

# Exhibition

October 22, 2021–January 22, 2022

## Moses Williams (ca. 1775–1825)

*Silhouettes*. Hollow-cut profiles on wove paper. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of the McNeill Americana Collection, 2009.

- 1. *Nathan Sellers* (1751–1830), after 1803. 2009–18–42(3).
- 2. *Elizabeth Coleman Sellers* (1756–1831), after 1803. 2009–18–42(4).
- 3. *Ann Sellers*, ca. 1805. 2009–18–42(15).
- 4. *Captain Robert Gill* (1742–1833), after 1803. 2009–18–42(33).
- 5. *Dr. James Hunter Fayssoux* (1785–unknown), ca. 1803. 2009–18–42(99).
- 6. Unidentified Young Woman, after 1803. 2009–18–4(129).

## Kara Walker (b. 1969)

*Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, 2005. Series of fifteen prints: offset lithograph and serigraph on paper. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2008.19.1.1–15.

- 7. *Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats*.
- 8. *An Army Train*.
- 9. *Bank’s Army Leaving*.
- 10. *Buzzard’s Roost Pass*.
- 11. *Confederate Prisoners Being Conducted from Jonesborough to Atlanta*.
- 12. *Cotton Hoards in Southern Swamp*.
- 13. *Crest of Pine Mountain, Where General Polk Fell*.
- 14. *Deadbrook after the Battle of Ezra’s Church*.
- 15. *Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta*.
- 16. *Foote’s Gun-Boats Ascending to Attack Fort Henry*.
- 17. *Lost Mountain at Sunrise*.
- 18. *Occupation of Alexandria*.
- 19. *Pack-Mules in the Mountains*.
- 20. *Scene of McPherson’s Death*.
- 21. *Signal Station, Summit of Maryland Heights*.
- 22. Alfred Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, eds., *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War*, 2 vols. Chicago: McDonnell Bros., 1866–68.

“Kara Walker,” in “Stories,” 2003, from the Art21 television series *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season 2. Created by: Susan Sollins and Susan Dowling. Video; color, sound; 12 minutes, 14 seconds. Courtesy Art21, art21.org, founded 1997.

“Silhouettes,” in “Before Photography,” 2012, from the video series *Inventions of Photography*. Produced and directed by Matthew Ehlers and Jessica Johnston. Video; color, sound; 1 minute, 36 seconds. Courtesy George Eastman Museum.

# Further Reading

Alberto, Alexander. “Kara Walker.” *Index* 2 (January 1996): 24–28.

Museum of Modern Art. *MoMA Highlights Since 1980: 250 Works from the Museum of Modern Art, New York*. New York: MoMA, 2007.

Naeem, Asma, et al. *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*. Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Shaw, Gwendolyn DuBois. “Moses Williams, c. 1775–1825.” In *Represent: 200 Years of African American Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, 34–35. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2014.

## Acknowledgments



*Moses Williams: Silhouettes* is one in a series of American art exhibitions created through a multiyear, multi-institutional partnership formed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art as part of the Art Bridges Foundation Initiative.



*Kara Walker: Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The C. F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum’s traveling exhibition program, Treasure to Go.

Exhibitions at The Trout Gallery are supported in part by Dickinson College, the Ruth Trout Endowment, the Helen E. Trout Memorial Fund, and the Friends of The Trout Gallery. Educational programming is presented through the Mumper-Stuart Education Center at The Trout Gallery.

**Design:** Phillip Unetic, UneticDesign.com  
**Copy Editing:** Mary Cason, West Trenton, NJ

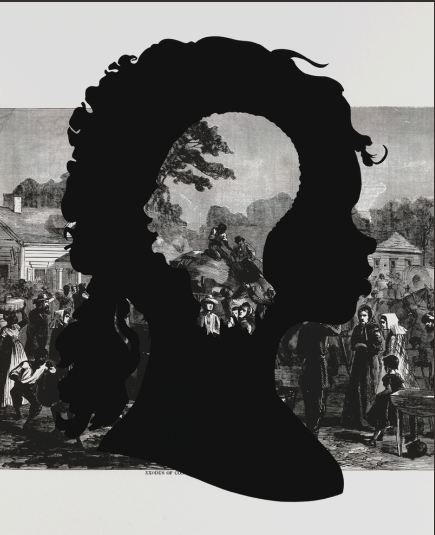
## THE TROUT GALLERY

THE ART MUSEUM OF DICKINSON COLLEGE

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# Tracing Slavery: Moses Williams Kara Walker



THE TROUT GALLERY  
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1. Kara Walker, *Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta*, 2005 (cat. 15).

“*These prints are the landscapes that I imagine exist in the back of my somewhat more austere wall pieces.*”<sup>1</sup>

In 2005 artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) created a portfolio of fifteen lithographs that superimposed solid black, silhouetted forms over illustrations selected from the 1866 publication *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* (fig. 1). Walker called this work of appropriation and adaptation *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* to highlight both its direct engagement with specific archival materials and her ongoing practice of visual and critical augmentation of American visual culture. *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* features the artist’s signature silhouetted figures engaged in provocative and oblique dramas that have come to characterize Walker’s signature style and her interest in engaging with the continuing impact that racism and perceptions of racial difference have had upon American visual culture. The artist’s work draws a direct line between the historical demonization and degradation of Black bodies that flourished during the century between the Civil War in the 1860s to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the contemporary era of protest against race-based police violence and the prison-industrial complex.

