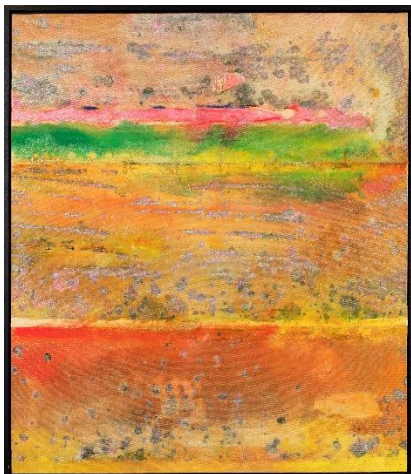


# Sir Frank Bowling: Fact Sheet

Lloyd's owns the painting *Empire Day Picture*, 1988 by Sir Frank Bowling. This Fact Sheet provides details of his life and career.

October 2022



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# 1 Early Life

## 1.1 British Guiana

Frank Bowling was born on 26 February 1934 in the county of Essequibo, in Bartica, a short way from the trading town of British Guiana's capital Georgetown. The family had come from Barbados and his grandparents had been enslaved.<sup>1</sup> Bowling was the eldest son and second born of four children. The family later moved to the small port of New Amsterdam, where Bowling's mother set up 'Bowling's Variety Store' selling clothes, hats and saris for the local Indian community, whilst his father was an accountant for the police. His childhood was tainted by his violent father; the effect of which was that Bowling became intransigent and planned to escape his family at the earliest opportunity. Highly intelligent and an avid reader but not academic, he left school at 14 and worked for his mother's business to save money for his passage out of British Guiana. He and many of his friends who were Indian, Chinese as well as African Caribbean realised that there was no possibility of advancement in British Guiana, unless you were a colonist. This necessitated a move to London to gain professional training or further study. Since 1948, when the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury, West Indian immigrants were being welcomed by the British government to fulfil shortages in labour. It is estimated that the mass migration of citizens of the British colonies in the West Indies sailing to Britain – known as the Windrush generation 1947-1970 - was half a million people.<sup>2</sup> This created an émigré postcolonial culture that would reshape the empire. Bowling had no specific plan or apparently any political consciousness when he left British Guiana in May 1953. A month earlier, the People's Progressive Party had won in the first democratic election and independence was on the horizon. Nationalist and independence movements for self-rule, from British imperialist rule, had emerged as a result of the allied defeat of Nazism.

## 1.2 London

Bowling arrived in London in June 1953 at the age of 19, during the Queen's coronation festivities and was amazed by the energy of the city. He said, 'the moment I arrived in London, I knew I was home.'<sup>3</sup> He had a series of inconsequential jobs and started to study English Literature but then realised he was liable for National Service and enrolled in the RAF, with the hope he would receive an education or training. This did not transpire but he did meet Keith Critchlow, who was about to start studies in architecture and art. Bowling's friendship with Critchlow was seminal. Critchlow took Bowling to the National Gallery and introduced him to his artistic friends in Chelsea and Soho.<sup>4</sup> He then lodged with the Critchlow's in Chelsea, who were a family of bohemian creatives that encouraged Bowling to write poetry and stories. He wrote a story called 'Why was a Nigger Born' which describes his difficult situation as a black immigrant. Keith Critchlow's father, Jerry Critchlow, was a portrait artist and gave Bowling work as an artist's model. This line of work developed and he ended up modelling at the Royal College of Art, where Keith Critchlow was studying. He met and made friends with many artists including Jerry Pethick, from Canada and Bill Culbert from New Zealand and over a two-year period the idea of becoming an artist germinated. Keith Critchlow gave Bowling lessons in techniques of painting and Bowling taught himself to draw through manuals from a library.

