SKETCHES OF THE PAST

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

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.

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, Illustration of the Habits, Occupa-
tion, 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. These memorable images,
with accompanying descriptive texts composed by Belisario
himself, offer a rare anthropological'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 Univer-
sity's Center for British Art presented the exhibition Art
and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario
and His World. It featured Belisario's Sketches prints,
artifacts from the slavery era and an accompanying cate-
ologue in which the famous pieces 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 sep-
ticated from their original bindings. The Facneys 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 printed leaves, as does the National Library of
Jamaica, whose set is unbound.

Last year The Mill Press issued Belisario's Sketches of
Character, a new, extensively researched and lav-
ishly illustrated book written by biographer Jackie Ran-
ton and printed in Venice, Italy, by the famed Stamperia
Valdesega. 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 prints.

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,
go back to the island's Catholic Church established in Spain and Portugal in the late 16th century,
and the migratory movements of branches of the Jewish
Lindo and Belisario families that survived. Their descen-
dants' paths crossed two centuries later at a London syna-
gogue that became the spiritual home of the British capi-
tal'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
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 38, and went to work for Alexandre (Elisha) Linda, a slave trader and merchant whose daughter, Esther, he later married. Roussoin writes that “Linda’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 Hilliard and showed his work with the Society of Painters in Oil and Watercolors. He also painted landscapes in oil and in 1831 exhibited a watercolor portrait (Lady in Black) at the Royal Academy of Arts. Belisario’s wife 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 warmer, soothing climate.

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

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as a prominent prize agent, selling off enemy vessels and their cargoes that had been caught off Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico and along the Spanish Main.” As Linda’s eventual business partner, Abraham became prosperous, too. But in 1803, after becoming involved with his father-in-law in a disastrous loan to France of half a million British pounds to help provision French forces fighting rebels in St. Domingue—the French colony that would become the independent nation of Haiti—Abraham returned with his family to London. Linda, ruined, sailed back on the same ship. For such businessmen, who had been deeply involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which transported human cargo from the coast of West Africa to European colonies 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 “Hatam” of Jackass, whom Belisario called the “conductor of a lively and graceful band of female dancers”; Canoe Walks Estate, an undated oil on canvas by Belisario, who was also known for his landscape work.
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, Rasnhoen insists, “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 slaveowners alike joined in the festivities wearing costumes and masks representing both mythical and real-life figures, Jonkonnu became a great, temporary, lesser of the ex-slaves’ strivings hierarchical society. (The word Jonkonnu—sometimes rendered “John Canoe”—might be derived from the name of an 18th-century West African chiefman.) The festival occurs in parts of the Caribbean and in slavery days was practiced in North Carolina.

Like Marci Gras in New Orleans, Jonkonnu developed its own stock characters, such as the Queen (or “Matam”) of the singing and dancing Set Girls and Jack-in-the-Green, a mask figure covered with a palm frond headdress. In Belisario’s emblematic image, 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 cluster 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 “cone-skirt whip” to keep her charges in line. At Jonkonnu time they would “sail 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 breasted shapely like a house or houseboat. That unusual headdress 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, Rasnhoen 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 cynics deemed to their community that in the future, “no person of our nation of either sexes 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 multifaceted 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 contain a total of 12 images. In April 1839 Belisario informed subscribers who had paid to receive forthcoming Sketches 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 “sneak disease,” as Charles Dickens described it, by means of which “day by day and grain by grain, the mortal part withers away.”

Despite Rasnhoen’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 waterman at the Spanish and Portuguese Jew’s 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-bound cousin who shared the same name, they claimed the artist had owned slaves. In fact, as Rasnhoen has established, the painter-printmaker was never a slave owner, despite his family’s close ties to the prosperous 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 patchwork of confluence and often closely interwoven family trees. Take this fact, for example: Belisario’s Jamaican-born mother, Esther Linde, was the great-great aunt of Blanche Linda Blackwell, the Sephardic-Jewish mother of Chris Blackwell, the legendary record producer who catapulted the 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. Rasnhoen notes, “Blanche Linda 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 that 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.