



London, 1794: a print depicting a black woman cast as the classical goddess Venus is made and circulated.

William Grainger's engraving reproduces a lost painting by the prolific, once-celebrated and now forgotten British artist Thomas Stothard RA.

Look closely and you will see that shackles are placed around the ankles of this otherwise commanding black Venus.

The VOYAGE of the SABLE VENUS, from ANGOLA to the WEST INDIES.



J. Stothard pinx.

W. Goussier sculp.

The VOYAGE of the SABLE VENUS, from ANGOLA to the WEST INDIES.

The print was made as an illustration to a book about the flora, fauna, trade and human life of the Caribbean, written by pro-slavery author and politician, Bryan Edwards: *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*.

Based between England and Jamaica, Edwards was a plantation owner who, thanks to the success of this book, was elected a member of the prestigious Royal Society. In the face of a growing abolitionist movement, he argued that slavery was both ethical and essential.

The first edition of the book was published in 1793 and had no illustrations.

So successful was the book that a second edition was planned for the following year, featuring a selection of maps and plates, including Stothard's image of the black or "Sable" Venus.



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LIST
OF
MAPS AND PLATES
FOR THE
HISTORY, CIVIL AND COMMERCIAL,
OF
The British Colonies in the West Indies :
IN TWO VOLUMES.

By *BRYAN EDWARDS*, Esq.
OF THE ISLAND OF JAMAICA;
F.R.S. S. A. AND MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN PHILO-
SOPHICAL SOCIETY AT PHILADELPHIA.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR JOHN STOCKDALE, PICCADILLY.
M.DCC.XCIV.

In the book itself, the image illustrates a poem entitled "The Sable Venus: an Ode" by Edwards's friend, the Reverend Isaac Teale.

This poem praises the charm and allure of a black enslaved woman, satirising the idea that a black woman can ever be as beautiful as her European rivals, be they marble or flesh.



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Published Nov. 11. 1794. by J. Stockdale, Piccadilly.

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But the book was not the only place in which the engraving was published.

Edwards also ensured that a volume of the new maps and plates was made available for those readers who already possessed the first edition, so that they did not need to buy the 1794 edition.



J. Richard pinx.

W. Greninger sculp.

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A copy of this rare supplementary volume of maps and plates is held in the All Souls Library.

In this volume, the image of a black woman as a chained classical goddess is placed as the frontispiece, its ties with the poem severed so that the image speaks for itself.

Looking at the engraving, Botticelli's famous *The Birth of Venus* may instantly come to mind. Yet although we have come to consider that work the ultimate Renaissance painting, it was not considered a work worthy of emulation during Stothard's lifetime.



The image is instead based on another Renaissance work: Raphael's fresco known as *The Triumph of Galatea*. Stothard had not yet travelled to Europe, and he would have known Raphael's work through this engraving by Domenico Cuengo, held in the collection of the Royal Academy, where he had been a student, and where himself would eventually become Librarian as well as Academician.

As Stothard's original painting has not survived, we can only imagine what it looked like.

Here, we can compare Grainger's engraving with a later engraving by William Greatbach after a watercolour by Stothard of a conventional, that is, non-black Venus.



J. Stothard pinx. *W. Grainger sculpt.*

THE VOYAGE of the SABLE VENUS, from ANGOLA to the WEST INDIES.