## 1.3 Art Colleges

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bowling interviewed by Mel Gooding/Cathy Courtney, British Library, Artists' Lives, National Life Story Collection, 2001-2007, Track 3 -TAPE 2; SIDE A (F9659)

<sup>2</sup> See: [Bound for Britain - The National Archives](#) [accessed 02/10/2022]

<sup>3</sup> Frank Bowling interviewed by Mel Gooding/Cathy Courtney, *ibid.*, Track 4 - SIDE B (F9659)

<sup>4</sup> Frank Bowling interviewed by Mel Gooding/Cathy Courtney, *ibid.*, Track 6 - SIDE B (F9660)

Practically without any relevant qualifications or training – just an ‘ingrained determination, an indefatigable determination to make himself an artist and the absolute conviction that he could make it happen,’<sup>5</sup> Bowling decided to apply to art college. In the autumn of 1958, he applied to Chelsea College of Art and was accepted. However, part way through he ran out of funds and was too late to apply for a grant. In 1959 he applied to the Royal College of Art. Although he was bitterly disappointed at being turned down, Carel Weight, the Head of Painting, recognised his talent and arranged for Bowling to do a course at the City and Guilds of London Art College in Kennington. At the end of the summer, he presented his portfolio of paintings and was awarded a scholarship at the Royal College. He was to enter one of the most prestigious art schools where many of the most important young artists had emerged, including Richard Smith, Robyn Denny and Peter Blake. Bowling’s contemporaries included David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Patrick Caulfield, Jerry Pethick and Ron Kitaj. Against this highly competitive context, Bowling’s relative inexperience gave him an advantage as his art was different to his contemporaries and this combined with his fierce ambition and determination saw him develop and prosper as an artist.

A personal incident, however, saw Bowling expelled from the Royal College by the end of his first year. This was because he had married the soon to be novelist, Paddy Kitchen. The objection to the marriage came from the College Principal, Robin Darwin, because Kitchen was his much-favoured assistant. Darwin hurriedly created a rule that decreed there were to be no staff/student liaisons. Bowling experienced difficulties over his inter-racial marriage and referred to the ‘whole complexity of [a] black and white marriage... [as] a terrible strain’.<sup>6</sup> Carel Weight, moved by the injustice of the situation, arranged for Bowling to move to the Slade School of Fine Art. However, the approach to painting at the Slade, based on William Coldstream’s formulaic methods, didn’t suit Bowling and he was allowed to return to the Royal College in spring 1961, after Paddy Kitchen left the Royal College. Bowling graduated in 1962, winning the silver medal to David Hockney’s gold.

#### 1.4 Early work

His time at the Royal College propelled him into becoming a painter of expressionist, figurative works, heavily influenced by Francis Bacon. The art critic, David Sylvester, wrote of Bowling that he ‘has obviously seen in Bacon ways to compress terror and violence into the form of painting... Bowling’s development over the last couple of years is a living proof of the truism that, for an artist bursting with something to express, a gain in control of the medium is a gain in forcefulness of expression.’<sup>7</sup> Stylistically, Bowling recognised his debt to Bacon, as a friend and fellow self-taught artist, alongside artists such as Van Gogh, Goya and Rembrandt. It was a humanist attitude combined with a physical directness that characterised Bowling’s work in this period. Images of human suffering including beggars and people living on the streets became his subjects. A work from 1961, *The Martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba*, demonstrates that Bowling was politicised in his depiction of postcolonial violence in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In his first commercial show, *Image in Revolt* at the Grabowski Gallery in October 1962, with class-mate Derek Boshier, Bowling used human suffering as the subject for his paintings. He sold two paintings and held another exhibition at the Grabowski the following year but was

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<sup>5</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.10

<sup>6</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.46

<sup>7</sup> David Sylvester, ‘No Baconians’, *New Statesman*, April 20 1962, p. 573

bitterly disillusioned about being excluded from the 1961 Young Contemporaries exhibition, which featured many of his fellow Royal College students.

