

**Introduction to Rethinking Race and Representation in Art History and Material Culture
of the Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century Francosphere**

Jennifer Ngaire Heuer
University of Massachusetts Amherst

And

Gülru Çakmak
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Self-proclaimed connoisseurs gathering around a pastel painting in an eighteenth-century Parisian salon. A photograph of Rodin sketching a Cambodian dancer. The reconstructed voice of an enslaved mother. Sculptures from French Guinea boxed up, linked to deceptive imperialist maps, and transported to a museum attic. The contributors to this special issue use these and other glimpses of the past to explore how deeply race and colonialism have been embedded in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century art and visual culture in France and in the worlds affected by French empire. They point us to places where we might expect to find powerfully racialized images—like the charged representations of the Haitian Revolution or nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings—and to more surprising venues, like fashion plates, or Renoir’s iconic images of indolent summer leisure. Contributors offer tools for understanding how such materials drew on, and contributed to, the structural violence, economic reach, and pervasive legacies of imperialism. At the same time, they unearth some of the individual human choices and experiences that reinforced or challenged these frameworks.

In exploring these dynamics, this special issue builds on the three-part series of *H-France Salons* edited by Emily Marker and Christy Pichichero on “Race, Racism & the Study of France and the Francophone World.” It is also more broadly indebted to the groundbreaking work of historians of art and visual culture. These include Anne Lafont, Robin Mitchell, Charmaine Nelson, David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., James Smalls, Denise Murrell, Alyssa Sepinwall, and Marlene Daut, among many others.

The issue represents an editing collaboration between an art historian and an historian; contributors come from multiple disciplines and offer a wide variety of methodologies. The issue emerged both out of excitement with new approaches and perspectives, and out of frustration with historical work that has sometimes used visual materials simply as illustrations rather than seeking out the stories embedded in those materials. It also seeks to challenge historical and art historical narratives that, perhaps unwittingly, reproduce certain racialized and imperialist ways of seeing and organizing the world and the past.

The need for such a collection of essays developed in the classroom as we sought for materials to expand the curriculum of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art and visual culture of the Francosphere. One of our goals was to gather short pieces on visual history and material culture that could be assigned in college courses. The essays in this collection highlight the processes by which representational systems have perpetuated racialized categories, while often silencing or obscuring historical experiences. The issue has no claims to be comprehensive. Rather, the reader should approach essays as case studies from which lessons can be drawn in the classroom and beyond about the workings and legacies of racialized narrative tropes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Several overarching themes emerge from this collection. We would like to briefly address three of them: 1) The participation of established art historical and historical narratives in replicating and reinforcing imperialist racialized accounts; 2) The role of historical imagination in reclaiming the agency of long-omitted historical actors; and 3) The economic and commercial aspects of *representing* colonialism and imperialism.

Challenging the Role of Art Historical and Historical Narratives in Reinforcing Colonialist and Imperialist Legacies

Many of the essays in this special issue highlight the afterlives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialist and racialized tropes of representation. Established art historical accounts often mirror, replicate, and reinforce colonialist accounts. Marlene Daut's "'All the Devils are Here': How the Visual Culture of the Haitian Revolution Misrepresents Black Suffering and Death" takes on the trope of Black-on-white violence that flourished in historical, literary, and visual accounts of the Haitian Revolution; she shows how such representations have deflected the reader/viewer from crimes against humanity committed by the French in Haiti.

Representations such as [*Revenge taken by the Black Army for the Cruelties practised on them by the French*](#), illustrating Marcus Rainsford's *An historical account of the black empire of Hayti* (1805), "[smother] histories of white violence and [turn] our gaze away from Black death" in Daut's words. This representational strategy shows whites (whether soldiers or civilians, including women and children), as victims of violence committed by Blacks, rather than the inverse. Such images not only served the interests of contemporaries who wanted to delegitimize the Haitian Revolution and restore slavery, but have also shaped subsequent understandings. Daut's vital intervention highlights how colonialist discourse has set up tropes that still perpetuate racist notions of Black rage.

