



who is Omai?

imagine... who is Omai?

Imagine tells the fascinating story behind Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of Britain's first non-white celebrity, Omai. We look at the extraordinary tale of the first 'noble savage', who was plucked from obscurity in Tahiti and became an overnight sensation in 18th-century London and a subject for controversy right up to the present day.

The Tate, together with Sir David Attenborough, is currently fighting hard to keep Reynolds' portrait of Omai in the country after the Castle Howard estate sold it to a private collector. The Government has put a holding order on the painting while the Tate, which has received a private donation of £12.5 million to buy it, tries desperately to persuade the owner not to take it out of the UK. But why is this painting so important?

Omai was brought back to London as a 'souvenir' from Tahiti by Captain Cook's support ship during the 18th century's voyages of discovery. On his arrival he was greeted by the A-list celebrities of the day and fashioned in their image. Within days he was taken to meet the King. History was made when he was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the leading British painter of his day. The result was perhaps Reynolds' greatest work – and the first ever grand portrait of a non-white subject. But just as with modern-day celebrities, people eventually tired of Omai and he was to meet a tragic end.

Imagine looks at the intriguing story behind one of the great masterpieces of British portraiture and the struggle to keep this slice of British history in the UK.