In 1963 Bowling started teaching part-time at Camberwell College of Art and Reading University and became vice-Chair of the London Group, showing in their annual exhibitions. He was also commissioned to create murals for an exhibition on Shakespeare at Stratford upon Avon, to celebrate the quatercentenary of Shakespeare. This was alongside Ceri Richards, Leonard Rosoman (both teachers at RCA) and Peter Blake, a former RCA student. The three huge canvases (later destroyed without the artist's knowledge) included a work called *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* in which colour and geometry underlay the painting's structure. The commission was sponsored by Roney, who supplied acrylic paints which Bowling found preferable to oils he had been using. He started to use acrylics from this time. Rosoman and Blake became mentors who influenced Bowling's move away from figurative expressionism and his introduction of Pop Art elements with a more programmatic approach. Bowling had visited New York in 1961 and 1962 and was aware of Pop Art and Andy Warhol's use of the silkscreen. By 1966 he was silk screening photographs into his paintings in works such as *Cover Girl* and combining this with images from popular culture. Bowling's iconic work from his early career is *Mirror*, 1964-1966, which depicts three figures around the central motif of a spiral staircase. This determines a dynamic symmetry based on a geometric structure and employs various styles, combining figuration with abstraction.

### 1.5 Career blocks

In 1964 Bowling was excluded from two important exhibitions, *54 64 Painting and Sculpture* at Tate and *The New Generation* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, selected by his influential friend, Bryan Robertson. He was also omitted from the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation's collection of recent British painting, exhibited at Tate. The London art world were unreceptive to a black artist and Bryan Robertson pointed out that 'England is not ready for a gifted artist of colour'.<sup>8</sup> Although postcolonial migration was necessary for the British economy, the transformation it brought upon the culture and society, ethnic and class relations, created tensions leading to racial hostility and violence.

Bowling had been able to show in the exhibition *Young Commonwealth Artists*, 1962, at the Commonwealth Institute and was persuaded by Bryan Robertson and Roland Penrose to enter his 1964 *Big Bird* to represent the UK at the *First World Festival of Negro Arts* at Dakar, Senegal, where he won the Grand Prize. However, Bowling was initially resistant because he felt it pigeonholed him as a black artist. *Mirror* won the Painting of the Year award at the 1966 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy but it signalled the end of his career for a time in London. The unconscious discrimination Bowling experienced meant he could not find an effective dealer and although he had many supporters, he felt a growing sense of exclusion based on his race. He commented, 'I thought my career path here was being blocked'.<sup>9</sup> In 1966 he had his first show in New York at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery, a few months before he made his move to the city.

## 2 New York and a transatlantic career

### 2.1 The Map Paintings

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<sup>8</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.59

<sup>9</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.59

In an extended visit to New York in 1965, Bowling had been actively encouraged to migrate there by the poet-critics John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, who was also a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, the poet Kenneth Koch and the painter Larry Rivers. When he moved to the Hotel Chelsea, he felt confident that New York would provide a conducive new start. Larry Rivers was an important artistic mentor who introduced him to the New York artworld, including Jasper Johns, whose use of signs in his work influenced Bowling.

He was awarded the Guggenheim Award in 1967 which allowed him to move from Hotel Chelsea to a large downtown studio and increase the size of his paintings. It was here that he started his important series of Map Paintings, 1967-1971. Okwui Enwezor described these works as 'cognitive abstraction', in which abstraction not necessarily disunited from content. Screen-print stencils and epidiascope-tracing added the motifs of maps, in the spectral outlines of continents including South America, North America and Africa, onto an abstract colour plane. The maps appear like pentimento and recall J M W Turner's or Claude Monet's sublime (who Bowling greatly admired) but Bowling created the diasporic sublime. Although Bowling has insisted that the Map Paintings are about painting itself rather than having any symbolic political meaning they have been interpreted in this way. Okwui Enwezor has written of them:

*'Bowling seeks to disinter territory from the speculative domination, and thus to deterritorialize colonised space... [the abstract sublime meets the Caribbean discourse and Bowling] synthesized the formal models of modernist abstract painting into psychogeographic signifiers of terrain.'*<sup>10</sup>

Bowling directly addressed the trans-Atlantic slave trade in three of his map paintings, which include *Night Journey* (1968-1969) and his two important works called *Middle Passage* (1970). On this he said: "I named the painting *Middle Passage* because I am a product of the middle passage. But ... I do not bring my images together because of the history and brutality of that terrible crossing, but rather in spite of it".<sup>11</sup> The large format, immersive Map Paintings were shown at a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum, New York in 1971.

