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Discriminating Taste: Skin Color and Connoisseurship in Eighteenth-Century France

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When the Salon exhibition opened in Paris in 1741, an anonymous critic noted that an unusual picture failed to strike “the majority of the spectators” but attracted the admiration of all the “connoisseurs”.¹ The piece in question (fig. 1) was the work of Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, who had risen to prominence through pastel portraits that depicted some of France’s most notable intellectuals and affluent patrons.² The work that fascinated the connoisseurs, however, did not come with any illustrious name attached. In fact, the listing of works in the exhibition identified the subject of this pastel not by name, but by type, describing the work simply as “a bust of a *nègre*.”³ What was it about the work that interested the connoisseurs? The critic does not say, but circumstantial evidence provides some clues. La Tour exhibited his pastel at a moment when French intellectuals were devoting intensive scrutiny to the physical properties of Black skin. Two years earlier, the Bordeaux Academy of Sciences announced that it would offer a prize in 1741 for the best essay explaining “the physical causes of the *nègres*’ color, of the quality of their hair, and of the degeneration of the one and the other.”⁴ By the time of the 1741 Salon, the Bordeaux competition was reaching a broader audience through the publication of an influential response by the botanist and physician Pierre Barrère.⁵ The art historians David Bindman, Paul Kaplan, and Helen Weston have plausibly suggested that La Tour’s pastel responded to these events and “makes its own contribution to that midcentury area of inquiry.”⁶ The hypothesis is consistent with recent scholarship that has emphasized the porous boundary

I am grateful to Jovonna Jones, Aaron Wile, Neil Jeffares, Jennifer Heuer, and Gülru Çakmak for their feedback on drafts of this essay.

¹ *Lettre à Monsieur de Poiresson-Chamarande*, 15.

² The most thorough examination of La Tour’s life and work to date is Neil Jeffares’s digital catalogue raisonné: Jeffares, *Maurice-Quentin de La Tour*.

³ Guiffrey, *Collection des livrets*, 8:30. Because my argument here emphasizes period-specific ways of interpreting the work, I have preserved original titles throughout the essay. For a thoughtful analysis of the ethical stakes of retitling works, see Higonnet, “Renommer l’œuvre.”

⁴ Andrew Curran has provided the most thorough analysis to date of the competition and its ramifications. The prompt for the prize is quoted and translated in Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 2. See also the critical introduction to the recently published translation of the essay submissions: Curran and Gates, *Who’s Black and Why?*

⁵ Barrère, *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des nègres*. Barrère’s text and the Salon were both reviewed in the October issue of the *Mercure de France*, suggesting their reception was essentially simultaneous. *Mercure de France*, October 1741, 2238, 2292.

⁶ Bindman, Kaplan, and Weston, “The City between Fantasy and Reality,” 173.

between art and natural philosophy in the eighteenth-century understanding of human variety.⁷ And yet, if debates about Black anatomy informed the creation and reception of La Tour's pastel, it remains unclear what, exactly, the pastel contributed to this discourse. What knowledge about Blackness did the pastel offer the connoisseurs who gathered around it?

