

## **PAPER ARTS | Personal Branding & Creating a Visual Identity with Michele Curtis Founder of Iconic Black Britons® CIC & The Seven Saints of St. Pauls® Project**

### **1. Introduction: Who are you?**



*“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken” – Oscar Wilde*

Your brand is an extension of who you are. Your personality, how you see the world and your place in it. It is unique to you and your experiences. Your talent and practice embodies every aspect of you. That is why your customer base chooses you over your competitors.

### **2. Personal Branding & Visual Identity: A Case Study | Michele Curtis**

In 2014 I won my very first award. At the time I was studying graphic design. At the end of my first semester my work, which was a corporate identity project was entered into a competition and I won the Stanley Hooper Award. For the first time in my creative career, my photograph appeared in a local newspaper. As a very self-conscious introvert, I struggled with all the attention; but nevertheless, it was a personal achievement and I was very proud.

Following months of being hounded by numerous tutors and friends about the “high quality of my artistic skill” and to “consider a career in fine art”. I crumbled under the pressure and decided to have an exhibition. As a British born child of the African Caribbean diaspora, I was always interested in Black history and the various indigenous cultures of the world. I remember reading the back of Black British publications and asking my mother to order educational books and posters of great African Queens, Kings and warriors who fought for justice and Caribbean heroes who did the same, from America.

It was important to me that my work reflected my identity and my passion and so I combined both. For Black History Month 2014 I held my debut exhibition called Iconic Black Bristolians. I exhibited six portraits highlighting some of the most influential and respected Black Bristolians. It was important to me that my exhibition reflected

my community in Bristol. When I shared by initial concept with my family my mother said, *“I’m not surprised, as a child you would always ask me; why do they only talk about Black Americans and not Black Britons?”* To my complete and utter surprise, there were others who shared the same sentiment and my exhibition was a complete success.

Over the period of five years, I went on to have a further three exhibitions; The Seven Saints of St. Pauls, Bristol Beats & Base and ARTival 2018. I also created The Seven Saints of St. Pauls Art, Culture & Heritage Initiative, the first culturally specific creative and digital placemaking project in the UK.

My work continued to gain traction nationally and internationally, but not without some backlash. There was confusion about the hierarchy of my work. People were confused because I did not have a clear brand vision. They would often ask; *Who are we dealing with Michele Curtis or Iconic Black Bristolians? Where does The Seven Saints of St. Pauls, Bristol Beats & Base and ARTival 2018 fit in?*

The validity of my vision faced constant scrutiny. I faced elitism from the art and culture sector and of course, a sprinkle of misogyny.

### **Artists don’t look like you!... What are you going to do when you run out of Black people to draw?**

Throughout my short career working in the creative sector, the catalyst for change was when I was told by a professional photographer and someone I had hired to manage my PR for one of my exhibitions said; *“Artists don’t look like you, they don’t dress like that, you should change your look... straighten your hair”*. Another person commented; *“...Well what are you going to do when you run out of Black people to draw? ...”*

These two comments in particular stuck with me, mainly because of the shock factor. But also, because it was comments like these that I have had to endure my entire life. Socially, in education and in the work place. It was comments like this why I began Iconic Black Bristolians. In an attempt to help combat some of the negative stereotypes and social stigma associated with the African Caribbean community. I knew that the very things that I was being critiqued for were my best assets, they were in fact my unique selling points. There was no way that I would compromise myself or my heritage for an ignorant few, in order to conform or appear more palatable and be governed by racist arbitrary rules.

### **Who am I and what do I want? ... Michele Curtis or Iconic Black Bristolians?**

Throughout my experiences, positive and negative I remained grounded in the fact that my work was a direct reflection of my musings, experiences and vision. The foundation of my work is built on integrity and my wanting to contribute to positive change in my own modest way.

