



*Drawn from Life, and Lately? by J. M. Belisario.*

“KOO, KOO, OF ACTOR-BOY.”

Kingston, Jamaica, Oct. 1837.

*Printed by A. Dugdale.*

VALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

# SKETCHES



# OF THE PAST

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

LITTLE KNOWN AND RARELY SEEN, THE PRINTS OF THE 19TH-CENTURY ARTIST *Isaac Mendes Belisario* CAPTURE THE FOLKWAYS OF COLONIAL-ERA JAMAICA.



# ISAAC MENDES BELISARIO WAS NO GIANT OF ART

in his own time and place—19th-century Jamaica and England—nor is he today. But this obscure painter and printmaker has been receiving some unaccustomed attention lately from art historians and specialized collectors because of a suite of richly detailed pictures that constitute a rare eyewitness account of Jamaican folkways and slave life during the colonial era.

artifacts from the slavery era and an accompanying catalogue in which the famous prints were reproduced from the complete set of three parts, in their original bindings, that are housed in the Yale museum's Paul Mellon Collection.

Very few other complete or incomplete sets of *Sketches* are known to exist. In Jamaica, Valerie Facey, the founder and director of The Mill Press, a Kingston-based company that focuses on works about Jamaican art and culture, and her husband, Maurice Facey, a well-known Jamaican businessman, own one complete set, whose pages are separated from their original bindings. The Faceys are one of the best-known families in the Jamaican business world, and some of their ancestors were Jewish. To some degree, this aspect of Valerie's own family's history has spurred her longstanding interest in the story of the Belisarios of Jamaica. In Kingston, the University of the West Indies owns another complete, bound set of *Sketches* (including two sets of part two), as does the National Library of Jamaica, whose set is unbound.

