



## I AM QUEEN MARY STATUE Copenhagen, Denmark

55.68620, 12.59761



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### Executive Summary

In 2018, artists La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers created the 'I Am Queen Mary' Statue. The monument honours Mary Thomas, one of the three female leaders of the 1878 'Fireburn' Rebellion, a revolt against Danish colonial rule on the Caribbean island of St. Croix. The monument was unveiled during the centenary celebrations of the sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States. Initially, the statue was made of lightweight material and placed temporarily outside a former West Indian warehouse in Copenhagen. In 2020, after years of campaigning, the Danish government agreed to display the statue permanently. During a storm in December 2020, the statue was irreparably damaged. In August 2021, a fundraising campaign began to cast the statue in bronze and display it and a twin version in Copenhagen and St. Croix. This case study examines how contemporary monuments can reshape historical narratives.

## Introduction

With its unveiling in March 2018, the I am Queen Mary monument was, and still is, one of the first and few statues in Denmark that references Denmark's history as a colonial power and its involvement in the slave trade. Due to irreparable damage caused by a storm in December 2020, the sculpture now only exists in an augmented reality version. The monument's creators are currently raising funds to build a permanent sculpture, as well as raising funds for a twin copy to be made and installed on St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands. While the monument has not been widely contested, some have questioned what message it sends and have also questioned how these messages can be reconciled with its objectives. At the same time, the monument's creation can be understood as a contestation of the wider Danish memory and narrative of Danish colonisation. This case study examines the history behind the sculpture, the questions about the monument and its purpose, and the tensions arising from the attempt at reconciling two opposing experiences and memories of the Danish West Indies.

## Background

### *The monument*

The I Am Queen Mary sculpture was created as a collaborative project between the artists' La Vaughn Belle from the Virgin Islands and Jeanette Ehlers from Denmark.<sup>1</sup> The monument, or more accurately the art project, bears the full title, I Am Queen Mary – A Hybrid of Bodies, Narratives and Nations.<sup>2</sup> The project's official website describes the sculpture as 'an allegorical portrait of Mary Thomas.' Thomas was an enslaved person working on a sugarcane plantation which led the largest labour revolt in Danish colonial history in 1878. The project aims to 'change whose stories get told in the public space by centring the stories and agency of those brought to the Danish West Indies.'<sup>3</sup>

The monument stands seven metres tall and consists of two main parts: a coral stone plinth on which the second part of the sculpture, namely the figure of Mary Thomas, rests.<sup>4</sup> The plinth is made up of 1.5 tons of coral stones imported from St. Croix from historic properties owned by Belle.<sup>5</sup> The stones were cut by enslaved people and used as material for buildings during the colonial period.<sup>6</sup>

The original monument was formed with sealant and paint-coated polystyrene.<sup>7</sup> However, this sculpture proved incapable of withstanding the Danish winter and was damaged in a storm in December 2020. The monument can currently only be seen as an augmented reality version.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Raaby Ravn, "I Am Queen Mary' skal minde os om vores kolonihistorie," *Information*, April 3, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Process," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Barnard College, "Break This Down: 'I Am Queen Mary' at Barnard," Barnard College, October 15, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Process," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>8</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

augmented reality version consists of the original plinth, which remained intact after the storm, still physically present at the monument's location, and the augmented figure of Queen Mary, which visitors can only see by using their smartphone or tablet camera.<sup>9</sup> The artists behind the project are currently raising funds to recreate the sculpture in bronze<sup>10</sup> to improve its durability and to create a twin version to be placed in St. Croix.<sup>11</sup>

The figure of Queen Mary holds a cane bill in one hand and a torch in the other.<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth noting that the sculpture is not made to represent what Mary Thomas looked like. The figure was developed by scanning the bodies of the artists Belle and Ehlers and fusing the two, using the combined forms of the artists as the figure of Mary Thomas.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the monument also closely resembles a famous image by the artist Blair Stapps of Huey P. Newton, one of the founders and leaders of the Black Panther Party, also known as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The aim of the Party was originally to patrol Black neighbourhoods in Oakland, California, and in this way, limit police brutality.<sup>14</sup> Over time, the organisation grew into a broader Marxist group initiating community service programs, such as free breakfast programs for 20,000 children, sponsoring schools, and calling for wider social reform in the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