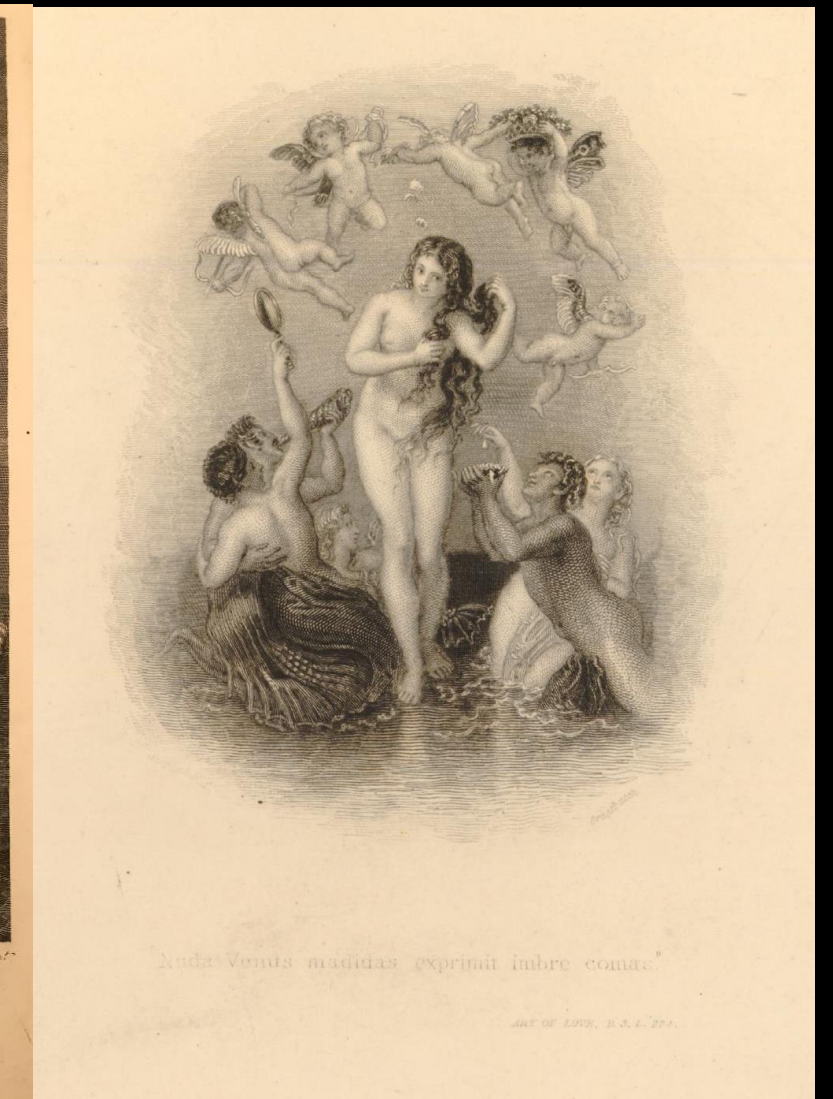


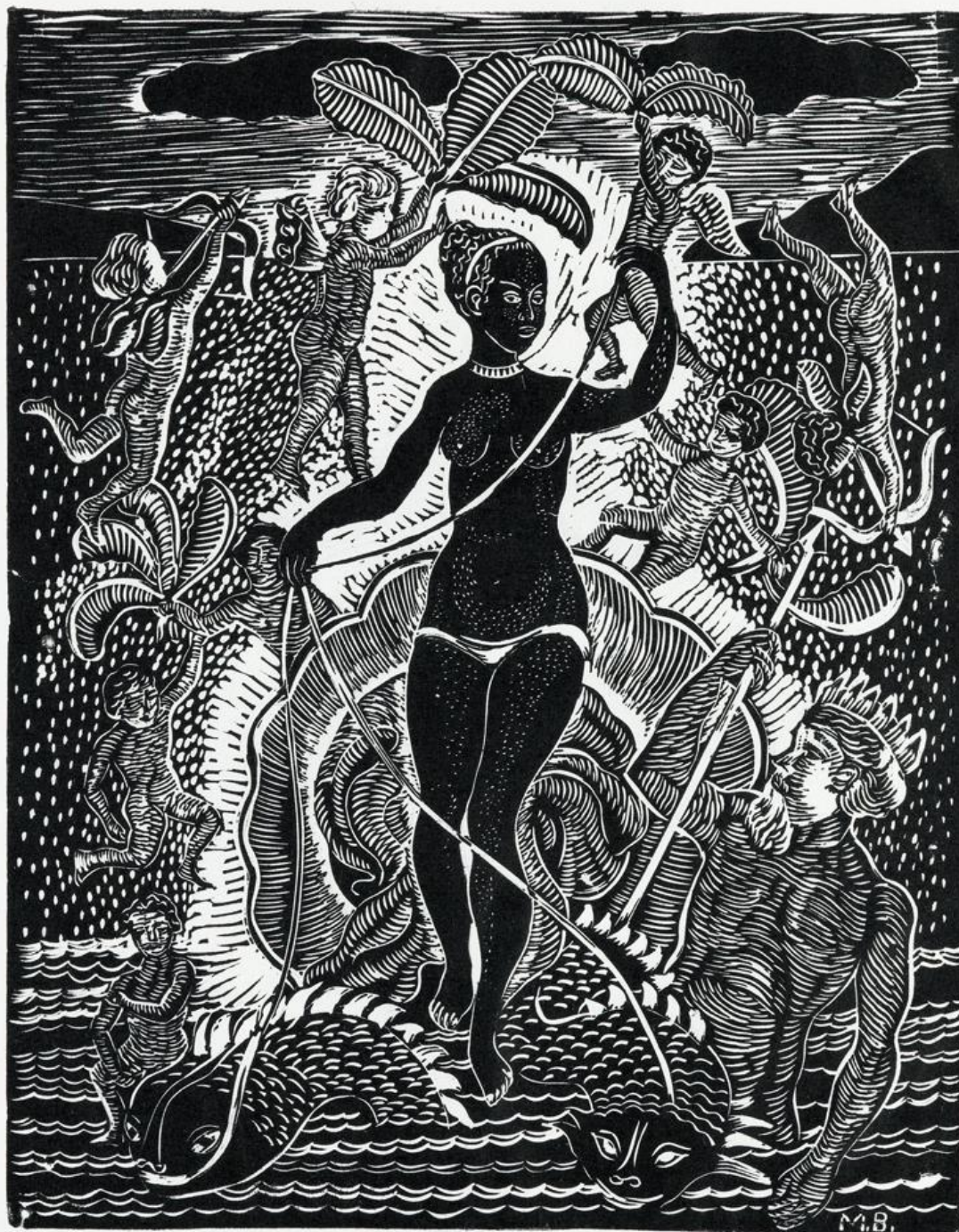
Anda Venus madidas exprimit imbre comas.

ART OF LOVE, D. S. L. 1784.

In the later work, Stothard has emulated the Venetian Renaissance artist Titian, specifically his painting of *Venus Anadyomene*, in which Venus is pictured combing her hair

Looking at these two images together, we can see that the black Venus is dressed in underwear, whereas the white Venus's pubic area is semi-exposed, covered only by strands of hair.