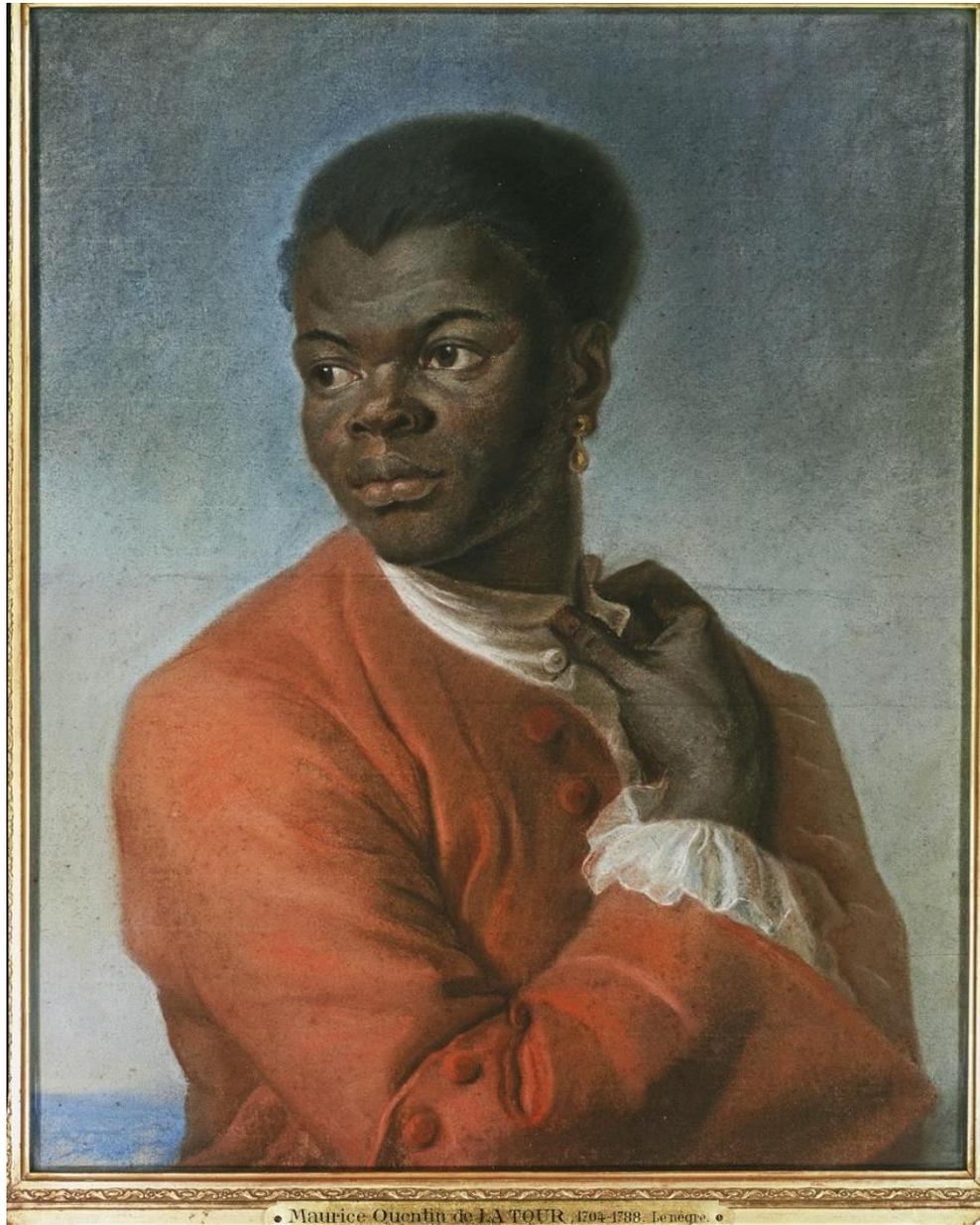


Figure 1. Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Buste d'un nègre*, ca. 1741, pastel on paper, 65 x 53.5 cm., Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire.

The short answer to this question, I think, is not much. What the picture could provide, however, was the *feeling* of knowledge acquisition. The work's material and formal subtleties created a

⁷ Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*; Lafont, *L'art et la race*; Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*.

mediated, vicarious experience of scrutinizing the bodily features of a Black man. Connoisseurs, who traveled in an elite milieu, had likely encountered Black people in person before, given that enslaved people of African descent constituted a small but visible presence in French aristocratic circles.⁸ The pastel, however, offered an excuse for a sustained consideration of Blackness as a visual and material property, summoning connoisseurs to combine their examination of the picture itself with a pseudo-anatomical study of a Black man's appearance. Because connoisseurs took inspiration from natural philosophy and believed their eyes to be instruments of knowledge, they would have been particularly liable to engage in this aesthetically simulated approximation of empirical research into the Black body.⁹ The picture indulged their self-conception as knowing viewers.