The Black Panther Party was involved in several violent encounters both with police as well as internally within the group.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the political mission of the group was also viewed as controversial since '[t]he Party believed that in the Black struggle for justice, violence (or the potential of violence) may be necessary.'<sup>17</sup> This was also reflected in some of the group's promotional material. The I Am Queen Mary sculpture is very similar to one of the Black Panther Party's promotional posters (see figure 1) in which Huey



Figure 1: "Black Panther Poster" Image by Bruce Bortin via Flickr

<sup>9</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "in Augmented Reality and soon on Kickstarter," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> Kunsten.nu, "I am Queen Mary skal fortsat minde os om kolonitiden," *Kunsten.nu*. March 5, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> Brigit Katz, "New Statue Immortalizes Mary Thomas, Who Led a Revolt Against Danish Colonial Rule," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 4, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Process," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Garret Albert Duncan, "Black Panther Party," *Britannica*, November 11, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> National Museum of African American History and Culture, "The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change," n.d.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> National Archives, "Huey P. Newton (February 17, 1942- August 22, 1989)," March 22, 2021.

Newton sits in a rattan chair with a shotgun in one hand and a spear in the other. At the bottom of the print, it reads, 'The racist dog policemen must withdraw immediately from our communities, cease their wanton murder and brutality and torture of black people, or face the wrath of the armed people.'<sup>18</sup>

The statue also references other Black social movements. For example, the title of the statue, *I Am Queen Mary*, is a reference to the 'I Am A Man' statement in posters from a 1968 worker's strike in Memphis, Tennessee; the statement has since then been widely used and adapted in several Black movements and artworks.<sup>19</sup>

## *Denmark and the Danish West Indies*

Danish colonial history spans hundreds of years and over several continents. From the early 17th century until the middle of the 20th century, Denmark established trading ports and routes, claimed territory, and established colonies in several regions, for example, in the Caribbeans, Greenland, India, and more. In addition, Denmark was involved in the slave trade from the middle of the 17th till the early 19th century.<sup>20</sup> Danish tradesmen began establishing themselves on the African Gold Coast, what is today known as Ghana, in the 1660s.<sup>21</sup> At first, the main commodity traded was gold. However, as Denmark began establishing colonies in the Caribbeans, enslaved people became their main commodity.<sup>22</sup>

In 1671, by royal charter, the *Vestindisk-Guineisk Kompagni* (Danish West India and Guinea Company) was established.<sup>23</sup> The following year, the company established its first colony in the Caribbeans, namely on the island of St. Thomas.<sup>24</sup> Notably, this was not Denmark's first attempt at establishing a colony in the Caribbeans, but this was the first successful attempt.<sup>25</sup> In the following years, the company remained relatively inactive, and the trade in the West Indies and Africa was instead leased out to private traders. However, in 1690, the company deemed that the trading was sufficiently profitable for the company to cease its trade leasing.<sup>26</sup> As the trading increased, so did the Danish colonial expansion. In 1718 Denmark expanded its colonial territory by occupying St. John, and later in 1733, by purchasing St. Croix from France.<sup>27</sup>

On March 16, 1792, due to the recommendation of the Danish Slave Trade Commission, King Christian VII issued an edict abolishing the trade of enslaved persons (but not slavery) effective

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<sup>18</sup> National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Huey Newton, Black Panther Minister of Defense," n.d.

<sup>19</sup> Semine Long-Calleesen, "Den Sorte Havfrue," *Perspective*, February, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition*, vol. 2, *Studies in Global Slavery* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Frederik Svensli, "'A Fine Flintlock, a Pair of Ditto Pistols and a Hat with a Gold Gallon': Danish Political and Commercial Strategies on the Gold Coast in the Early 18th Century," In *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 71-72.

