

UC SANTA BARBARA

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## Europe's hidden Black Africans of the Renaissance

The Renaissance is often imagined as a period of European artistic and intellectual flourishing, yet its depictions frequently erase the presence of Black Africans who lived in cities like Venice, Florence, Lisbon and Paris. “We Were Here: The Untold History of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,” a documentary by filmmaker Fred Kudjo Kuwornu, seeks to correct this omission. The film, which screens at UC Santa Barbara’s MultiCultural Center (MCC) on Thursday, Feb. 27, sheds light on the often-overlooked lives of [Black Africans in 15th- and 16th-century Europe](#), challenging dominant narratives about race, identity and history.

The event, part of the MCC’s Cup of Culture series, features a screening followed by a Q&A and reception with Kuwornu. [The Italian-Ghanaian filmmaker](#), known for his work on race and identity in European history, will discuss the research and artistic approach behind his film.

“History is an attempt to articulate the human experience of the past for those living in the present and those who will come in the future,” Kuwornu said. “History is not a fixed container but a dynamic space where what is included or excluded depends on the narrator. Minorities, forgotten voices and overlooked events are as much a part of history as the more widely known ones, but without a proper frame, they risk becoming invisible.”

At the Venice Biennale Arte 2024, Kuworno noted that if you are traveling in Venice right now, you might never see a Black gondolier, but in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, they were commonplace. His film explores how Black Africans were depicted in Renaissance art, appearing in masterpieces by celebrated artists such as a work by Venetian painter Vittore Carpaccio, which features a Black gondolier. In doing so, Kuworno's research helps to restore the narratives of Black individuals who shaped European history.

[One of the film's central themes](#) is the evolution of racial constructs. Kuwornu highlights how, in the Renaissance, race as we understand it today did not exist. "Of course, you have different skin colors, but this was not the main difference," he said. "The main difference was religion." In 15th- and 16th-century Europe, the distinction between Christian and Muslim identities played a greater role in determining social status than skin color alone.

By reframing history, "We Were Here" invites viewers to reconsider the foundations of modern racial ideologies. "Racism is a social construct that was created in the 17th and 18th centuries — and every social construct can be, in some sense, deconstructed," Kuwornu said. His film suggests that understanding this history is a step toward dismantling contemporary racial biases.

Since its premiere, "We Were Here" has garnered international attention, including an exhibition in the Central Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The film weaves together perspectives from historians, artists and activists, offering a multilayered view of Black European identity.

The UCSB screening offers a unique opportunity for students and the Santa Barbara community to engage directly with Kuwornu's research and creative process. As an artist who has long felt like an outsider, Kuwornu sees his work as a bridge between cultures. "Being a foreigner is something that at the same time attracts people that look like you," he said. "So I always like to interact with people that have my same background. It doesn't matter if it's a background of being a foreigner geographically or in the sense of being an outsider."

By restoring erased narratives, "We Were Here" asserts that Black history is not separate from European history — it is an integral part of it.

[“Cup of Culture: We Were Here,”](#) a free and open-to-the-public event, will be held on Thursday, Feb. 27, 5-6:30 p.m. at the MCC Theater & Lounge. A reception and Q&A with Fred Kudjo Kuwornu will follow the screening. To register, [visit cglink.me/2dD/r2264608](#).

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