I am, admittedly, speculating about thoughts and motivations that I cannot prove with any certainty. The attraction that connoisseurs felt toward La Tour's pastel merits speculation, however, for two reasons. First, it allows us to refine what we mean when we speak about art's "participation in" or "contribution to" eighteenth-century ideas about race and skin color. If the precise nature of art's contribution is sometimes difficult to discern, then the ambiguity itself is worthy of scrutiny. Secondly, imagining the goals and assumptions that eighteenth-century connoisseurs brought to bear on La Tour's pastel provides us as scholars today with a chance to reflect on our own aims in examining such works. Our objectives undoubtedly differ greatly from those of eighteenth-century viewers. No legitimate scholars today would study La Tour's pastel for knowledge of Black skin, nor would they see physical appearance as a meaningful basis on which to construct theories of human difference. Art history, however, has preserved an important methodological premise of eighteenth-century connoisseurship in continuing to underscore the power of close looking to yield knowledge. Adherence to this belief is especially tempting when studying representations of marginalized subjects, in which art historians are understandably interested in finding visual complexities that suggest that a given picture challenges racist tropes or reveals something about the lived experience of the person it depicts.¹⁰ Denise Murrell's revelatory study of Laure, the Black model for Manet's *Olympia* and other paintings, shows the potential that exists in this approach, using the nuances of a Black woman's painted representation as a gateway to understanding her life beyond the canvas.¹¹ In the case of the model for La Tour's pastel, whose identity remains undocumented, using the work to establish a deeper understanding of Black life during the period is more challenging and more perilous.¹² The more we read into visual evidence alone, the more likely we are to misconstrue it,

⁸ For estimates of the total Black population, see Peabody, "No Slaves in France," 4. On enslaved Black people in elite social circles, see Boule, *Race et esclavage*, 155–167.

⁹ On the connoisseur's approach to observation and its relationship with natural philosophy, see Bleichmar, "Learning to Look"; Smentek, *Mariette and the Science of the Connoisseur*.

¹⁰ See, for example, Bindman's remarks on "complexity that goes quite beyond stereotype and conventional assumptions" in the introduction to *Image of the Black*, vol. 3, pt. 3:16.

¹¹ Murrell, *Posing Modernity*. See also the elaboration of her approach in the catalog for the related exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay: *Le modèle noir*.

¹² Anne Lafont posits that the model was a servant of Gabriel Bernard de Rieux, given that La Tour also exhibited Rieux's portrait at the 1741 Salon. The proposal is intriguing, though speculative. The differing provenances of the two portraits suggest that they may be unrelated. Lafont, *L'art et la race*, 147. For the provenances, see Jeffares, *Maurice-Quentin de La Tour*,

seeking a fully realized life within material traces that lack the capacity to contain it. Before we repeat the connoisseur's visual search for knowledge, then, we need to consider the historical motivations behind those spectatorial behaviors, and the limits of what art alone can teach us.

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The word *connoisseur* itself was a relatively recent invention in 1741, having first appeared in artistic discourse in the 1670s and developing an increasingly distinct meaning in the first half of the eighteenth century.¹³ In contrast to the *curieux*, who was defined by a desire to accumulate, or the *amateur*, who exhibited taste and love for the arts, the *connoisseur* wedded taste with “discernment” and “knowledge.” In his *Dictionnaire abrégé de peinture* from 1746, the Jesuit writer François-Marie de Marsy provided a succinct definition of the term connoisseur that distinguished it clearly from *amateur*:

A *connoisseur* is not exactly the same thing as an *amateur*. A *connoisseur* of paintings encompasses less the idea of a decided taste for that art than a fine *knowledge*, and an exquisite and delicate discernment. One is hardly a connoisseur without being an *amateur*, but one can be an *amateur* without being a *connoisseur*.¹⁴