Although each of my projects were branded, there was a disconnect because Michele Curtis the artist was the ‘face’ of each initiative. Being the introvert that I am, I admitted to myself that I really do not like doing media. Although I successfully resisted the pressure to post my every move on social media. I realised that I needed to decide how I wanted to promote my work moving forward. I needed to establish clear boundaries when in the social media and media space. I had successfully asserted that I do not discuss politics and all press and social media coverage was strictly in a professional capacity. However, I felt there needed to be a clear distinction between Michele Curtis woman, mother, daughter, sister; Michele Curtis the artist and Iconic Black Bristolians.

Due to the growing popularity of my work, I decided a complete overhaul of my brand was required to firmly position myself in the market. When I first established Iconic Black Bristolians in 2014, it was essentially a hobby. Moving forward I decided to change the name from Iconic Black Bristolians to Iconic Black Britons and separate Michele Curtis artist as a separate entity. Visit the Iconic Black Britons website to see how I transitioned from Iconic Black Bristolians to Britons. <https://www.iconicblackbritons.com>

As part of the re-branding process I defined a clear business structure and hierarchy by positioning myself as the founder. All projects fall under the umbrella of Iconic Black Britons®, see Image 1. Strategically, this allowed me to diversify my portfolio of work and opened up further opportunities for me to work in different capacities and not *just* an ‘artist’, but an expert in my field, see Image 2.

Image 1: Business Structure Iconic Black Britons CIC.

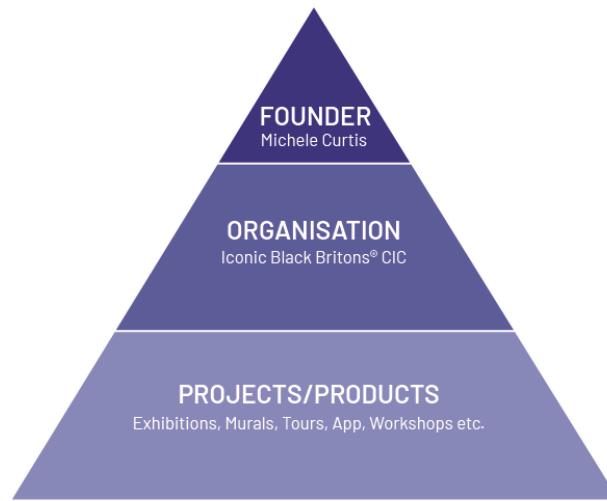
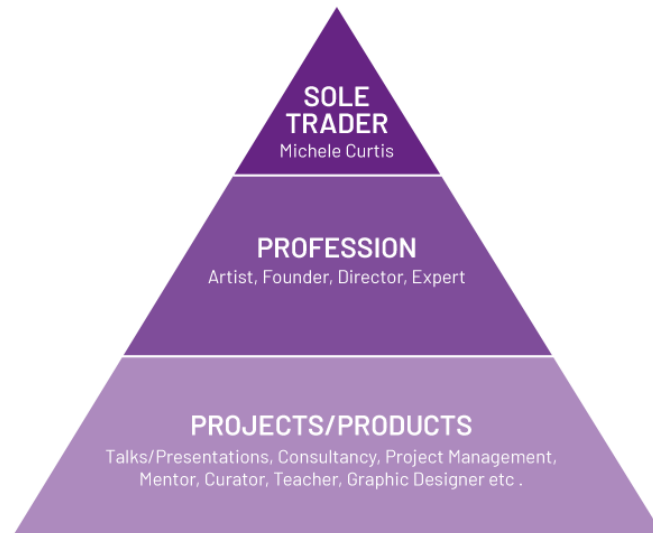


Image 2: Business Structure Michele Curtis Artist (Sole Trader).