Other essays in this collection call attention to art historical accounts that propagate racialized colonialist/imperialist myths. One of the most pervasive is that of modernity and modernist painting as taking roots in the soil of nineteenth-century Parisian culture. The formalist experimentations of modern painting in that context have been commonly considered to reflect the politically progressive attitude of the artists. Consider Auguste Renoir's *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881), one of the iconic paintings of late nineteenth-century French urban leisure and sociability. A bohemian gathering of artists and their circle enjoys a leisurely afternoon around a festive banquet table. Wine and fruits have been consumed, and post-lunch clusters of people chatter away the afternoon. Comfortable luxuries are available to those who seek them in the rural environs of the metropolis. In "If Objects Could Speak: Tales of Race and Empire at Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*" Elizabeth Heath reads Renoir's painting against the

grain; she undertakes an archaeological examination of the provenance of various commodities and consumables depicted in the painting. From the Algerian vineyards worked by displaced peasants to exotic flowers originating in the colonies, the details that signal metropolitan bounty and easy living also attest to French imperialist networks that made this wealth available to the bohemian artists and their working-class friends.

The same modernist narrative that creates a canon of “progressive” artists weaves a parallel account of “outcast” artists who do not belong to this progressive art. For a long time, one of the standard figures depicted in this narrative as a staunch opponent of artistic progress was the nineteenth-century French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme. In art historical accounts Gérôme has epitomized the reactionary academic painter who steadfastly held on to figurative painting and highly polished facture while his forward-looking contemporaries like Renoir, Claude Monet, or Edouard Manet made self-reflective art. In the second half of the twentieth century, Gérôme’s art came to be seen as embodying colonialist and racist perspectives, in a way that absolved artists in the modernist canon of such positions. In the wake of Edward Said’s foundational book *Orientalism* (1978), Gérôme’s paintings were deemed the flagbearers of an active Orientalist discourse. In the words of the art historian Linda Nochlin, whose article “The Imaginary Orient” forcefully articulated this perspective, Gérôme presented “a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology, an iconic distillation of the Westerner’s notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be transparent naturalism.”¹

Marc Gotlieb’s article in our collection, “Where is the Orientalist artist? On Gérôme’s 1887 *Carpet Merchant*,” takes on several of the myths that perpetuate this dichotomy of progressive modernists versus regressive academic painters. Rather than focusing on the Orientalist images of Gérôme’s *Carpet Merchant*, Gotlieb investigates the active roles of both Gérôme and his viewers in participating and constructing these images. He shows how *The Carpet Merchant* referenced the artist himself, presenting a “mediated image of Gérôme’s studio” that was deeply entwined with aspects of modernity. His careful examination of the painting’s complex compositional structure also highlights how the painting itself calls attention to the viewer’s role, supporting the conclusion “that neither the artist nor the viewer is as absent as might at first seem.” Reading Heath’s analysis of Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* in tandem with Gotlieb’s investigation of Gérôme’s *The Carpet Merchant*, both products of the 1880s, challenges and complicates art historical narrative arcs. Much work, however, still lies ahead for researchers in dismantling established mythologies about progressive modernist art.

The case of French colonization of coastal West Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century offers another instance of how the legacy of late imperialism lives on. In “The Case of Dr. Maclaud in Coastal Guinea: Re-Assessing Colonial Photography,” Angie Epifano examines the colonial functionary Dr. Charles Maclaud’s ethnographic and cartographic work in Afrique-Occidentale française (AOF) in combination with his vast archive of photographs and collection of sculpture from the coastal Guinée française. Epifano explores the construction of colonial power structures at work in the last decade of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In mapping coastal regions, Maclaud sought to impose racialized identities and

¹ Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), p. 34.

essentialized cultural categories onto the diverse communities. Epifano potently traces an analogous structure of essentialism in the display of objects MacLaud collected and shipped to Paris to become part of the “Africa Room” at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. The curatorial choices made in photographing as well as presenting these objects highlight an imperialist drive to racialize, decontextualize, and dehistoricize the material cultural artifacts extracted from the colonies. The article demonstrates how such choices have had “tangible, wide-reaching, and long-lasting effects.” A new generation of scholars like Epifano are at work developing innovative methodologies for discovering and reclaiming the specificities of such objects.