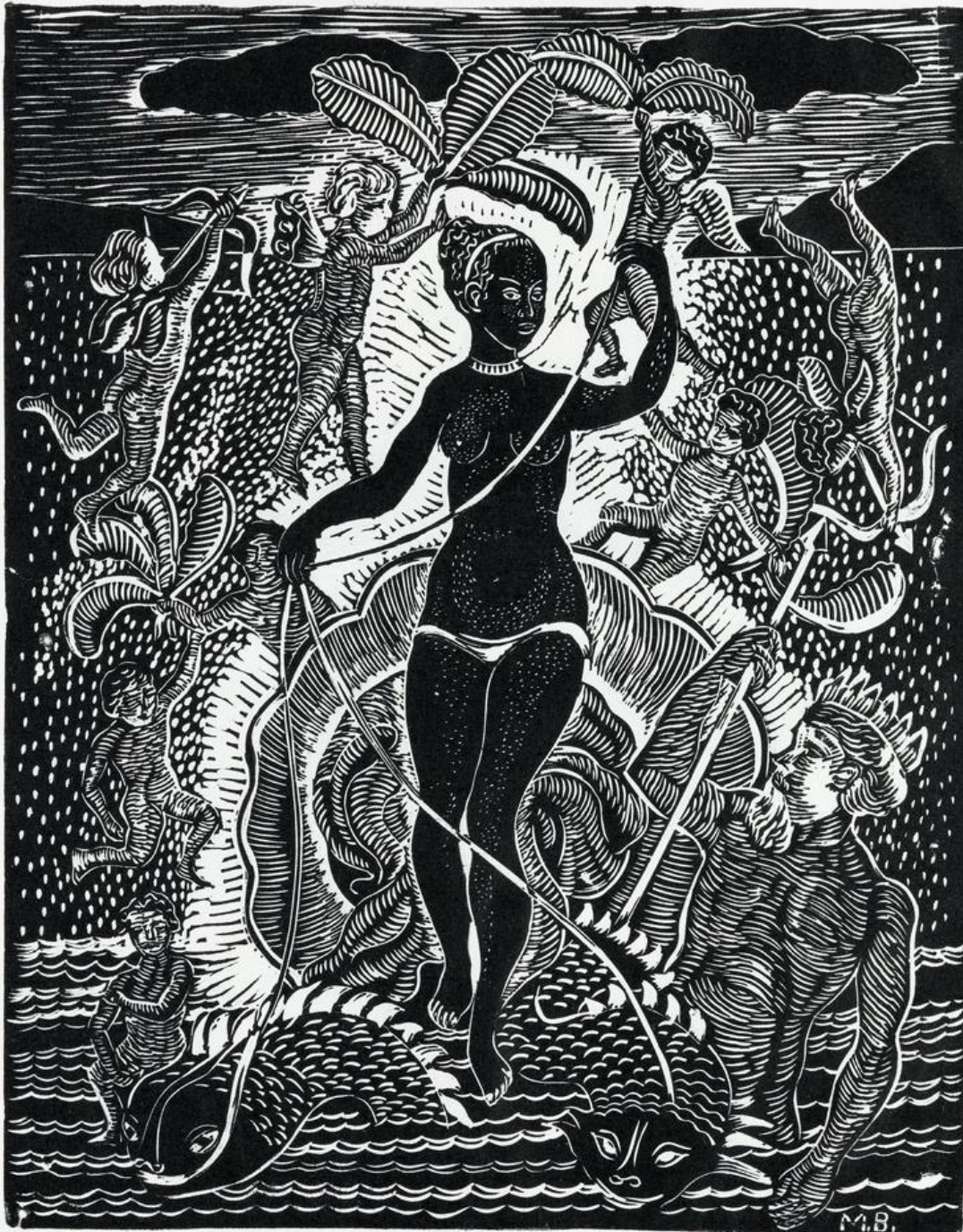


"Black Venus"

50/50

Margaret Burroughs

Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that Stothard's image was made in the context of pro-slavery propaganda, several African American female artists have subsequently engaged with the engraving, adapting its imagery into a celebration of the beauty and resilience of black women.



"Black Venus"