“*I’m interested in . . . the fact of slavery’s influence on the American system, and the power of its influence over the American imagination.*”<sup>2</sup>

With a circulation of 200,000 copies in 1861, the illustrated magazine *Harper’s Weekly* was the publication of record for Northern audiences during the era of the Civil War. Founded just a few years prior to the start of the conflict, during the war it represented the political views of the Republican party and celebrated the victories of the Union Army. Each week readers were treated to propagandistic stories and original images of daily life in camp and trauma on the battlefield by well-known artists and illustrators including Winslow Homer and Thomas Nast. Following the end of the conflict, editor-in-chief Alfred H. Guernsey and managing editor Henry M. Alden repackaged the extensive coverage they had produced over the previous five years into a two-volume history that both expanded and distilled previously



2. Frontispiece, *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War*, vol. 1, 1866 (cat. 22).

*Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* serves as a profound remediation of the act of exclusion performed by the original volumes’ purposeful elision of the Black presence in the Civil War. It is also representative of Walker’s provocative insertion of Black bodies, both real and imagined, into the historical image worlds that were created in the immediate aftermath of the devastating national reckoning over slavery and political union that was the US Civil War.

“*The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does.*”<sup>3</sup>

In 1997 the MacArthur Foundation awarded then twenty-eight-year-old Kara Walker its coveted “genius grant” fellowship, catapulting the young artist onto the national stage and into a heated (and ongoing) debate around the use of racial stereotypes, graphic violence, and strong sexual content in contemporary art. Despite the controversy that Walker’s often life-size and profoundly surreal silhouette installations of interracial violence and sexual depravity generated in the late 1990s, or perhaps because of it, the artist’s career has flourished. In the last two and a half decades, she has had numerous major solo exhibitions and has completed important commissioned projects in the United States and throughout Europe. Today her work is recognized as some of the most important and influential in the world, instantly recognizable and taking many forms, from epic drawings of former President Donald Trump and his cronies to monumental sculpture such as the enormous sphinx *A Subtlety* (fig. 3), commissioned in 2014 by Creative Time for the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York, and the *Fons Americanus* that was installed in 2019–20 in the Hyundai Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London.

“*I suppose I consider the silhouette weak. I wanted to find a format that I could seduce.*”<sup>4</sup>

One of the most interesting elements of Walker’s success has been the spotlight that it has cast on the complex history of silhouettes in the United States, bringing into view the Black presence at the height of the form’s popularity in the early 1800s.

published materials. In a conciliatory move to shed the pro-Union, anti-slavery position that had characterized the magazine during the war, Guernsey and Alden chose two titles: *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* (fig. 2) and *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion*. In these volumes the editors sought to minimize the Black presence by nearly eliminating the numerous illustrations of the enslaved, the freed, and the freeborn people of African descent that had been featured in the magazine during the war. In so doing, Guernsey and Alden attempted to attract a Southern audience and recast the Civil War as a disagreement over states’ rights and a struggle for economic dominance between an agrarian South and an industrial North.



3. Kara Walker, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, 2014. Sugar, polystyrene, plastic, molasses. Domino Sugar Factory, Brooklyn, New York. Photo: Andrew Burton via Getty Images.

The hollow-cut paper silhouettes made by Moses Williams (1777–1825) during the period of the early republic have received renewed attention (fig. 4). Williams was born enslaved into the household of painter, naturalist, and museum proprietor Charles Willson Peale at the start of the American Revolution. In his youth, Peale had been indentured to a saddle maker and experienced personally what it meant to have one’s life completely controlled by others. This produced a conflict within him, whereby he owned at least three slaves (Moses and his parents, Lucy and Scarborough Williams) and also campaigned for a gradual end to slavery in Pennsylvania. In many ways Peale’s conflicted beliefs around slavery were mirrored by those of his friend and colleague Dr. Benjamin Rush, who founded Dickinson College. After freeing Williams’s parents and then training the young man to use a physiognotrace, a special mechanical device designed to copy profiles for cut silhouettes that was housed in his Philadelphia museum, Peale also manumitted Moses Williams at age twenty-seven. Between around 1804 and 1820, Williams traced and cut tens of thousands of silhouettes for museum visitors and for Peale family members and friends, such as those that descended in the Sellers family.

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4. Moses Williams, *Dr. James Hunter Fayssoux* (1785–unknown), ca. 1803 (cat. 5).

#### All quotes: Kara Walker

1. Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights Since 1980: 250 Works from the Museum of Modern Art*, New York (New York: MoMA, 2007), 257.
2. “Interview,” in Kara Walker et al., *Kara Walker: For the Benefit of All the Races of Mankind; An Exhibition of Artifacts, Remnants, and Effluvia EXCAVATED from the Black Heart of a Negress* (Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 2002).
3. Alexander Alberto, “Kara Walker,” *Index 2* (January 1996): 25.
4. Alberto, “Kara Walker,” 25.