## 2.2 Black Art

Mel Gooding writes of how Bowling was 'disconcerted that in New York there were distinct divisions between black and white artists and that even in the bars frequented by both, they tended to keep apart. Bowling found however, that his status as a black British outsider enabled him to move easily between the two groups'.<sup>12</sup> No black arts movement had existed in London, but in New York discourses arising out of the Civil Rights Movement were putting pressure on museums to represent black artists. Debates within the Black Power movement reorientated Bowling's artistic language and he brought an expanded political view from the diasporic postcolonial scene in London. He also had a relationship with the novelist and black activist, Toni Morrison. On the other side of the political camp were the formalists, providing a rich intellectual environment to question the relationship of abstraction to subject matter.

Bowling met many black artists and allies when he attended a protest outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art's controversial exhibition *Harlem on my mind* of 1969. This purported to address the achievements of black artists but only used documentation and only showed artists who addressed political concerns, thereby excluding many black artists. He started writing a series

<sup>10</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction', *ibid.*, pp.37-38

<sup>11</sup> Correspondence with Ben Bowling, 31/07/2022

<sup>12</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.58

of article on black art for *Arts Magazine* between 1969-1972. 'Bowling began to articulate a bridge between African American aesthetics and an intercultural and transnational take on questions of blackness.'<sup>13</sup> He challenged the marginalisation of black art and argued that 'Black art, like any art, is art' but 'any black artist who does not want to be identified by the color of his skin could be indulging in a subtle form of passing'.<sup>14</sup> Bowling felt the issue of black art had been reduced to identity politics.

His critique of black art with a direct political message, usually chosen by white curators, as opposed to a black art founded on aesthetics, was addressed in an exhibition he curated of five leading African American abstract artists and himself, as an émigré Caribbean in 1969, titled *5+1*. The exhibition was at the invitation of Lawrence Alloway for the Art Gallery of the State of New York and included Melvin Edwards, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, Daniel Johnson and William T Williams and Frank Bowling. In 1969 he also assisted Larry Rivers with the exhibition *Some American History* at Rice University, Houston, Texas, in which he showed *Middle Passage*. This exhibition was highly controversial as Rivers was a white Jewish artist who was addressing black history and race.

### 2.3 Moving to pure abstraction

Bowling was introduced to the influential curator and art critic Clement Greenberg in late 1971. Greenberg became his mentor and they corresponded for over twenty years. Greenberg had defined [post-painterly abstraction](#). This led Bowling to set aside socio-political concerns and detach himself from any figurative elements, such as maps and photographic elements for pure formalist explorations. He was influenced by Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. One of his 1972 paintings was called *Looking at Barney and Mark*.

Bowling reacted by producing a series of poured paintings which was freed of artistic expression and left representation to chance in pure self-referential art using an automatic procedure. In 1975 Bowling moved back to London to be with his three sons, although he continued re-crossing the Atlantic until 2008. By 1978 he wanted to intervene in the image and re-complicate the surface noting that 'I wanted to catch the light and movement of nature itself'. He resumed teaching at Camberwell and started teaching at Byam Shaw.

His work from this period became an intensive experimentation to create dynamic surfaces with acrylic foam strips creating geometric relief structures which would be held in place by the acrylic gel combined with a heavy impasto technique to create variations in light. It concentrated on the 'dynamic disposition across the surface of medium and pigment and to the topography of the painted surface effected and modified by sometimes unorthodox colouring agents, ammonia, spirits, varnish, pearlescence, beeswax and acrylic gel ... the textile support of the canvas of the painting is stitched, seamed, glued stapled and cut to create extensions where needed.'<sup>15</sup> The poetic visual effects produce an evocation of natural phenomena and allusions of time, place and motion and the Proustian 'involuntary memory.' They are a profound response to the English landscape painting tradition Bowling closely studied in the work of Gainsborough, Turner and Constable.

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<sup>13</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction', *ibid.*, p.21

<sup>14</sup> Frank Bowling, 'Critique – Discussion on Black art III', *Arts Magazine*, Dec 1969- Jan 1970, reprinted in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, *ibid.*, pp.200-201

<sup>15</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.11

In 1984, a residency at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine gave him the space and place to engage in this trajectory and marked a major shift in his work. Bowling continued to experiment with the materiality of paint and substances such as foam plastic that could be added to the surface, creating new techniques of painting. He mastered the control of the thickness, fluidity, transparency, opacity, luminosity or metallic radiance of the surface creating intense visual phenomena.