Historical Imagination and Reclaiming Agency

Contributors to this issue also remind us how European artistic representations of people of color have often objectified and depersonalized them, effacing their identities. Racialized images have been used to inspire generalized feelings of fear or horror, eroticized exoticism, commercial desire, and other strong emotions. Scholars have recently begun to uncover the stories of some of the individuals of color who appear in artwork, and have tried, as much as possible, to restore their identities and their agency. This has sometimes involved retitling portraits after their models, or when those names remain unknown or unknowable, experimenting with alternative titles for works that were labeled as anonymous or portraits of a *nègre* or *négresse*.² Finding such lost stories is an ongoing task. In “Discriminating Taste: Skin Color and Connoisseurship in Eighteenth-Century France,” Oliver Wunsch discusses his fruitless search for the identity of the model for who posed for Maurice-Quentin de La Tour’s pastel *Buste d’un nègre* shown at the Salon of 1741; he observes that “using the work to establish a deeper understanding of Black life during the period is more challenging and more perilous” than with some other contemporary images.

In “Searching for ‘la petite Sap’: Auguste Rodin’s Drawings of the Cambodian Royal Ballet and the Problem of Agency” Juliet Bellow looks at the stories behind the Cambodian dancers that Rodin sketched over a four-day campaign in 1906. She notes that Rodin distorted dancers’ bodies and consistently rendered their faces as blank fields, depriving them of individuality. These drawings, singly and collectively, project a vivid kinesthetic that registers the dancers’ presence according to Bellow. She insists that we acknowledge the dancers’ contributions to these images, offering as an example “little Sap,” who may have insisted that Rodin buy her a new pair of shoes in exchange for her modeling. Other contributors hint that the people who became the subjects of these artworks were less malleable or passive than their depictions might

² James Smalls, “Exquisite Empty Shells: Sculpted Slave Portraits and the French Ethnographic Turn,” in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Lugo-Ortiz, Agnes and Angela Rosenthal, eds). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 283–312; David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (5 vols) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010–2014); Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Charmaine Nelson, “From Portrait of a Negro Slave to Portrait of a Haitian Woman: The Racial Politics of Re-Naming Art in Canadian Museum Practice,” *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance*, ed. Charmaine A. Nelson (Concord, Ontario: Captus Press, 2018), pp. 213–251; Isabelle Bardon et al., *Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse* (Paris: Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie and Flammarion, 2019); Anne Lafont, *L’Art et la Race: L’Africain (tout) contre l’œil des Lumières* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2019).

imply. Heath notes, for example, that Renoir, during his sojourn in Algeria in 1881–1882 was frustrated by “trying to find local models willing to sit for his paintings. Stymied by the reluctance of native women to work the role of the racialized other, Renoir ultimately resorted to painting European models dressed in local garb.”

Contributors also suggest the complicity of viewers in these dynamics of invisibility or selective viewing. In analyzing the display of Maurice-Quentin de La Tour’s pastel portrait of a Black man in the 1741 Paris Salon, Wunsch calls attention to the ways connoisseurs might have viewed the work and claimed their own expertise in judging skin color and aesthetics. He also provocatively links the exhibit to the contemporaneous Bordeaux essay competition that Henry Louis Gates and Andrew S. Curran have recently identified as a key moment in defining race.³ In a later context, part of what made images of the Haitian Revolution so powerful and lasting, as demonstrated by Daut, was that they were claimed to have been depicted by eyewitnesses—and implicitly invited viewers to share in that witnessing—even as they deliberately misrepresented racialized violence.