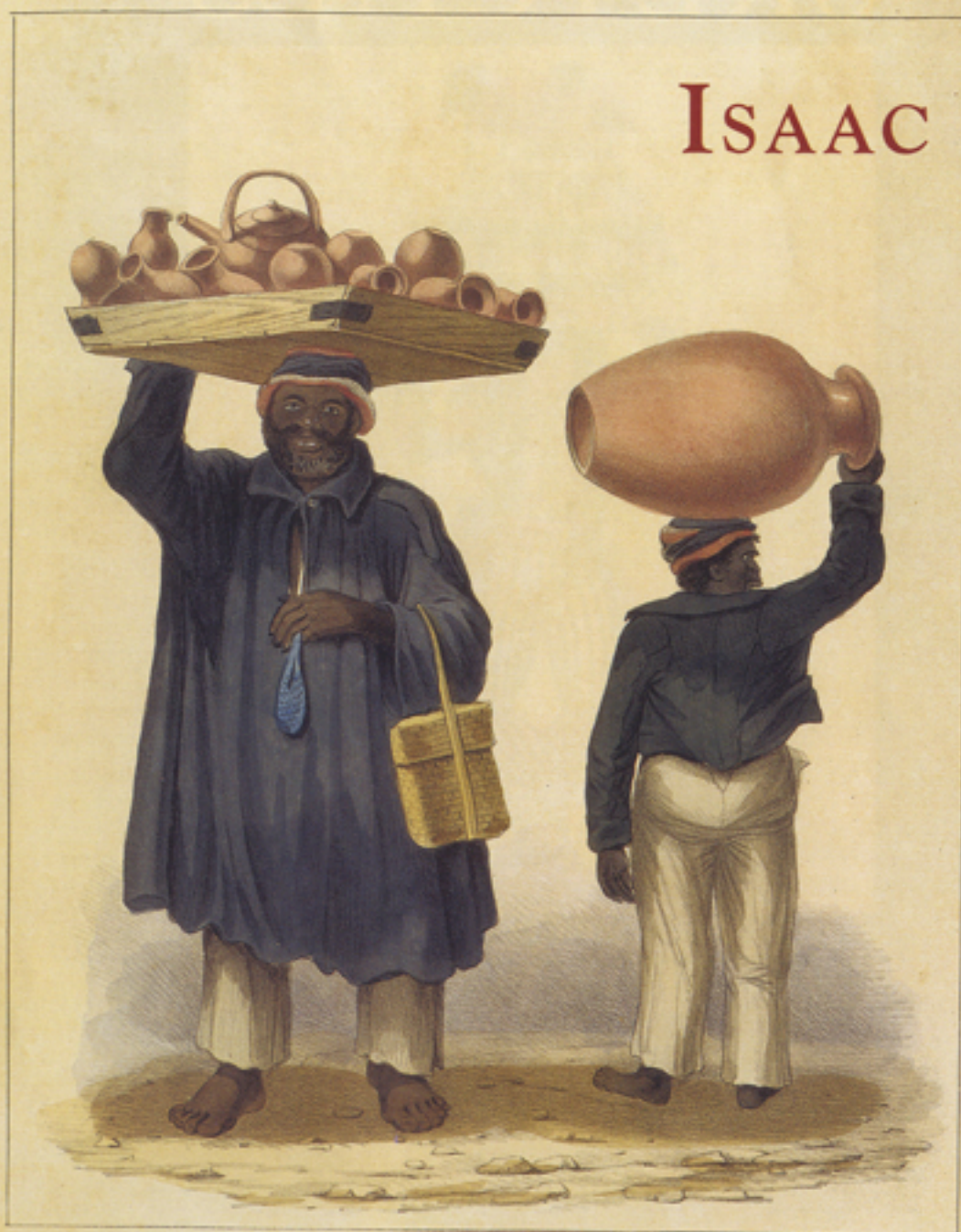
Late last year The Mill Press issued *Belisario: Sketches of Character*, a new, exhaustively researched and lavishly illustrated book written by biographer Jackie Ranston and printed in Verona, Italy, by the famed Stamperia Valdonega. *Belisario* is the most ambitious project this small press has undertaken to date. At the heart of the book is the story of the artist's creation of his portraits. To provide a sense of the historical and cultural contexts in which Belisario's *Sketches* emerged, the British-born Ranston, who has lived and worked in Jamaica since 1970, goes back to the Inquisition, which the Catholic Church established in Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century, and to the migratory movements of branches of the Jewish Lindo and Belisario families that survived it. Their descendants' paths crossed two centuries later at a London synagogue that became the spiritual home of the British capital's small community of "Mosaic" people, as Jews were sometimes referred to at the time.

Decades later, the paths of certain members of the Lindo and Belisario families crossed again—in Jamaica. They were among the countless Jewish families in the Caribbean

Born in Jamaica in 1794 into a well-to-do Sephardic-Jewish merchant family, Belisario spent part of his life in England and died in London in 1849. His major work is *Sketches of Character, In Illustration of the Habits, Occupation and Costume of the Negro Population, in the Island of Jamaica*, a series of lithographs of Jamaican slaves dressed up for a popular music-and-dance celebration, which the artist, who was based in Kingston, Jamaica's capital, issued to subscribers in 1837 and 1838. Those memorable images, with accompanying descriptive texts composed by Belisario himself, offer a cultural anthropologist's treasure trove of information about one of the most colorful folk customs to have emerged in colonial Jamaica.

Belisario's reputation got a boost in 2007 from the 200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. As part of the commemorations, Yale University's Center for British Art presented the exhibition *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*. It featured Belisario's *Sketches* prints,

Isaac Mendes Belisario's hand-colored lithographs in *Sketches of Character* (1837-38) documented the costumes and rituals of the Jamaican masquerade festival known as Jonkonnu. Previous spread, from left: Among the stock characters of Jonkonnu were Koo, Koo, or Actor-Boy; Jaw-Bone, or House John Canoe. This page: Water-Jar Sellers, from *Sketches of Character*.



Water-Jar Sellers, 1837-38, by Isaac Mendes Belisario

WATER-JAR SELLERS.

Kingston, Jamaica.