The connoisseur, then, held all the taste of the *amateur*, but approached the act of looking with a greater rigor and discriminating eye. The connoisseur demonstrated these powers of discernment through the performance of tasks such as the attribution of unidentified works to specific artists, distinguishing originals from copies, and assessing the quality of objects. More than these activities, though, it was the systematic manner in which connoisseurs conducted them that defined their identity. Self-described connoisseurs from the period such as Pierre-Jean Mariette and Dezallier d'Argenville emphasized their methodical approach to observation, comparing objects through empirical methods derived from natural philosophy.¹⁵

Empirical study likely struck these connoisseurs as doubly pertinent to a work such as La Tour's depiction of a Black man given the heated discourse on the Black body around the time of the Bordeaux competition. Not only did this anatomical writing turn Black corporeality into a subject of heightened interest, but it also presented the sensorial encounter with the body as a key mode of research. The responses to the competition, and Barrère's essay in particular, were significant for treating the most minute material properties of Black skin and hair as a meaningful source of knowledge about the history of humankind and its eventual separation into different groups. Older, biblical narratives of human evolution still played a role in many prize

207, 248.

¹³ For a genealogy of the term, see especially Gibson-Wood, *Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship*, 42–95. See also Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, 53–57 and 132–35; Guichard, *Les amateurs d'art*, 15–17.

¹⁴ “*Connoisseur* n'est pas tout-à fait la même chose qu'*Amateur*. *Connoisseur* en fait d'ouvrages de Peintures, renferme moins l'idée d'un goût décidé pour cet Art, que d'une *connaissance* fine, & d'un discernement exquis & délicat. On n'est guères connoisseur, sans être *Amateur*, mais on peut être *Amateur*, sans être *Connoisseur*.” Marsy, *Dictionnaire abrégé de peinture*, 1:140–41. This definition was repeated almost word-for-word seven years later in the *Encyclopédie*.

¹⁵ Smentek, *Mariette and the Science of the Connoisseur*; Kobi, *Dans l'oeil du connoisseur*; Lafont, 1740, *un abrégé du monde*.

entries, as did deductive arguments about the influence of climate on the body, but these forms of explanation began to be integrated with inductive claims based on the growing authority of anatomical observation.¹⁶ Throughout his essay, Barrère emphasized his first-hand examination of Black cadavers that he claimed to have dissected during his time in French Guyana. Rather than approach the prize question from first principles, Barrère began with “what the anatomy of the skin of a *nègre* teaches us.”¹⁷ The key to his response lay in his claim to have found in the skin of African people “bile always black as ink,” which he contrasted with the “yellow” bile that he observed in white bodies.¹⁸ Whether Barrère lied about the existence of black bile or simply misinterpreted his own observations remains unclear. In any case, the erroneous theory proved enormously influential, informing the thinking of later writers such as the comte de Buffon and Denis Diderot.¹⁹ That this false idea could gain credence suggests how the insistence on having observed a phenomenon through first-hand experience was enough to grant a claim legitimacy.



Figure 2. Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Le président de Rieux*, ca. 1741, pastel on paper, 201 x 150 cm., Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum.

La Tour’s pastel does not present itself as an anatomical study, but it nonetheless invites the viewer to inspect the physiological traits of its subject. The man’s pose contributes to the invitation. Unlike the subjects of La Tour’s other two submissions to the 1741 Salon—a full-length portrait of Gabriel Bernard de Rieux (fig. 2) and a smaller portrait of Marie Sallé (fig. 3)—the unidentified Black man does not look out toward the viewer. Instead, he turns his head to the side while staring toward an indeterminate point in the distance. The pose, though it can be found in a few other works in La Tour’s oeuvre, nonetheless departed from his more habitual strategy of depicting his subjects as if they were engaging directly with the spectator.²⁰ The impression of reciprocal regard is central to La Tour’s reputation as a “thief of souls” who could convey the full psychological depth and interiority of his subjects.²¹ His decision to depict the Black man turning in partial profile has sometimes been

¹⁶ Curran, 81–87.

¹⁷ “Voici ce que l’anatomie de la peau d’un nègre nous apprend.” Barrère, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

¹⁹ Curran, 112.

²⁰ Examples of sitters shown in partial profile include Jacques Dumont le Romain, L’abbé Pommyer, and, most notably, Madame de Pompadour.