<sup>23</sup> Niels Brimnes, "De Vestindiske Øer, 1672-1917," *danmarkshistorien.dk*, June 29, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition*, vol. 2, *Studies in Global Slavery* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Holger Weiss, "Introduction: Portals of Early Modern Globalisation and Creolisation in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade," In *Ports of Globalisation, Places of Creolisation: Nordic Possessions in the Atlantic World during the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Holger Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Niels Brimnes, "Vestindisk-Guineisk Kompagni, 1671-1754," *danmarkshistorien.dk*, January 4, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition*, vol. 2, *Studies in Global Slavery* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 7.

from 1803.<sup>28</sup> This recommendation was based on several different factors. However, there were arguably two principal reasons. Firstly, the slave trade was increasingly deemed unprofitable.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, there was increased scrutiny and condemnation of the slave trade not only in Denmark but more widely within several European countries.<sup>30</sup> The ten-year grace period between the issued edict and its enforcement date is notable.

The ten-year interim allowed Danes to import more enslaved people to work in the Caribbean colonies. The importation during this decade could even be described as 'feverish.'<sup>31</sup> This escalation of the importation of enslaved Africans was largely supported, if not encouraged. The hope was that if the number of enslaved people in the Danish West Indies could be increased enough before the enforcement of the abolition edict, then the workforce in the colonies would be self-sufficient, i.e., it would be 'possible for the slave population to reproduce – and thereby make further imports from Africa superfluous.'<sup>32</sup> In a further effort to increase the workforce in the colonies, the Slave Trade Commission also recommended that enslavers should improve the circumstances of the enslaved people, e.g., by improving working conditions, allowing official marriages between enslaved people, allowing for greater access to education, etc.<sup>33</sup> Despite these recommendations and the varying enforcement level, unrest and dissatisfaction continued to grow among the enslaved workers and freedmen.

After several slave revolts as well as European power struggles on the islands, in combination with the steadily decreasing profitability of maintaining control of the islands, Denmark sold the Danish West Indies to the United States in 1917 for 25 million U.S. dollars and on the condition of U.S. recognition of Denmark's claim to Greenland.<sup>34</sup> The islands have since then been known as the U.S. Virgin Islands.<sup>35</sup>

### *The path to emancipation and the Fireburn Revolt*

Throughout Danish control over St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, revolts and rebellions would occur sporadically. Enslaved people had few rights, and it was only possible for very few to earn enough to buy their way to freedom and thus become 'freedmen.'<sup>36</sup> Thus, the only way to gain more rights and eventual freedom was through rebellion. In 1733 on St. John, the enslaved people rebelled against their Danish occupiers and took control of the island. They managed to maintain control for several months. However, with help from the French, Denmark managed to reclaim

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>31</sup> Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, (The University of the West Indies Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Erik Gøbel, *The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition*, vol. 2, *Studies in Global Slavery* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>34</sup> Niels Brimnes, "De vestindiske Øer, 1672-1917," danmarkshistorien.dk, June 29, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, (The University of the West Indies Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Niels Brimnes, "De vestindiske Øer, 1672-1917," danmarkshistorien.dk, June 29, 2020.



power.<sup>37</sup> Similar plans of rebellion were discovered on St. Croix, and thus the revolt was stopped before it had truly started.<sup>38</sup>