## Exercise 1.

In order to create a visual identity, it is important to first position yourself in the market. It is best practice in business planning to seek out your competitors and identify your USP (Unique Selling Point) in order to establish your position. However, whilst I firmly agree with this approach at times it can be debilitating. With this approach, many creatives will find their focus will shift toward their perceived competition and competitors and all too often forget how fantastic their product truly is. As I stated at the beginning of this resource:

***Your brand is an extension of who **you** are. **Your** personality, how **you** see the world and **your** place in. It is unique to **you** and **your** experiences. **Your** talent and practice embodies every aspect of **you**. That is why **your** customer base chooses **you** over your competitors.***

It is very important that you pay close attention to your product and brand. What you have to offer is very important to the success of your business. For example; there is a reason why there is both Michael Jackson and Prince, Mariah Carey and Beyoncé, Barclays and Triodos, Coco Cola and Pepsi, Patricia Bright and Lydia Elise Millen. There is room in the market place for everyone. What separates us is the quality of our products, ethics and style/personality. Most consumers invest emotionally in a company or brand, this is why corporations invest in advertising and social media influencers.

To help you get started are a list of three questions below. Take as much time as you need and you may find these are questions that you revisit over a period of time. Answering the questions below is a useful tool in defining your elevator pitch and tag line or motto if you choose to incorporate either of them as part of your visual identity. Elevator pitch and tag lines will be explored in section 3. Creating an Identity.

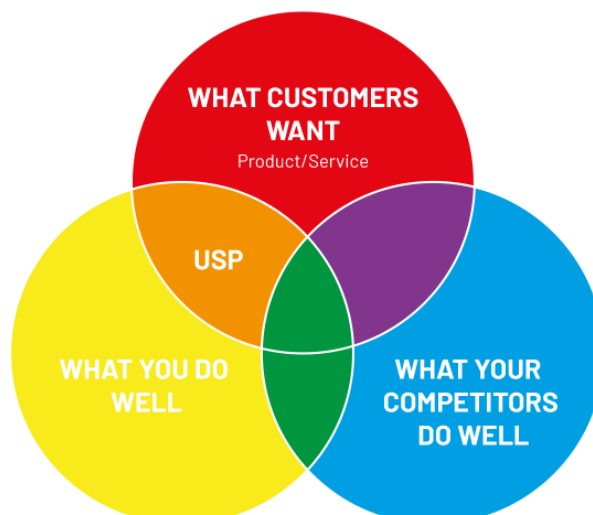
### 1. What or who is your brand?

Are you an individual, alias or company?

### 2. Is your unique selling point (USP) defined by a person, a product or a service?

*Definition: the unique selling point (USP), also called the unique value proposition in the business model canvas, are the best attributes of a company. Identifying your USP is a proven tactic to position yourself in the market place. Armed with this knowledge, organisations are best informed to market how one's own brand, product and/or service is superior to its competitors. See image 3.*

Image 3: Unique Selling Point (USP) Diagram.



*Model example: As discussed in my case study. My experience taught me that I was a key component of my brand. As a direct result I decided to separate the person from the product. I made this strategic decision because I did not want to be restricted professionally. i.e. Due to my brand image, I was perceived as a Black portrait artist. If I continued as I did I would not receive opportunities like this, to create resources for emerging artists.*

### 3. What is your person, alias or company's unique selling point?

1. How are you special?
2. What do friends and/or family members think are your best attributes?
3. How does your life experience and/or personality influence your practice?
4. What's your story and how did you get here?

### 4. In a short paragraph describe the USP/s you identified above in steps 1-3.

This exercise is to assist you in creating your brand image.

*Definition: A brand identity is how a business presents itself to, and how it wants to be perceived by its customers. Your brand identity is different to brand image. Your brand identity is the same as your visual identity, which we will explore in 3. Creating a Visual Identity. It is the intent behind the branding; the name, logo design, colour palette and all the visual elements in its products and promotions. Brand identity includes the language and tone of voice used to communicate with its staff, customers and stakeholders. Brand image is the actual result of your visual/brand identity.*

1. How do you want to be perceived to new customers?
2. Will they understand what your organisation stands for?
3. What do you want people to remember about you when you leave the room?

