

The many faces of Mary Thomas

By Rikke Lie Halberg, 2019.

There are no known photographs or portraits of Mary Thomas. Although it was common to take photographs of female prisoners in Denmark in the 1880s, the West Indian women are not among the photos of female prisoners kept in the National Archives in Copenhagen.

Throughout the years, however, different depictions of Mary Thomas have been created and used in attempts to visualize her.

The first known depiction of Mary Thomas is from the book *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies*, written by C.E. Taylor in **1888**. There are two images in the book's chapter about the Fireburn. One is called "A Rebel" and the other "Queen Mary". Both the rebel and Queen Mary wear dresses, but where the rebel holds a cane knife and a torch, Queen Mary holds a cane knife and a banner. The banner appears to be white in the image, although it is stated in police records that she had a red banner.

Interestingly, it is the image of the rebel that has come to represent Mary Thomas, at least in Denmark. Even The National Museum (Nationalmuseet) and The National Archives (Rigsarkivet) in Denmark use the image of "A rebel" to represent Queen Mary.

In USVI, a number of representations are to be found. A large painting from **1989** by artist Nathaniel Mack hangs prominently in the post office in Frederiksted, showing the leaders in front (one of which undoubtedly represents Mary Thomas), as well as a large crowd behind them.

In St. Thomas, the statue called *The three Queens of the Virgin Islands* by sculptor Richard Hallier from **2005** shows three of the leading Fireburn queens.

And in **2018**, artists Jeannette Ehlers and LaVaughn Belle completed the prototype of their sculpture I AM QUEEN MARY, which was on display at the Workers Museum (Arbejdermuseet) in Copenhagen from January to April that year. The artists have merged their own faces and bodies in order to create the sculpture and draws on references from the American civil rights movement as well as material related to slavery.

In October 2018 the full sized sculpture of I AM QUEEN MARY was installed in front of The West Indian Warehouse (Vestindisk Pakhus) in Copenhagen. An important part of the sculpture is its foundation of coral, bricks and rocks from old plantation ruins in the USVI: Building material produced by enslaved Africans and African-Caribbeans before 1848.

Study questions:

Look at the portrait on one of the first pages in C.E. Taylor in *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies*. How is the writer projected?

The book can be found here: <http://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/130020757567.pdf>

Compare the portrait of Taylor to “A REBEL” and “QUEEN MARY”. Comment on technique, style, detail, and aesthetics. Discuss possible reasons for the artistic choices.

There seems to be a “silent period” in the depictions of the Fireburn and the queens between the 1880s and the 1980s. Discuss why.

Compare and contrast the different depictions of Mary Thomas/Queen Mary. How are they composed? What stories do they tell?

“A REBEL” (1888):



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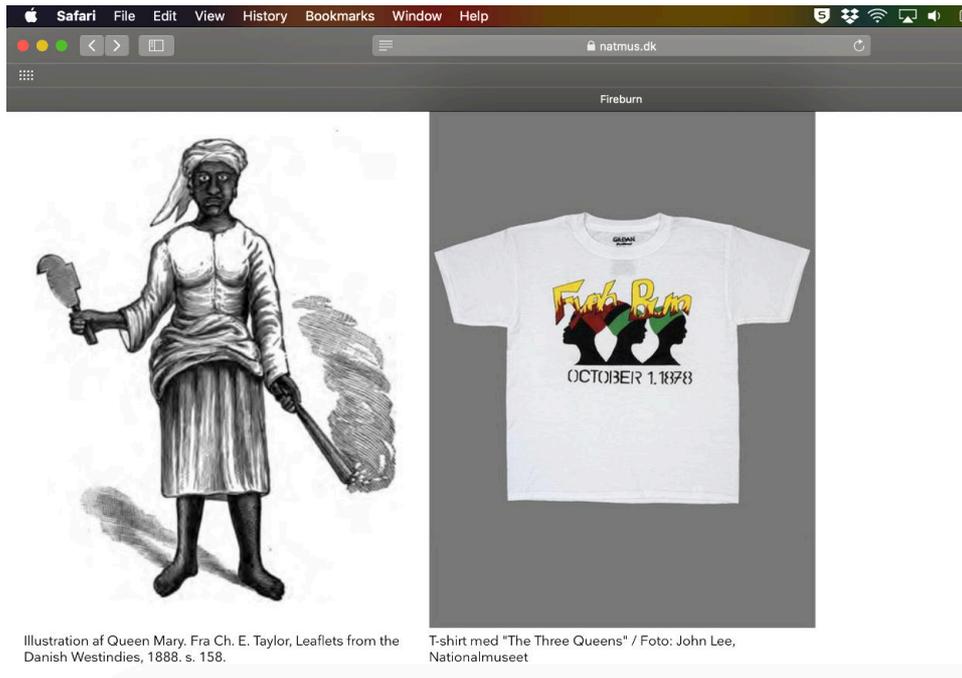
ARBEJDERMUSEET
& ARBEJDERBEVÆGELSENS BIBLIOTEK OG ARKIV