In response to the growing unrest among the enslaved people, an edict was issued which ensured that children born to enslaved people from 1847 and forward would be born free.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, this was not enough to suppress the dissatisfaction in St. Croix. In July 1848, thousands of enslaved people converged and demanded freedom,<sup>40</sup> which Governor Peter von Scholten granted.<sup>41</sup> While the new freedmen were pleased with this outcome, the plantation owners were less so, fearing that this development would curtail their profits. To appease the plantation owners, the new Governor-General, Peder Hansen, proposed a new Labour Act, which came into effect in January 1849. The act did include some reforms, yet, in essence, the act re-established the slave-master relationship, thus leaving the formerly enslaved people virtually no better off than before emancipation.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most notable reforms initiated by the act was the introduction of a yearly *skiftedag* (literally 'changing day', but it is known as Contract Day in English), a day where the freedmen could switch to a different plantation to work there instead.<sup>43</sup> This day also became an annual holiday in which the freedmen could celebrate their temporary power over their station.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, this limited freedom did not satisfy the freedmen's continued calls for rights and real freedom. After years of social, economic, and political hardship, another revolt began.<sup>45</sup>

In October 1878, the growing unrest culminated in the appropriately named Fireburn Revolt. The freedmen were aware of how easily St. Croix could be damaged by fire and how there was little that the plantation owners could do in response. Although it is unclear to what degree the Fireburn could be said to have had a definite leadership, some women, amongst others, were identified as having to some degree, served as leaders of the revolt.<sup>46</sup> These women, Axeline 'Agnes' Elizabeth Salomon, Matilda McBean, and Mary Leticia Thomas, have since become known as the queens of the Fireburn.<sup>47</sup> Mary Thomas was put to trial for her involvement in the revolt, and was at first sentenced to death; her sentence was then changed to imprisonment.<sup>48</sup> Thomas was imprisoned in a Danish prison from 1882 to 1887, after which she was returned to St. Croix, where she served the remainder of her life sentence until she died in 1905.<sup>49</sup> The Fireburn led to significant changes and improvements in the lives of plantation workers,<sup>50</sup> which helps explain

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, (The University of the West Indies Press, 1994), 209.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>41</sup> Niels Brimnes, "De vestindiske Øer, 1672-1917," danmarkshistorien.dk, June 29, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Clifton Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies," *Phylon* 42, no. 42 (1981): 336.

<sup>43</sup> Rigsarkivet, "De tre oprørsdronninger," Rigsarkivet, n.d.

<sup>44</sup> Clifton Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies," *Phylon* 42, no. 42 (1981): 342.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Background," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>48</sup> Morten Mikkelsen, "Portræt af en omstridt karakter: Queen Mary er et tvetydigt symbol," *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Clifton Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies," *Phylon* 42, no. 42 (1981): 344-345.

why Thomas, Salomon, and McBean are still remembered and celebrated in the U.S. Virgin Islands today.

## History of the Contestation

While the monument has perhaps not been fervently contested by the broader public, Danish educators and opinion makers have raised questions about what the monument tries to represent and its success. However, it is worth noting that the statue did receive media coverage not only from local and national sources in Denmark and in the U.S.V.I., but it also received attention from more widely known international sources such as *The New York Times*<sup>51</sup> and *Le Monde*.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly after the unveiling of the original monument in March 2018, Jes Fabricius Møller, lecturer at Saxo-Institute,<sup>53</sup> summarised that the monument aimed to remind Danes of Denmark's past as a colonising power and of its involvement in the slave trade.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Møller states that the monument misses the point of its aim since 'Mary Thomas was not a slave – or enslaved, as recent research prefers to call it. The rebellion at St. Croix took place 30 years after the abolition of slavery on the islands.'<sup>55</sup> In this sense, Møller argues that the monument does not represent what it claims to do, and he further argues that the monument rather celebrates 'rebellion and fighting.'<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Møller criticises how the monument attempts to reconcile several contemporary understandings of the past, namely European, Danish, American, and Caribbean modern-day interpretations, arguing that the combination complicates the artists' message.<sup>57</sup>

A week after Møller's article was published, Gunvor Simonsen, a History professor at the University of Copenhagen,<sup>58</sup> entered the debate about the monument and challenged Møller's views. In particular, Simonsen argues that the monument's message is not complicated by the different national and regional memories and interpretations but rather that the history behind the monument is of such a nature that it necessitates the inclusion of these. Furthermore, Simonsen states that the sculpture does not offer one closed interpretation and that it instead leaves the message open for interpretation and reflection.<sup>59</sup>