This is your brand image. A great place to start is with your mission, vision and values this is an essential step for business planning, but also to create your visual identity and brand image. Below is a definition of each to help you get started if you have not already completed this step. I would advise you complete your mission, vision and values during the business canvas development stage.

*Definitions:*

Your **mission** statement focuses on the present. What your company does now in order to accomplish your vision.

Your **vision** is your aspirations for the future. Where you see your organisation in the future and the impact you hope your company will have. Your purpose.

Your **values** are your organisation's principles and/or ethics.

## 3. Creating a Visual Identity:

### 1. Elevator Pitch

The Cambridge dictionary defines an elevator pitch as:

*"a short but effective explanation that is intended to persuade someone to buy a product or accept an idea... [and] a short description of a product or business idea, especially one given to a possible investor.*

*When you start a business, it is all about "elevator pitches", in which you express your idea in simple terms - in less time, as the term suggests, than a 30-second ride in a lift..."*

Below is an example of my elevator pitch for Iconic Black Britons:

When I wrote my elevator pitch there was a lot of trial and error. I struggled with my pitch initially because my work covered such a broad spectrum of projects and products. It took me some time to perfect how much to say and what to say. I realised, it was best to stick to mission and to leave room for questions if people are interested and want to know more.

*"Hi, my name is Michele Curtis. I am an artist; and the founder and director of Iconic Black Britons CIC. At Iconic Black Britons we celebrate Britain's Black history through art. We use art, education and representation to highlight the contributions made by people of African Caribbean descent in Britain. Because this isn't just Black history; this is Britain's history".*

Example of my elevator pitch used in a conversation:

**Networker:** Hello, how are you? My name is Hassan, nice to meet you.

**Me:** Hello Hassan, I'm well thank you. My name is Michele.

**Networker:** So, what do you do Michele?

**Me:** I'm an artist and; the founder and director of Iconic Black Britons CIC.

**Networker:** Oh, Iconic Black Britons that sounds interesting. What's that all about?

**Me:** So, at Iconic Black Britons we celebrate Britain's Black history through art. We educate by using positive representations of grass root community members to highlight the contributions made by the African Caribbean diaspora in Britain. Because this isn't just Black history; this is Britain's history.

**Networker:** Okay, so where does the art fit in?

**Me:** Ah right yes, so we have exhibitions of portraits with full biographies, researched using archive material and intangible cultural heritage. We also have a creative and digital placemaking project called The Seven Saints of St. Pauls®, which is an outdoor exhibition of seven murals with an accompanying mobile app.

The key to a successful elevator pitch is to explain your product in an authentic and concise manner with conviction, and without sounding robotic. In order to achieve this, you have to believe what you are saying and be comfortable saying it. You need to know your business inside out. You can practice your pitch with friends and/or family to get feedback and increase your confidence.

## 2. Taglines and Mottos

Taglines and Mottos are statements, usually no longer than a sentence that sums up your product, mission, vision or feeling associated with your product and/or service.

Below are four examples of some well-known taglines and mottos:

**McDonalds:** *I'm loving it!*

**Nike:** *Just Do it!*

**Tesco:** *Every little Helps!*

**Skittles:** *Taste the Rainbow!*

Deciding on the tag line for my brand was an organic process. I would often find myself constantly repeating the same things during my elevator pitch and interviews. The key statements I made were memorable and clearly defined my work, mission, vision and values in just a few words. My tag lines and motto are used across my branding and marketing materials, media interviews and social network platforms.

I have three tag lines which I use interchangeably or together as illustrated in my logo, see image 3:

1. Celebrating Britain's Black History Through Art
2. Art – Representation – Education
3. This isn't *just* Black history; this is Britain's history!