“QUEEN MARY” (1888):



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The National Museum (*Nationalmuseet*) on the Fireburn (2019):

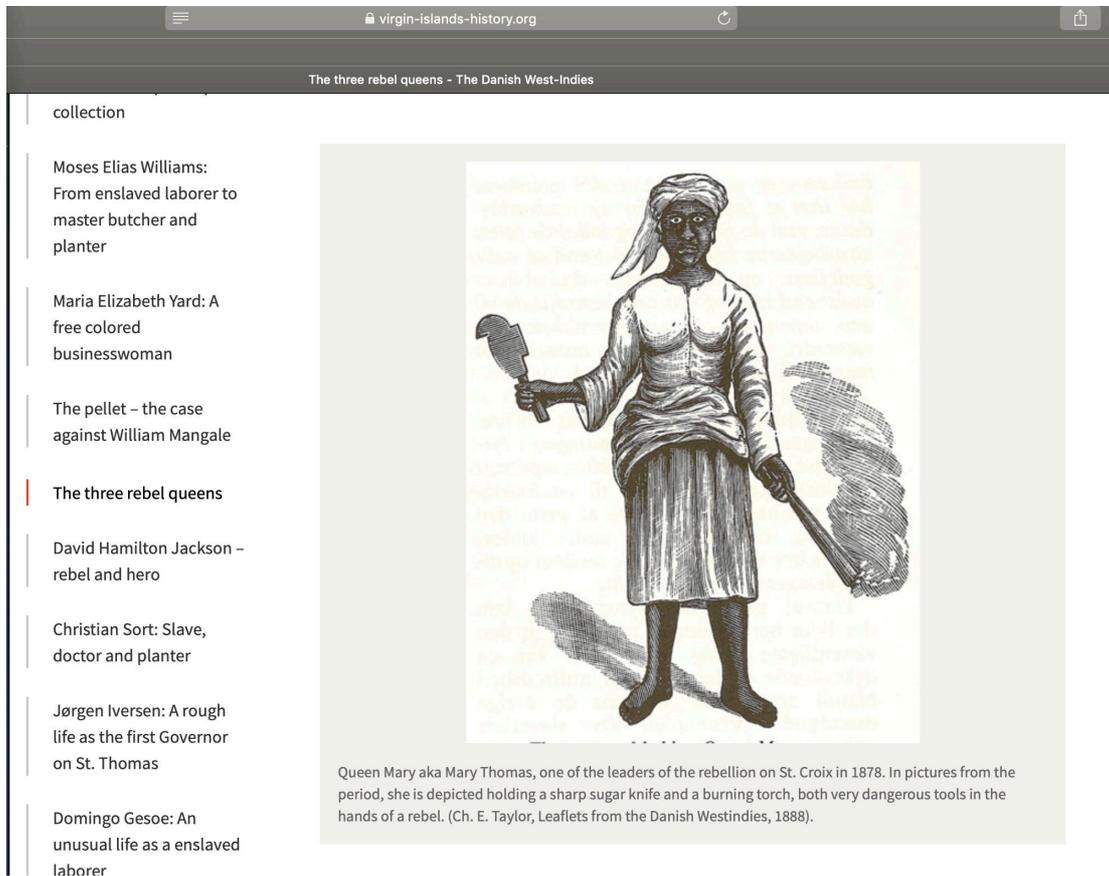


The screenshot shows a Safari browser window with the URL natmus.dk. The page title is "Fireburn". On the left is a black and white illustration of Queen Mary, a Black woman wearing a headscarf and a long dress, holding a large sugar knife in her right hand and a burning torch in her left. On the right is a white t-shirt with a graphic that says "Fire Burn" in a stylized font, with three silhouettes of heads below it, and "OCTOBER 1, 1878" printed underneath.

Illustration of Queen Mary. Fra Ch. E. Taylor, Leaflets from the Danish Westindies, 1888. s. 158.