Printed by J. P. [unclear]





*Drawn after Nature by an Slave by J. M. Belisario. Printed by A. Duperly.*

QUEEN or "MAAM" of the SET-GIRLS.

Kingston, Jamaica. — June, 1837.

Belisario set his sights on becoming an artist, despite his family's expectations that he assume a role in its enterprises.



who traced their roots back to England, Spain, Portugal or other countries and who distinguished themselves for generations as merchants and financiers. Reminders of the contributions Jews have made to the societies and institutions of the Caribbean islands can be found in the graveyards and national archives of many of the region's small, independent, post-colonial countries. As for Jamaica, in the past some of the island's most prominent Jewish businessmen were deeply involved in its notorious slave trade, right up until Jamaica freed its slaves in 1838. It was against this commercial and social backdrop that the Belisario's life unfolded.

His father, Abraham Mendes Belisario, arrived in Kingston from London in 1786, at the age of 18, and went to work for Alexandre (Elisha) Lindo, a slave trader and merchant whose daughter, Esther, he later married. Ranston writes that "Lindo's thriving port business included his role

in the Americas, the final economic crunch came, Ranston points out, in 1807. In that year, Britain's Abolition of the Slave Trade Act "made it illegal for British ships to be involved in the trade."

Even before this time, Belisario had set his sights on becoming an artist, despite his family's expectations that he assume a role in its enterprises. He gave up his job as a London stockbroker and studied with watercolorist Robert Hills and showed his own work with the Society of Painters in Oil and Watercolours. He also painted landscapes in oil and in 1831 exhibited a watercolor portrait (*Lady in Black*) at the Royal Academy of Arts. Belisario's lady was Ellen Terry, one of the most-admired young actresses of her time. However, while his artistic career progressed, Belisario suffered from respiratory ailments, so he returned to Jamaica in 1834 in search of a warm, soothing climate.

There he set up a studio on the Parade, the main plaza

in downtown Kingston. He had been away from the island of his birth for 31 years. As Belisario became established, wealthy landowners commissioned him to paint portraits of their family members or pictures of their estates; the relatively small number of the artist's paintings that are known to exist today are mostly in private collections in Jamaica or in the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston.

When Belisario arrived back in Jamaica, he found a small art scene made up of only a few itinerant foreign artists. Notable among them was the Frenchman Adolphe Duperly, who became known for his hand-colored lithographic prints of typical Jamaican scenes. Belisario's keen eye for detail and Duperly's printmaking skill would come together in the

From left: The Queen, or "Ma'am" of Jonkonnu, whom Belisario called the "conductress of a lively and graceful band of female dancers"; Cocoa Walks Estate, an undated oil on canvas by Belisario, who was also known for his landscape work.





Drawn after Nature from Stone by J. M. Belisario.

Printed by A. Dugdale.

## BAND of the JAW-BONE JOHN-CANOE.

Kingston Jamaica — Aug. 1837.

production of the Jewish-Jamaican artist's ambitious but, ultimately, incompletely realized *Sketches* series documenting a masquerade festival known as Jonkonnu.

African in origin, Jonkonnu was, Ranston explains, "a fantastic fusion of African and European traditions that had its origins in the early days of slavery, when the Christmas and Easter holidays ... provided the only real recreational opportunities for the enslaved." For a few days at Jonkonnu time, plantation owners allowed their slaves to bang drums, make music and celebrate. Since slaves and slave-owners alike joined in the festivities wearing costumes and masks representing both mythical and real-life figures, Jonkonnu became a great, if temporary, leveler of the era's strictly hierarchical society. (The word Jonkonnu—sometimes rendered "John Canoe"—might be derived from the name of an 18th-century West African chieftain. The festival occurs in other parts of the Caribbean and in slavery days was practiced in North Carolina.)