The paintings and titles are deliberately ambiguous, Bowling believes they should have no fixed meaning or message and should be polyvalent. Primarily, they were what Francis Bacon 'called 'a painting experience,' complex and allusive but inextricable from the sensational presence of the work.'<sup>16</sup> Okwui Enwezor has written that his later works:

*'though nominally abstract... were nevertheless about places and things, objects and their representation, memory and absence. The paintings make direct reference to nature, evoking vibrant seascapes, geological landscapes, liquified magma and anthropocentric fields.'*<sup>17</sup>

Bowling's unique contribution to late modernist abstraction is rooted in his transnational and intercultural perspective. 'Bowling's paintings on the theme of memory, dislocation and absence not only reveal, but also triangulate, the vital scenes of experiences in which his art was to be situated, across and between modernism, location and identity (painter, British, black).'<sup>18</sup>

#### 2.4 *The Other Story* and other exhibitions in the UK

In 1986, Bowling had his first major show in Britain, at the Serpentine Gallery and Tate purchased *Spreadout Ron Kitaj* (1984-86). In 1989, Bowling was asked to participate in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, curated by the artist Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery, London. The lack of recognition of artists of colour by British art institutions led Araeen to create an exhibition to challenge this and celebrate the contributions from postcolonial emigres of the British Empire. Bowling had sought to escape categorisation and to be judged on his artistic results alone and was therefore sceptical. He stated it was 'the albatross... hanging around my neck all through my early career.'<sup>19</sup> In 1989 Bowling revisited Guyana and acknowledged its importance in his art; sometimes appearing in the content but also through how he embedded references to Guyana in the titles of his paintings. As he was acknowledging his heritage at this point, he was finally persuaded to participate. However, he was not comfortable with his inclusion and wanted to continue to resist the stereotype of a colonialist artist rather than an artist in the Western tradition and Modernism. Bowling refused to write a statement for the catalogue, asking Mel Gooding to write it instead, which was titled 'Notes towards a definition of an individual talent' in order to resist categorisation by ethnicity and to ensure the importance of his contribution to late modernist abstraction was not undermined.

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<sup>16</sup> Mel Gooding, *ibid.*, p.12

<sup>17</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction', *ibid.*, p.36

<sup>18</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction', *ibid.*, p.26

<sup>19</sup> Frank Bowling interviewed by Mel Gooding/Cathy Courtney, *ibid.*, Tape 26



Bowling received the Pollock-Krasner Award in 1992 and 1998 and Eddie Chambers curated a travelling exhibition *Bowling Through the Century*, 1996-1997 for the Arts Council. However, only a single review resulted from the exhibition.

### 3 Reputation

Bowling's legacy has not been fully explored or even included in the art historical canon until the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The critic Okwui Enwezor writes 'colonial imagery has shadowed much of Bowling's career as an artist across sixty years.'<sup>20</sup>

The first step in the rehabilitation of his reputation in the art world came in 2003 when some of Bowling's Map Paintings were exhibited at the Venice Biennale's in the exhibition *Fault Line: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, curated by Gilane Tawadros. In 2005 Bowling became the first Black Royal Academician and was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 2008. He was honoured with a Knighthood in 2020.

In 2011 the first monograph on Bowling by Mel Gooding was published, partly based on the National Life Story Collection interviews they made in 2001. In America, museums were starting to buy up paintings by Bowling and his contemporaries, including Melvin Edwards, Jack Whitten, Al Loving and William T Williams. Bowling had important exhibitions at Spanierman Modern, New York, in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

In 2017 was the most important survey of Bowling's work, *Mappa Mundi* curated by Okwui Enwezor at Haus der Kunst Munich took place and in 2019 Tate Britain showed a major retrospective. Bowling is now in great demand and his work is shown internationally in many exhibitions. For more information on his current shows please see the [Frank Bowling Studio](#).

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<sup>20</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction', *ibid.*, p.32