T-shirt med "The Three Queens" / Foto: John Lee, Nationalmuseet

The National Archives (Rigsarkivet) on "The Three Rebel Queens":



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL virgin-islands-history.org. The page title is "The three rebel queens - The Danish West-Indies". On the left is a sidebar with a list of collection items:

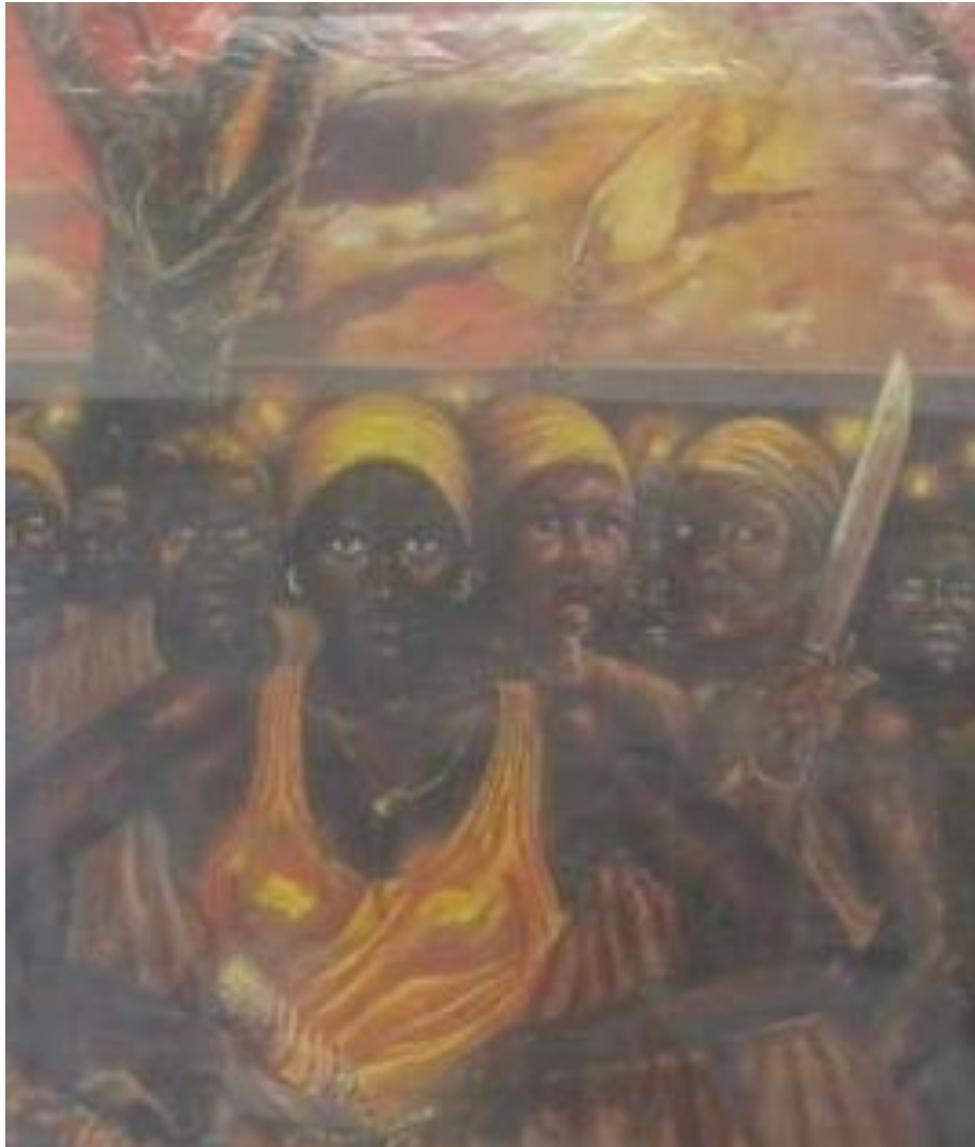
- collection
- Moses Elias Williams: From enslaved laborer to master butcher and planter
- Maria Elizabeth Yard: A free colored businesswoman
- The pellet - the case against William Mangale
- The three rebel queens**
- David Hamilton Jackson - rebel and hero
- Christian Sort: Slave, doctor and planter
- Jørgen Iversen: A rough life as the first Governor on St. Thomas
- Domingo Gesoe: An unusual life as an enslaved laborer

On the right is a large image of the same illustration of Queen Mary as seen in the first screenshot. Below the image is a caption:

Queen Mary aka Mary Thomas, one of the leaders of the rebellion on St. Croix in 1878. In pictures from the period, she is depicted holding a sharp sugar knife and a burning torch, both very dangerous tools in the hands of a rebel. (Ch. E. Taylor, Leaflets from the Danish Westindies, 1888).

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The Fireburn-painting (excerpt) at the post office in Frederiksted
(painting from 1989, picture from 2014):



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The three queens in St. Thomas
(statue from 2005, picture from 2014):



Fireburn mural from Complex High School, St. Croix:



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I AM QUEEN MARY prototype at The Workers Museum (Arbejdermuseet) 2018:



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I AM QUEEN MARY statue at The West Indian Pakhus (Vestindisk Pakhus) 2018:



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