²¹ The expression served as the title to the last major monographic exhibition devoted to his

interpreted as a way of giving the man an air of melancholy, but it has another important effect: by shifting the man's attention away from the viewer, it allows the audience to scrutinize him without the self-consciousness that comes from the feeling of a returned gaze.²² There is no interaction here, nor is there the associated intensity of subjectivity. La Tour allows viewers to pore over the man's hair and skin without ever feeling that the man himself is aware of their presence.



Fig. 3. Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Mlle. Sallé*, ca. 1741, pastel on paper, 82 x 64 cm., Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum.

How would connoisseurs have balanced their study of the man's appearance with their scrutiny of the pastel itself as an object? Given that connoisseurs commonly held an interest in natural history, and many would have been familiar with the Bordeaux competition, a picture such as La Tour's pastel likely elicited interest for both its subject and its artistic execution. The original owner of the work remains uncertain, but a version of it may have belonged to the amateur and antiquarian the comte de Caylus, whose collection at the time of his death in 1765 included a pastel described as a "bust of a *nègre*."²³ The inventory does not supply the name of the artist, but the work is later attributed to La Tour when it reappears in the possession of Caylus's inheritor, the duc de Caylus, whose extensive collection included both natural curiosities and art.²⁴ For such men, the appeal of the picture's subject matter and its materiality may well have been difficult to separate. By examining the picture from different distances, they could enact what Jacqueline Lichtenstein has described as a "conditional" mode of eighteenth-

century spectatorship that allowed the viewer to consider the picture's subject as if it *were* really present while simultaneously inspecting the material fabrication of the work.²⁵ The art theorist Roger de Piles suggested that this oscillation was particularly pronounced when it came to the depiction of skin, which he regarded as both the subject of painting's most lifelike effects and

work: Salmon, *Le Voleur d'âmes*.

²² For the melancholic interpretation, see Bindman, Kaplan, and Weston, "The City between Fantasy and Reality," 173.

²³ See the *inventaire après décès* transcribed in Hattori, "Le comte de Caylus d'après les archives," 64.

²⁴ *Catalogue du cabinet d'histoire naturelle*, 208; Remy, *Catalogue des tableaux*, 11. The two Caylus catalogs provide different dimensions for La Tour's "tête de nègre," and one catalog describes the work as oval in format, making it difficult to determine what version of the picture was in the Caylus collection.

²⁵ Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot*, 57–58.

crucial to its artifice.²⁶ In the work of great colorists, he insisted, “the skin tones appear to be true skin,” yet he also argued that “painting is only makeup...its essence is to deceive.”²⁷ If anyone was attuned to this double status of painted skin as both true and artificial it was connoisseurs, whom de Piles described as uniquely interested in the interplay between the illusionistic effects of paintings and the technical processes that produced them: “it is only connoisseurs [who], having first looked at [paintings] from a reasonable distance, want then to come closer in order to see their artifice.”²⁸



Fig. 4. Detail of figure 1.

La Tour’s pastel rewarded this process of study, and his medium was well suited to highlighting the duality of skin in visual representation as a real presence and fabricated simulacrum. Pastel was still relatively new at the time, having been used sporadically by French artists in the late seventeenth century and popularized when the Venetian portraitist Rosalba Carriera demonstrated its potential during her visit to Paris in 1720.²⁹ One of the distinctive properties of pastel that Carriera had highlighted was its capacity to represent the texture and color of skin, and she herself had explored global variation in complexion through her allegories of the Continents.³⁰ The power of pastel to capture the appearance of skin related, in part, to the way light interacts with it. While light tends to reflect off the slick surface of oil paintings, it penetrates and diffuses in the downy particulate of pastel, producing a subtle radiance. The friable texture of pastel was especially well matched to the powdered faces of European men and women, whose cosmetics shared several ingredients with pastel.³¹ Such an elision between makeup and pastel did not apply to La Tour’s depiction of a

Black man, and surely one of the subjects that interested connoisseurs was how the artist

²⁶ The issue has been explored at much greater depth in Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*; Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, 25–35.