Contributors to this issue insist more generally on the need for historical imagination and empathy.⁴ This is especially critical when we only have fragmentary records or ones created and preserved by colonial archives. Within this context, author and poet Florence Ladd makes a unique contribution to our Special Issue. Ladd’s two-part epic poem on le Chevalier de Saint-Georges and his mother Nanon (Part 1: *Homage to le Chevalier de Saint-Georges*, Part 2: *La Belle Nanon*) imagines the trans-Atlantic passage of eighteenth-century musician and fencer Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, son of Georges Boulogne, a plantation owner in Guadeloupe, and Nanon, an enslaved African woman.⁵ This two-part poem allows its protagonists to speak in the first person as they describe their thoughts, emotions and experiences leaving Guadeloupe and settling for a new life in metropolitan France.

In the video interview with Florence Ladd about the Chevalier de Saint-Georges and his mother Nanon, published alongside Ladd’s poems in this Special Issue, Gülru Çakmak asks, “To those college students who may be assigned your poems in the context of an art history or a history class, what would you want to say regarding the role of poetry and creative fiction in ascribing agency to historical personages whose lived experiences have been neglected, silenced or suppressed by the available archival sources?” As Ladd explains, her process of composing the poems began with archival research, where she discovered many gaps and silences regarding

³ Henry Louis Gates, and Andrew S. Curran, *Who’s Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

⁴ Saidyia Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton and Co., 2020) has been particularly influential, as has Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). In a different context, French historians may be familiar with Natalie Zemon Davis’s pioneering work, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), where she begins by informing readers that: “What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”

⁵ Christy Pichichero is also in the midst of an exciting reconstruction of the life of Chevalier de Saint-Georges and those connected to him. See her unpublished talk, “Searching for Saint-George: Race and Celebrity in the French Revolution,” French Revolutionary Lives: Davis Center Conference, Princeton, April 8, 2022, and her biography in progress.

Nanon's life and inner world. The poems give Nanon a voice and represent a complex interiority, a life lived. Such interventions into the historical archive are powerful pedagogical tools in enabling students to comprehend the humanity of historical agents who have often been omitted from teaching practices.

Even when aiming to recuperate agency for silenced historical actors and to uncover hidden stories, several contributors acknowledge that they are venturing onto ground that is more suggestive than conclusive. In considering the reactions of viewers to La Tour's pastel, Wunsch acknowledges that "I am, admittedly, speculating about thoughts and motivations that I cannot prove with any certainty." Similarly, in bringing life to the objects in Renoir's painting, Elizabeth Heath emphasizes the need for creative speculation, noting for example, that "One can only imagine the tale that the boater hat that adorns Caillebotte's head might offer the interested listener." But while acknowledging the fundamental limits and uncertainties of these records, they also remind us that imagination and empathy can be powerful tools for transforming our access to historical actors.

Colonialism, Commerce, and Visual Cultures

The economic dimensions of colonialism are well known, even as there is still substantial debate over the particular dynamics of economic exploitation and the profitability of specific colonies and forms of labor. Scholars have also begun to think more systematically about the economic and commercial aspects of *representing* race and colonialism, most notably in analyzing advertisements.⁶ In "Setting the Tone: Slave Imagery in the Nineteenth-Century French Fashion Press," Lise Schreier builds on this work, showing the importance of racialized images not only for marketing the products most closely associated with colonial production—like coffee, cocoa, or rubber—but also for metropolitan "French" fashion. Schreier also argues that while the second abolition of 1848 legally ended slavery in the French empire, abolition did not lead to equality. Cultural representations, like these fashion plates, also played important roles in creating and perpetuating lasting images of Black subservience.

