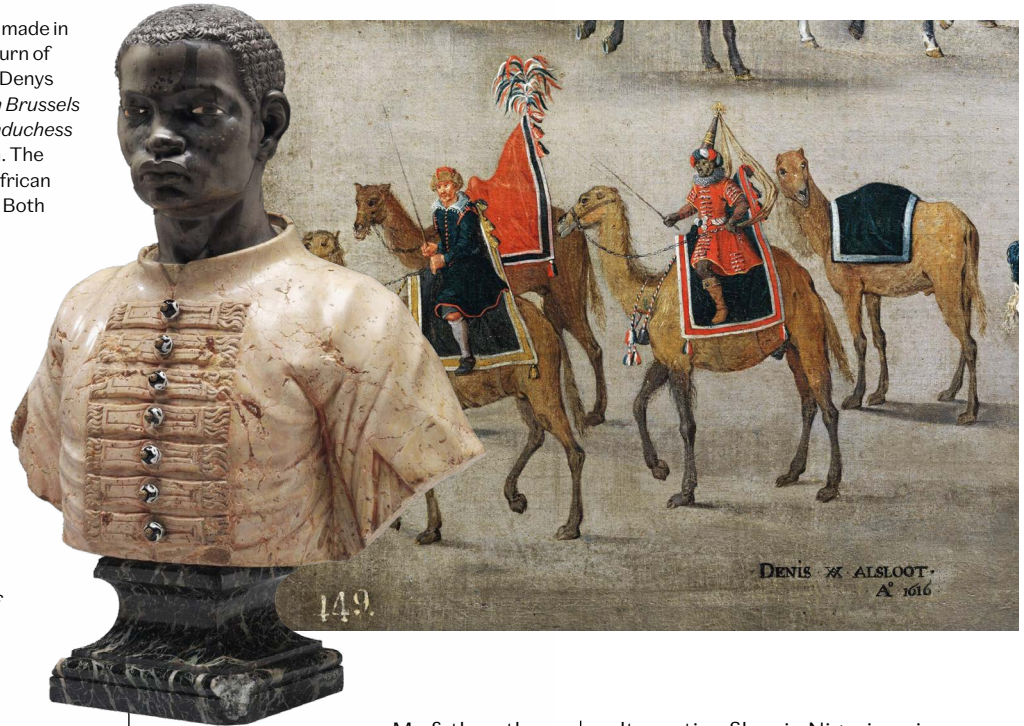


Nadia Denton: art whisperer

The V&A African Heritage Volunteer Guide channels performance and film on her tours through centuries past

Nadia Denton is a curator of African cinema and also gives tours at Tate Modern and the British Museum

Right: This bust of a young man was made in Venice by an unknown artist at the turn of the 17th century. Far right: Detail of Denys van Alsloot's 1616 *The Ommegang in Brussels on 31 May 1615: The Triumph of Archduchess Isabella* depicting a civic procession. The camel driver shows that people of African descent were in Europe at the time. Both objects appear on Denton's tour



For me, art is like a form of spiritual reverence. Art from the past is important, because it tells us things that books don't, particularly on the subject of my V&A tours – individuals of African descent in 17th- and 18th-century Europe.

European history is often presented in such a way that you wouldn't have ever imagined that people of colour existed at different levels of society, yet we see them looking back at us in paintings.

I was part of the first dedicated group of African Heritage Guides to give tours here in 2016. The V&A was the first museum in the UK to have a regular, set programme that was free and accessible to the public.

My tours are led as public performance – and I channel a West African *griot*, or storyteller, using art and artefacts in place of music and poetry. I'm concerned with taking people through a narrative rather than presenting a series of objects.

There are moments when I am covering something that has a history that people might find difficult and I think, "How can I create a space where people feel open to talk?" It's important to explain things in an accessible way, so I bring in contemporary references, such as Louis XIV's red-heeled shoes – I ask whether people know of any modern-day equivalent with a red sole. It's to make them feel that they can claim the space and better read a museum.

My father, the late Menelik Shabazz, was a filmmaker and a committed pan-Africanist and there are parallels in our interests – such as narratives of people of African descent. In 1998, he created *Black Filmmaker Magazine (BFM)* and launched it with

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a festival, screening hundreds of films from the Caribbean, Africa, US and Europe. In 2003, I started running a monthly film club at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London on behalf of the magazine.

One of my projects, *Beyond Nollywood*, explores art house and

alternative films in Nigerian cinema. I coined the term in 2014 to describe the new wave of films emerging from the country. My guided art tours are an extension of this curation. Film borrows so much from visual art traditions and I see discussing a work of art as the same as exploring a film frame by frame.

There's an 18th-century bust of a child of African descent by Flemish artist Joannes Claudius de Cock in Europe 1600–1815, Room 7, The Sheikha Amna Bint Mohammed Al Thani Gallery. He's probably about four or five, and on my tour I talk about what his experience in Europe might have been. I always say that if I were to touch him, I feel he would come alive because the depiction is so exacting. He is so recognisable as a young, innocent child – he doesn't need a lot of explanation. He just is. There are points on the tour where you feel as though an object speaks. If the objects are whispering stories, what are they? As a guide, it's my duty to act as an intermediary, to interpret the whisper. ♦

Interview by MZ Adnan

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