Questions have also been raised as to whether the figure of the monument is an adequate and appropriate representation. For example, in 2020, a Danish journalist, Morten Mikkelsen, highlighted the varied understandings of who Mary Thomas was and whether she is an individual that should be celebrated at all. Mikkelsen relays that while Mary Thomas is known as Queen Mary and celebrated as a hero on St. Croix, Danish sources paint a different picture. According to Danish police reports from the colonial period, Thomas abused her own children and offered the

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Selsø Sørensen, "Denmark Gets First Public Statue of a Black Woman, a 'Rebel Queen,'" *New York Times*, March 31, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> *Le Monde*, "La Première Statue d'une Femme Noire Devoilée à Copenhague," April 3, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Saxo-Institutet. "Jes Fabricius Møller." Københavns Universitet. n.d.

<sup>54</sup> Jes Fabricius Møller, "En hyldest til oprøret," *Kristeligt Dagblad*, April 3, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Translation by author, *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Translation by author, *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Gunvor Simonsen, "'I Am Queen Mary.' Jes Fabricius Møllers kritik af en ny skulptur rammer ved siden af," *Kristeligt Dagblad*, April 10, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

names of other leaders of the Fireburn in order to reduce her own sentence.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Mikkelsen questions whether the I Am Queen Mary monument is an appropriate commemoration of Danish colonial history.

Similarly to Møller and Mikkelsen, Jacob Wamberg, an art history professor at Aarhus University, also takes issue with what the monument represents. Wamberg argues that ‘the monument repeats the [very same] power structure that the monument tries to break with.’<sup>61</sup> Wamberg contends that Belle and Ehlers claim to challenge the patriarchal and traditional understanding of Danish colonial history by showcasing and celebrating a female rebel who fought for her rights. Yet, they fail to truly do so because of who they celebrate and how.<sup>62</sup> In essence, Wamberg argues that by choosing someone like Mary Thomas as a figurehead for commemoration, a woman who has a chequered history, and further by representing her bearing ‘working tools as weapons,’ Belle and Ehlers effectively celebrate the symbols of repression that they are at the same time condemning.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, Wamberg questions whether a monument of Mary Thomas is appropriate when the statues of other historical figures are now being torn down for the same type of violence.<sup>64</sup>

Alongside the contestation of the monument, the monument itself has also been interpreted as a contestation of Danish colonial memory. Ehlers herself stated that the sculpture has ‘created a space for black and brown people in which we can see ourselves represented in a strong and positive way. It [(the sculpture)] provides a much-needed counterpoint to the white European narrative that has long defined our collective consciousness and dominated the public sphere.’<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Niels Brimnes, associate professor at Aarhus University, argues that the narrative of Denmark as a colonial power represents Denmark as not having been ‘as bad as others.’<sup>66</sup> Mathias Danbolt, a researcher at the University of Copenhagen, seemingly corroborates this by arguing that Denmark’s role as a colonial power ‘is remembered selectively and poorly.’<sup>67</sup> In this sense, the monument contradicts this seemingly dominant narrative and challenges Danish colonial amnesia.

However, some argue that colonial history, in fact, is re-examined and remembered in Denmark. For example, some have argued that in the last decades, Danish educational material in schools has become more diverse and offers more critical and nuanced perspectives on Danish colonial history.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, others, like Louise Sebro, a researcher at the National Museum of Denmark, contend that while there are significant differences in the level to which Denmark remembers its colonial history in comparison to other European colonisers, this can, to some extent, be attributed to Denmark having only very small minority groups from their former