Image 4: Iconic Black Britons® Logo (version 3. all tag lines)



## Exercise 2.

If you decide to include a tagline or motto as part of your brand. I have listed four tips and tricks to below to help you get started:

1. **Comments people have made regarding your work.**  
Did your work evoke a thought or feeling that could be translated into a tag line?
2. **Revisit your mission, vision and values.**  
Is there a statement or two that you can extract that sums up your brand?
3. **Make it memorable**  
Keep it short and sweet, a sentence or less
4. **Check your elevator pitch**  
Is there a phrase or sentence you say constantly that can be edited as your tag line or motto?

### 3. Logomark or Logotype

A logo is often made of a logotype and a logomark. A logotype is the customised font of the business name that is designed in a stylised way. A logomark is an identifying mark or symbol that doesn't contain the business name, like a drawing, symbol or image that represents the business.

Below are examples of three logomarks and one logotype that I designed for my 2016 Bristol Beats & Bass exhibition, see Image 5. Due to the theme of my exhibition I designed three versions of the logo, which worked very well. However, the logos required context, so I designed and rendered the logotype to use as a title in combination with the logos. This added versatility to the application for branding and marketing.

Image 5: Bristol Beats and Bass Logomarks (l – R: Sound System, Turntable, Speaker Box) & Logotype



#### 1. Your Logo

When designing your logomark and/or logotype it is important to consider the following:

1. **Your brand identity**
2. **The typography/font that will be used in conjunction with your logo, and/or the style of your logotype if you choose to have one.**  
A great reading resource is '*Just My Type*' by Simon Garfield.
3. **Application, what will your logo be used for?**  
In addition to the obvious logo being placed on your website. You will find that your logo could potentially have several uses depending on your product and/or services.

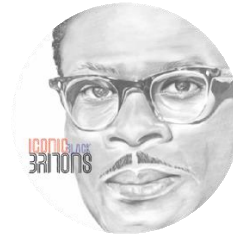
Your logo needs to be versatile. The examples given above in Image 5, are great; they are colourful, engaging, very detailed, convey a particular message and served a very specific purpose. When I designed these logos, I knew they would be used for print, which was why I added the logotype. But I also knew they would be animated with music specific to each design as an online marketing tool. But complex logo designs like these, would not be suitable for my overall brand identity.

Below in Image 6, are two variations of my logo designs for Iconic Black Britons®. I have a logotype and I have a version with one of my portraits. I use these logo's interchangeably and both are used in a variety of ways. They are used as watermarks, social media banners, email signatures, prints,



stickers, address labels, letterheads etc. But neither appear on my website. This is because I have created a strong visual identity.

Image 6: Iconic Black Britons Logo (l – R: Version 2 & Version 4)



A great logo and selecting the right typography are all important assets for your visual identity. Your colour palette is also very important. When you examine brands like Coco Cola, Tiffany's, Apple and Barclays their colour palettes are equally as recognizable as their logos. In fact, Tiffany's has a trademark for their signature blue. We will explore Intellectual Property (IP) in the next section. Just like the examples I gave earlier with tag lines, seeing a specific colour is synonymous with hearing a tag line. I could say any of the examples given earlier and the majority of people would know what brand I am referring to. For example, *Just Do It!* Jingles or music also has the same effect.

Combined all these elements create your brand identity. Visit my website <https://www.iconicblackbritons.com> ; to see how I was able to create my site without a logo, that still screams Iconic Black Britons®. Pay close attention to the font I selected for my type, the tone of voice used throughout, the colour palette used and how each brand element is a direct reflection of both my logos in Image 6.

You need to take great consideration when creating your visual identity. Each element must be strong as independent components and complement each other when combined. Taking into consideration all the preparation and planning you have done so far, now it's your turn!

### Exercise 3.

Now it's time to design your logo and visual identity. Irrespective of where you are on your journey, creating a visual identity is a time consuming process. There is no right or wrong way to begin, just make a start wherever you feel inspired. Ensure your workflow works best for you... and have fun! This should be an enjoyable process.

A couple of great reading resources with great ideas for inspiration is *The Art of Looking Sideways* by Alan Fletcher and, *A Smile in the Mind* by Beryl McAlhone.