²⁷ “Les carnations paroissent de véritables chairs.” “La peinture n'est qu'un fard...il est de son essence d tromper.” De Piles, *Dialogue sur le coloris*, 13; 68.

²⁸ “Ce n’est que les connoisseurs après les avoir vus d’une distance raisonnable, veulent s’en approcher ensuite pour en voir l’artifice.” De Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture*, 300.

²⁹ Burns, *The Invention of Pastel Painting*; Neil Jeffares, “Prolegomena,” in *Pastels & Pastellists*, 2021.

³⁰ I have explored the series at length elsewhere. Wunsch, “Rosalba Carriera’s *Four Continents* and the Commerce of Skin.”

³¹ Burns, 89–94.

adjusted his technique in response. They likely noted that La Tour, instead of building up a thickly powdered surface that emulated a made-up face, had applied a thinner field of pigment that revealed specks of the underlying paper to convey light, showcasing the artist's ability to deploy new techniques for different skin types (fig. 4).



Fig. 5. Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Buste d'un nègre*, ca. 1741, pastel on paper, 40 x 31.5 cm., Orléans, Musée des Beaux-Arts © François Lauginie.

It is tempting to think that connoisseurs, attuned as they were to the mediated status of the picture, would have been cautious about viewing it as reliable source of knowledge about its subject. Unlike the anatomists who could claim direct knowledge of bodies they dissected, connoisseurs were well aware that they scrutinized a manufactured representation. Circumspection would have been warranted in the case of La Tour's Salon submission. The constructed nature of the work becomes more apparent when we compare it with another version that La Tour completed either as a preparatory study or as an independent variation (fig. 5). This smaller work has been cut from its original strainer, meaning its format may have been altered after La Tour completed it, but the remaining elements suggest that it was conceived as a different sort of picture from the Salon piece.³² The man here is not dressed as a servant, but appears shirtless with fabric draped over his shoulder, perhaps indicating that he is here meant to represent an African hunter or warrior.³³

The man's skin has a different appearance in this version, conveyed through a thicker layer of pastel with a darker range of hues.³⁴ The darker skin sets off sharper highlights, making the man's skin appear to glisten. The divergences between the two works make clear that both are fabricated images, shaped by La Tour's experimentation with his medium and varied ideas about African identity.

³² I am grateful to Neil Jeffares and Valerie Luquet for information about the potential reformatting of the work.

³³ Bindman, Kaplan, and Weston note these evocations in their discussion of the two works. "The City between Fantasy and Reality," 173.

³⁴ Some of the differences between the surfaces of the two works stems from their differing states of conservation. When the larger work was found in an attic in the early twentieth century, its glass was broken, and signs of the damage remain visible. Condition alone, however, is unlikely to account for the different ways that the works represent complexion. For the damage to the larger work, see Baud-Bovy, "Une lettre de M. Daniel Baud-Bovy," 201.



Fig. 6. Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, *Mapondé*, 1745, pastel on paper, 75 x 56 cm., Stockholm, Swedish Nationalmuseum.

Yet an appreciation for the artifice of painting among connoisseurs could easily have coexisted with their belief that a work such as La Tour's pastel provided knowledge about human difference. Consider, for example, the mindset of the connoisseur and Swedish diplomat the comte de Tessin, who was living in Paris in 1741 and was almost certainly among the men who inspected La Tour's work at the Salon.³⁵ Tessin had an abiding interest in both art and natural history, and the two converged in his attention to "human variety."³⁶ Most notably, in 1744 he commissioned Jean-Baptiste Perronneau to produce a pastel portrait of an albino boy named Mapondé (fig. 6) who had been enslaved by a French ship captain and brought to Paris, setting off a fierce debate about the significance of albinism among natural philosophers.³⁷ Tessin was in Sweden when he learned about the controversy, and he sent word to Paris indicating that he wished to see the "nègre blanc" himself.³⁸