Like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Jonkonnu developed its own stock characters, such as the Queen (or "Ma'am") of the singing and dancing Set Girls and Jack-in-the-Green, a male figure covered with a palm-frond shroud. In Belisario's emblematic images, the Queen appears in a brightly patterned hoop skirt, puff sleeves and a broad lace collar, along with a wide-brimmed hat topped by a thicket of fluffy white plumes. In Belisario's own words, she was the "conductress of a lively and graceful band of female dancers" armed with a "cow-skin whip" to keep her charges in line. At Jonkonnu time they would "sally forth in the morning," accompanied by a band, to "parade the town" until nighttime. Belisario also depicted Jaw-Bone, or House John-Canoe, a character who wore a mask and a long-haired wig, a military-looking jacket and a headdress shaped like a house or houseboat. That unusual headgear had roots in west-central African societies and symbolized a man's wealth, which was measured by how many people lived in his home.

In *Belisario*, Ranston notes that the mask-wearing and cross-dressing associated with Jonkonnu would have reminded the artist "of the Jewish Purim celebration that plays with the themes of identity," and that, in the late 18th century in London, after those festivities had become too boisterous, Jewish elders decreed to their community that in the future, "no person of our nation of either sex or of any age shall, on Purim, or at any other time of the year, appear in the streets in masquerade or disguised in the dress of the other sex."

In documenting Jonkonnu characters for posterity, Belisario took a turn away from the landscapes and society portraits for which he had become known. With his *Sketches*, he also helped validate a form of cultural expression that had become an integral part of Jamaica's multi-racial and already multicultural society. Although he had intended to produce a dozen separate installments (known

as parts or numbers) of the *Sketches*, each containing several images, because he could not find capable assistants to help him hand-color each print he was forced to cease production of the series after issuing only three numbers. They contained a total of 12 images. In April 1839 Belisario informed subscribers who had paid to receive forthcoming *Sketches* installments that he had fallen ill from overexertion in hand-coloring the prints. Shortly thereafter, Belisario sailed back to England. In London he resided with his sisters until his death from tuberculosis, that "dread disease," as Charles Dickens described it, by means of which "day by day and grain by grain, the mortal part withers away."

Despite Ranston's exhaustive research, her subject remains something of an enigma. "Of Belisario," she writes, relevant documents offer "no mention of a wife, mistress or children—legitimate or otherwise. All that has emerged of his personal life is that he was a vestryman at the Spanish and Portuguese Jews' synagogue in Kingston from 1838 until he left" Jamaica for good the following year.

Unfortunately, despite the considerable resources that supported Yale's presentation, some of its researchers got basic facts about Belisario's life wrong. For example, confusing him with his Jamaica-based cousin who shared the same name, they claimed the artist had owned slaves. In fact, as Ranston has established, the painter-printmaker was never a slave owner, despite his family's close ties to the notorious business.

Today, Jamaica counts only a few hundred Jews among a total population of nearly three million inhabitants. That they contributed significantly to the development of the country's commercial infrastructure is no secret. Neither is the fact that, in Jamaica, as throughout the Caribbean, successive waves of immigrants from different countries and cultures—including Indians, Chinese, Lebanese and Jews from Europe and beyond—have routinely intermingled, creating a pageant of complexions and often closely intertwined family trees.

Take this fact, for example: Belisario's Jamaican-born mother, Esther Lindo, was the great-great aunt of Blanche Lindo Blackwell, the Sephardic-Jewish mother of Chris Blackwell, the legendary record producer who catapulted reggae star Bob Marley to international fame in the 1970s. Never mind that Belisario might still be known only to a handful of art-history experts and collectors. Ranston notes, "Blanche Lindo Blackwell is Belisario's cousin, twice removed, and very proud of the fact." It is such personal connections to the little-known artist, plus the sense of wonder at the sophistication and quality of his achievement each new discoverer of his *Sketches* seems to feel, that will ensure this mysterious artist a lasting place in the art history of his time. ■

Band of the Jaw-Bone John-Canoe, a hand-colored lithograph from *Sketches of Character*.

For a few days out of the year, Jamaican slaves were allowed to play music and celebrate in public.