50/50

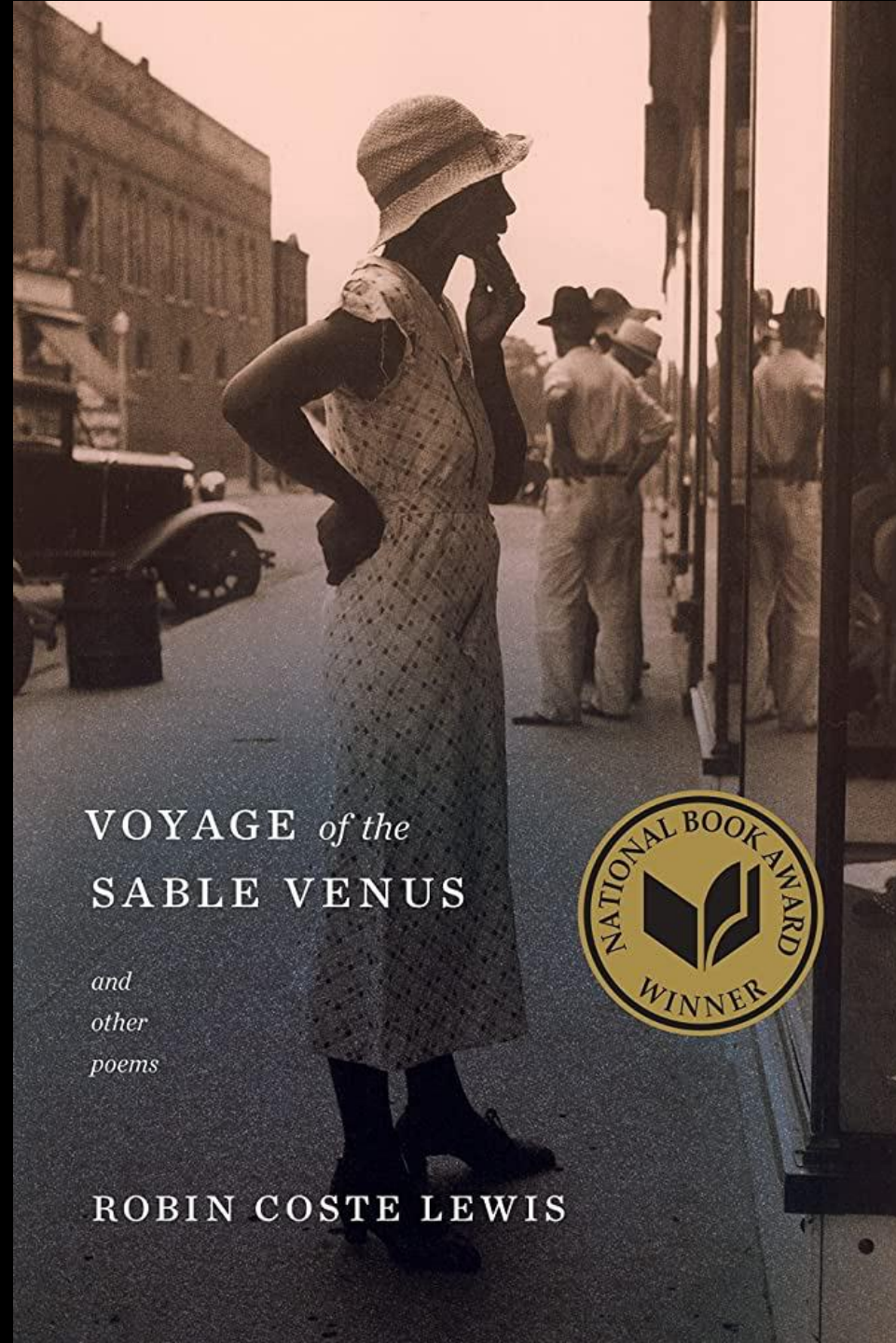
Margaret Burroughs

In 1977, this linocut by the Chicago-based educator and activist Margaret Burroughs was printed in an edition of 50.

It reproduces the composition of Stothard's work almost exactly, with some of the finer detail lost in its translation from engraving to the more rudimentary technique of linocut.

Originally from Compton, California, the poet Robin Coste Lewis chose to name her debut anthology after the engraving: *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*, published in 2015.

The title poem *Voyage of the Sable Venus* is composed entirely of titles, catalogue entries and museum descriptions of “Western” art objects that depict or allude to the black female form.



Contrary to the often-repeated claim that the black female body is not a significant presence within the history of art, Coste Lewis discovered an overwhelming amount of archival material relating to black women's bodies and experiences of objecthood, which she then configured into verse.

