

Image of Josiah Wedgwood's "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" medallion



The Wedgwood medallion was the most famous image of a black person in all of 18th-century art. Josiah Wedgwood, Britain's renowned potter, was a man of conscience, deeply interested in the consequences of the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.

His friendship with Thomas Clarkson - abolitionist campaigner and the first historian of the British abolition movement - aroused his interest in slavery. Wedgwood copied the original design by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade as a cameo in black and white. The inscription 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' became the catchphrase of British and American abolitionists. Medallions were even sent in 1788 to Benjamin Franklin who was then president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society.

The image was widely reproduced on domestic objects like crockery and also became popular on fashion accessories. According to Clarkson, gentlemen had the image 'inlaid in gold on the lid of their snuffboxes. Of the ladies several wore them in bracelets, and others had them fitted up in an ornamental manner as pins for the hair. At length, the taste for wearing them became general; and thus fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom.'

Although the kneeling black figure is docile and supplicatory (reflecting nothing of the frequent fierce rebellions by enslaved people in the New World plantations), the image nonetheless helped to galvanise support for the abolitionist cause. Benjamin Franklin declared that the medallion's effectiveness was 'equal to that of the best written Pamphlet, in procuring favour to those oppressed People.'

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