When Tessin was told that the captain was willing to sell Mapondé to him, Tessin replied: "I feel no need to possess the *nègre blanc*. His portrait will take the place of his person for

me."³⁹ Such a direct statement of equivalence between the ownership of a person and the possession of a material object is now striking for its dehumanizing implications, but it also indicates how a connoisseur could treat a pastel portrait as a bodily proxy in anatomical study. We cannot know for certain whether connoisseurs studied La Tour's Salon submission with a comparable attitude. Albinism represented a different subject from Blackness, and the rarity of the condition in Europe would have granted visual representation greater power to shape how connoisseurs understood the phenomenon. What Tessin's mindset nonetheless highlights is the role that a pastel portrait could play in giving the connoisseur an armchair sense of participation in the period's anatomical analysis of skin. Pastel, in its modulated colors and varied textures,

³⁵ For Tessin's activities as a connoisseur, see Almqvist and Belfrage, *Collecting Enlightenment*; Guillaume Faroult et al., *Un Suédois à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*.

³⁶ For the influence of natural history on Tessin's conception of art, see Tonkovich, "Enlightened Eyes?," 53–55.

³⁷ Arnoult, *Jean-Baptiste Perronneau*, 207.

³⁸ Scheffer, *Lettres particulières à Carl Gustaf Tessin*, 56. Tessin never used Mapondé's name in correspondence, but it was recorded on a label from the period attached to the work. Arnoult, *Jean-Baptiste Perronneau*, 207.

³⁹ "Son portrait me tiendra lieu de sa personne." Unpublished letter, quoted in Arnoult, "Portraits au pastel par Jean-Baptiste Perronneau," 115.

was enough to provide the impression of empirical study, even if it was an essentially superficial experience.

If connoisseurs examined La Tour's pastel in this way in 1741, then how should we study the work in the present? The habits of eighteenth-century connoisseurs should, at the very least, give us pause before we ourselves invest the picture with significant epistemological authority. The picture's visual subtleties, when interpreted as a means of addressing the eyes of the connoisseur, may reveal less about the pastel's subject than they tell us about the artist's effort to attract an influential group of viewers who wished to demonstrate the sensitivity of their own vision. La Tour, after all, made no effort to identify the man when exhibiting the picture at the Salon, and subsequent collection inventories similarly describe the man only with the derogatory designation of *nègre*.⁴⁰ The nuance and specificity of La Tour's picture clearly mattered at the time, but the significance that La Tour and his viewers ascribed to these features never rose to the level of an individual identity that they deemed worthy of a name.

The possibility that eighteenth-century connoisseurs viewed art in this way does not, of course, prevent us from finding other meaning within it. We can read such works against the grain, contemplating the lives of their subjects at a depth that their original audience may never have considered. Saidiya Hartman has made a compelling case that historians must exercise their imaginations if they wish to access the subjectivity of people whose experiences have been omitted or obscured within the historical record.⁴¹ La Tour's pastel could serve as a starting point for such conjecture, allowing the art historian to escape the constraints of what the artist and his viewers decided to preserve for us. But any speculation must begin with an honest account of what the picture fails to convey and where it may mislead. Such caution is both difficult and necessary when considering a work as subtle as La Tour's pastel, which was designed for an audience that conflated the acuity of its vision with the validity of its knowledge. La Tour's pastel, in its visual richness and complexity, encourages us to believe in this equivalence of seeing and knowing. Escaping this pitfall requires us to acknowledge the limits of visual evidence. It also forces us to recognize that "close looking" is far from a neutral act. The looking habits of eighteenth-century connoisseurs and anatomists alike offer a reminder that empirical observation can lend false credibility to conclusions by grounding them in attention to detail. When we study works such as La Tour's portrait, rather than repeat this mistake by searching the work's minute visual features for signs of a deeper truth, we must consider how the portrait *invites* this behavior, flattering the proclivities of spectators who believed in the power of their eyes.

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⁴⁰ *Catalogue du Cabinet d'Histoire Naturelle*, 208; Remy, *Catalogue des tableaux*, 11.

⁴¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*.

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