Connections between colonialism and commerce are profound and pervasive. The articles in this special issue make powerful cases for how a pervasive colonialist worldview shaped artworks and other forms of visual culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This can be the case even in the absence of overt references to empire. Heath situates Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* "within a rapidly evolving commercial and cultural ecosystem sited in the metropole and beyond." As Gotlieb observes of Gérôme's *Carpet Merchant*, "the painting is not about sex but about shopping." He looks at the painting as a commodity, reproduced and circulated within France and its empire as well as broader global networks. Similarly, Epifano

⁶ For some examples, see Raymond Bachollet, *Négripub: l'image des noirs dans la publicité* (Paris: Somogy, 1992), Leora Auslander and Thomas C. Holt, "Sambo in Paris: Race and Racism in the Iconography of the Everyday," and Dana S. Hale, "French Images of Race on Product Trademarks during the Third Republic," in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, eds. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), and Stephen L. Harp, *Marketing Michelin, Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001). Also see *Visualizing Empire: Africa, Europe and the Politics of Representation*, eds. Rebecca Peabody, Steven Nelson, and Dominic Thomas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021).

shows Dr. Maclaud's engagement in both claiming territory in western Africa for France and capitalizing on the French art market's desire for African artworks.

The contributors to this issue also show us that artists and collectors sometimes deliberately obfuscated their own roles in profiting from, and contributing to, the economic and political power of empire. The photograph of Rodin with "Little Sap" discussed in Bellow's article gestures both at the power relations behind his artwork and the commercialization of those dynamics. But as Gotlieb notes, such relations were often hidden even as artists claimed to be providing firsthand images: "Nineteenth-century European artists who travelled to North Africa and the Middle East claimed to paint what they saw. And yet it seems they may have disguised as much as they revealed."

Conclusion

If these pieces offer an exciting range of approaches, they also suggest just how much research remains to be done. While they touch on connections between race, gender, and the dynamics of colonialism, few center gender in their analyses. Doing so offers its own challenges, including the risks of reproducing images of sexualized and racialized violence that threaten to perpetuate the very structures that authors seek to challenge.⁷ But it also promises us new insights into the deeply interconnected dynamics of representation and power. More generally, contributors to the issue invite us both to explore new materials and to revisit seemingly familiar images and archives with new eyes. As Juliet Bellow observes, these stories "serve as a potent reminder that some of what we are seeking out has been sitting in our file cabinets and hard drives all along."

About the authors:

Gülru Çakmak is Associate Professor of Nineteenth-Century European Art in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. A specialist in nineteenth-century French and British painting and sculpture, her research has been supported by the Henry Moore Institute, Yale Center for British Art, the Clark Art Institute and the American Philosophical Society. She is the author of *Jean-Léon Gérôme and the Crisis of History Painting in the 1850s* (Liverpool University Press, 2017; paperback 2021). She is currently at work on a book manuscript on the late nineteenth-century Ottoman painter, archeologist and bureaucrat Osman Hamdi, tentatively entitled *Osman Hamdi and the Long Duration of History*. She has been an Associate Editor at *H-France Salon* since 2020.

Jennifer Ngairé Heuer is Associate Professor of History at UMass Amherst. She has been one of the editors of the *H-France Salon*, and is leaving that role to become co-editor of *French Historical Studies*, along with Christine Haynes. She is the author of *The Family and the Nation*, and co-editor of *Life in Revolutionary France*. Her most relevant publications for the theme of this special issue include "The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France," *Law and History Review* (2009), "Race, Freedom, and Everyday Life:

⁷ This is particularly clear in the controversy over Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Dominic Thomas, and Christelle Taraud, eds., *Sexe, race, et colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018), viewed both as a large-scale attempt to show visually how colonial powers exploited the people of the places they invaded, and as a glossy coffee-table book that that perpetuated that exploitation by reproducing images of it.

French Caribbean Prisoners of War in Britain” (co-written with Abigail Coppins) in *Life in Revolutionary France*, and “Race, Law, and Contested Heritage: Toussaint Louverture’s Family in France,” *Journal of Modern History* (December 2022).

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