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<sup>60</sup> Morten Mikkelsen, “Portræt af en omstridt karakter: Queen Mary er et tvetydigt symbol,” *Kristeligt Dagblad*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Translation by author, Joachim Talbro Paulsen, “Professor kritiserer kommende statue ved Amaliehaven – minder om totalitær kunst,” *Berlingske*, April 15, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Translation by author, *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Translation by author, *Kunsten.nu*, “I am Queen Mary skal fortsat minde os om kolonitiden,” *Kunsten.nu*, March 5, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Selsø Sørensen, “Denmark Gets First Public Statue of a Black Woman, a ‘Rebel Queen,’” *New York Times*, March 31, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Translation by author. Emil Eggert Scherrebeck, “Det var en god tid for Danmark...,” *Information*, January 19, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



colonies in the population – especially when it comes to their former tropical colonies – in contrast to other former colonisers.<sup>69</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

Belle and Ehlers have centred their works around colonialism issues throughout their careers. Because of their similar focus, they were both commissioned for an art project in Denmark in 2014. Although the 2014 project ended up not taking place, Belle and Ehlers continued their contact and, after some time, began collaborating on the I Am Queen Mary project.<sup>70</sup>

The two artists selected the Copenhagen location of the monument for two main reasons. First, the selected location is outside the former West Indian warehouse, which speaks to the historical background of the monument.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, because the former warehouse is now home to the Danish Royal Cast Collection, in this way, the I Am Queen Mary monument stands in contrast to European Renaissance art.<sup>72</sup>

A year before the unveiling of the monument, the then Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, visited St. Croix on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the sale of the Danish West Indian islands to the U.S.<sup>73</sup> During his visit, Løkke held a speech in which he spoke of Denmark's role as a coloniser in the West Indies and called it 'a dark and disgraceful part of Danish history.'<sup>74</sup>

In 2020, the then-Danish Ministry of Culture permitted the monument to be housed permanently in front of the warehouse.<sup>75</sup> In a press statement, the Culture Minister, Joy Mogensen, stated that:

Only if we remember our past can we enter the future well. This is why we must be aware of the history in all its diversity and all its nuances. I am Queen Mary will be a strong and lasting physical reminder of a dark side of Danish history that we must not forget – and a concrete reminder in Copenhagen's cityscape that Denmark's history was created by many incredibly different people – not just kings and war heroes.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to this statement, the Danish government supported the project further by contributing one million Danish kroner to the funding for re-creating the monument, and a twin copy, in bronze.<sup>77</sup>

Despite receiving grants from several institutions, such as the Danish government, the Danish National Gallery (SMK), etc., further funding is still needed to create two new versions of the monument in bronze. On May 19, 2021, the artists behind I Am Queen Mary hosted an event to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Background," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>71</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>72</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Background," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>73</sup> danmarkshistorien.dk. "Statsminister Lars Løkke Rasmussens tale ved Transfer Day på St. Croix, 31. marts 2017," danmarkshistorien.dk, January 30, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "Home," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

<sup>76</sup> Translation by author. Kunsten.nu, "I am Queen Mary skal fortsat minde os om kolonitiden," *Kunsten.nu*. March 5, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

introduce the augmented reality version of the monument.<sup>78</sup> The event was also used to spread the word about the project's then-upcoming crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter, which started in August 2021.<sup>79</sup> Currently, the funding campaign is still ongoing.

## Summary and Conclusions

The I Am Queen Mary monument was created to shed light on Denmark's role as a coloniser and an active player in the slave trade. At the same time, the monument also challenges the dominant narratives surrounding this role by creating a space for the representation of those who are often not actively a part of this narrative. The monument's creation, the support it has received from the Danish government, and the relatively smooth reception it has had thus far can arguably be understood to reflect a broader trend in recent years to re-examine colonial legacies in the former colonising countries.

However, the monument has not been received entirely without contestation. Questions have been raised, mainly by journalists and scholars, as to whether Mary Thomas and the I Am Queen Mary monument accurately represent Danish colonial history and, further, whether the monument celebrates an appropriate figure and history. This case study draws attention to the difficulties in reconciling a history contested due to the diversity of actors, nations, and regions involved.

## Research contributed by Helja Asadi-Gholami

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<sup>78</sup> I Am Queen Mary, "in Augmented Reality and soon on Kickstarter," I Am Queen Mary, n.d.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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