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Ship shape: Yinka Shonibare with a model of his sculpture Photo: ANDREW CROWLEY

The next work to occupy Trafalgar Square’s Fourth Plinth will be a sculpture of HMS Victory – in a bottle. Martin Gayford meets its creator Yinka Shonibare.

There is no way of knowing what Nelson would have made of the various occupants of the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, on which his statue has looked down. But it is a fair bet that he would have had more time for the next piece of sculpture to occupy that spot than for some of its predecessors. Next Monday, Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, will unveil an object calculated to please almost any sailor – a gigantic ship in a bottle. Moreover, it is not just any ship, but Nelson’s own flagship, the Victory.

The work, by the Anglo-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, is a complex symbol that relates to the past and present of London on several levels. But the first impression, the artist hopes, will be simple pleasure and amazement.

“It’s important that people who don’t speak English, don’t know anything about British history, should still engage with the work on an immediate, basic level: just to look at it and think, ‘Wow, what’s that?’”

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When I talk to him in his studio, Shonibare is obviously thrilled. “I saw the finished bottle the other day,” he says. “I’d seen it at various stages before, but to see the whole plan come together is a different level of excitement.”

Mind you, this is not a model of the Victory quite as Nelson knew it. For one thing, it is a very hi-tech vessel in a bottle made of a toughened hybrid material normally used for large aquariums and coloured with a green pigment to match samples of 19th-century glass. Hidden away beneath the deck is a sophisticated air-conditioning system that will keep its temperature steady within 10 degrees.

The most striking aspect, however, is that its 37 sails are colourful and exotic-looking in a manner quite unlike any canvas used by the early-19th-century Navy. They are made of Dutch wax textile, which has become as much of a signature material to Shonibare as, say, pickled wildlife is to Damien Hirst. To a casual glance, this looks typically African – joyously patterned and vivid – but one of the reasons why it appeals to Shonibare is that, in fact, it isn’t African at all.

“People have come to associate the fabric with Africa, but actually it is Indonesian-influenced fabric produced by the Dutch for sales to the African market. It was made in Hyde, near Manchester, and I buy it in Brixton market. I like the fact that something seen as being African is actually the product of quite complex cultural relationships.”

In other words, though this cloth is popular in Africa – to the point that it was worn at one point by African nationalists as a sign of solidarity – it’s actually a product of globalisation. That process of trading conquering and intermingling has been going on for centuries.

One of the results of the globalising process is, of course, London itself. “Look around you in London and you can see that it is a very diverse city. London is perhaps the most multicultural city on Earth. Maybe that’s because this island is just not big enough to create parallel universes of people. We have to be interdependent. That enters very much into the culture of Londoners – the kind of food they eat, the kind of art they produce, the kind of music they listen to.”

Victory itself played a part in that story – and indeed in Shonibare’s own biography and cultural background. “If Napoleon’s fleet had won that battle, I might be speaking to you in French because victory at Trafalgar enabled the British Empire to expand further. The French would have had control of the seas if that hadn’t been the case. The formation of my own identity has been influenced by ships, by the whole colonial process and the trade routes.”

That is why, after accepting an MBE in 2005, he made the initials part of his professional name. A new book about him published by Prestel (£35), for example, is entitled Yinka Shonibare MBE.

Shonibare was born in London in 1962 to Nigerian parents. When he was three, the family moved back to Lagos, but his upbringing was almost as globalised as the Dutch wax cloth.

“Middle-class Nigerians lead a culturally very mixed life. My father studied law in Britain, for example. I can speak Yoruba, the Nigerian language, but we had summer holidays in England and Italy. It was a very cosmopolitan lifestyle.”

At 16, he returned to Britain to do his A-levels and went on to art school in London. During his first year, he became ill with a rare neurological disease. As a result, he was completely paralysed for a while, and in a

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wheelchair for three years. Eventually, he was able to walk again, but his mobility was permanently affected.

“As things got better”, he has explained, “I figured the only way I could carry on was to get back into art school and pick up where I left off.”

From childhood, his ambition had been to become an artist, which caused the sort of parental disapproval that is traditional.

“My father, who passed away about six years ago, was a lawyer, and he expected me to go into the law. But, to his huge disappointment, I went to art school instead. That didn’t go down well at all for years. After I left art school, I was still scrounging for money, while my brother, who is five years younger, was on a salary four times mine. I was managing to raise about £5,000 a year. But, eventually, my father was very proud of me.”

There has been a lot to be proud of. Over the past two decades, Shonibare has become an internationally renowned artist, widely exhibited, and shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2004. This commission for the Fourth Plinth, however, is the most prominent work he has yet made. He hopes it will give people pleasure as well as making them think.

“I may be interested in a number of issues – identity, politics – but primarily I am an artist, and my job is to take people elsewhere. My job is to create a wonderland or a fantasyland for them. A giant ship in a bottle is one way to bring back that childhood sense of wonder. To scale it up to that size, I hope, makes it a mesmerising, wonderful, mysterious object to look at. The enchantment aspect is absolutely central.”

Of course, we won’t really know what it looks like until the mayor (“My old mate Boris” to Shonibare) reveals it to the world. But, to judge from models, he may well be right about that enchantment factor.