

An allegory is a metaphor in which a character, place or event is used to illustrate or convey complex ideas and concepts in ways that are comprehensible or striking to its viewers, readers or listeners.

Writers or artists typically use allegories as a device that conveys hidden or complex meanings through symbolic figures, actions, imagery or events, which together create the moral, spiritual or political meaning that the author wishes to convey.

Satire

Satire is an approach to literature, visual and performing arts, in which vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings are held up to ridicule. The intent is usually to provoke individuals, corporations, government or society itself into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be humorous, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society.

Key words and themes

Colonialism

Colonialism is defined as 'control by one power over a dependent area or people'. It occurs when one nation subjugates another, conquering its population, displacing and/or exploiting it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people.

The concept of colonialism is closely linked to that of imperialism, which is the policy or ethos of using power and influence to control another nation or people.

Criticism

Criticism is the practice of judging the merits and faults of something. In specific areas such as literature or the arts, the form of criticism can be highly specialised and technical. It often requires professional knowledge to appreciate the criticism.

To criticise does not necessarily imply 'to find fault', but often it involves active disagreement, such as 'taking sides'. Constructive criticism will often involve an exploration of the different sides of an issue.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is the analysis of facts to form a judgment. This term is complex and several different definitions exist, which generally include the rational, sceptical, unbiased analysis or evaluation of factual evidence.



Kehinde Wiley CV

Kehinde Wiley

Born: 1977 in Los Angeles, USA

Lives and works in New York and Beijing

Education

2001

MFA, Yale University, School of Art, New Haven, USA

1999

BFA, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, USA

Solo exhibitions (selected)

2018-2019

Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis, Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri

2018

Kehinde Wiley: Lit, Bozar Centre For Fine Arts, Brussels, Belgium

2017-2018

In Search of the Miraculous, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England

2015-2017

Trickster, Sean Kelly, New York, USA

Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, USA; travels to Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; Seattle Art Museum, Washington; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona; Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma; Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio

Kehinde Wiley CV

Special projects

2018

Barack Obama Presidential Portrait Commission, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

2014

Iconic, Presented by Sean Kelly at the 26th Annual ADAA Show
Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace film premier at the Reel Artists Film Festival, Toronto, Canada
FIFA World Cup Brazil Official Art Print Edition

Public collections (selected)

The Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York, USA
The Box, Plymouth, England
Denver Art Museum, Denver, USA
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, USA
The Jewish Museum, New York, USA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida, USA
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas, USA
Nasher Museum of Art, Chapel Hill, USA
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California, USA
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
Royal Museums Greenwich, London, England
Seattle Museum of Art, Seattle, USA
The Zabłudowicz Collection, London, England

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