#### 4. Intellectual Property & Copyright

***“... Don’t just steal the style, steal the thinking behind the style. You don’t want to look like your heroes, you want to see like your heroes.” – Austin Kleon***

Anyone who knows me well, knows that I am a huge hip hop fan. So, it would be of no surprise that the inspiration behind my Bristol Beats & Bass logos was the Wu Tang Clan logo. Allow me to take you briefly through my design process to explain.

Wu Tang Clan the ‘W’: Below in Image 7, is the Wu Tang Clan logomark with logotype designed by Mathematics. My Bristol Beats and Bass exhibition consisted of three ‘B’s and mapped three generations through the evolution of Black British Music in Bristol specifically.

1. Reggae Sound Systems of the 1960s to 1970s
2. Sound System evolution that incorporated turntables of the 1980s
3. How reggae music of the 1960s and 70s influenced the Drum ‘n’ Bass genre of the 1990s to 2000s

*Image 7: Wu Tang Clan logomark and logotype*



I was inspired by the use of the ‘W’ as a logo, and the many ways in which the logo was edited to incorporate the personal branding of each, of the ten members of the rap group. See Image 8, for some examples of how the original logo was creatively transformed, whilst still maintaining the integrity of the overall visual identity and brand image.

Image 8: Wu Tang Clan logomark and logotype for members; Raekwon Chef, GZA, Inspectah Deck & RZA



As you can observe from the images provided, my Bristol Beats & Base logos and Wu tang clan logos, are completely different. There is no obvious comparison. They look nothing like each other, although I was heavily influenced during the concept and design process. *"I successfully stole the thinking behind the style, and saw like my 'hero'",* mathematics. There is a clear distinction between being inspired and stealing another creatives' work, and it is important to recognise the difference. A great reading resource, that I recommend for all creatives is *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon

In addition to being lazy and insulting, it is also illegal under Intellectual Property Law to steal another creatives' work.

### **What is intellectual property?**

*Definition: Intellectual Property is an intangible asset. It is the protection granted for anything you create using your mind. Examples of intellectual property are works of art, photographs, products or poems. An intangible asset is an asset that is not physical in nature. Brand recognition and intellectual property, such as patents, trademarks, and copyrights, are all intangible assets.*

Having the right type of intellectual property protection helps you to stop people stealing or copying your creations and covers things like:

- the names of your products or brands
- your inventions
- the design or look of your products
- things you write, make or produce

Copyright, patents, designs and trademarks are all types of intellectual property protection. Some types of protection are automatic like copyright ©, whilst others you have to apply for like trademarks ®.

### **What counts as intellectual property?**

Intellectual property is something unique that is your physical creation. An idea alone is not intellectual property. For example, an idea for a book is not, but the words you have written are.

## Owning intellectual property

You own intellectual property if you:

- created it (and it meets the requirements for copyright, a patent or a design)
- bought intellectual property rights from the creator or a previous owner
- have a brand that could be a trademarked e.g. *The Seven Saints of St. Pauls*<sup>®</sup>

Intellectual property if you are self-employed:

If you are self-employed, you usually own the intellectual property, even if you commissioned someone else to complete the work. However, this is not always the case if your contract with them, gives them the rights. If you are employed it is highly likely that whatever you have created on behalf of the company is owned to the them.

**Copyright is automatic.** The moment you put pen to paper or create anything digitally you automatically own the copyright.

**You cannot steal someone's copyright or intellectual property.** It is illegal and you can be prosecuted. The same also applies to someone stealing your work.

**You can be inspired by another person's creation** but must never copy or use without permission, or claim works of art as your own.

The above information is a summary from the [www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) website. Please do your research and if you are not sure of your rights. Please contact a legal professional. There are law firms in the UK that specialise in Intellectual Property and some offer pro-bono (free) advice.

Source and further information: <https://www.gov.uk/intellectual-property-an-overview>