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Philippe Bordes, *Jacques Louis David, la traite négrière et l'esclavage, son séjour à Nantes, mars-avril 1790*. Paris: Centre Allemand d'histoire de l'art (DFK Paris), 2023. 175 pp. 44 halftones, notes, and index. $15.00 U.S. ISBN 978-2-735129683.

Review by Marika Takanishi Knowles, University of St Andrews.

In early 1790, the city of Nantes raised a public subscription to commission Jacques Louis David, "peintre du roi," to paint a portrait of the city's beloved mayor, the wealthy shipping merchant Christophe Clair Danyel de Kervegan. David accepted the invitation and traveled to Nantes in March 1790. David's month-long sojourn in Nantes and the resulting artworks are the subject of this short book by Philippe Bordes, the pre-eminent living scholar of David.[1]

For a painter who was already celebrated throughout France, and who was actively involved in the revolutionary overhaul of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, a journey to Nantes would seem a strange choice. But these were strange times, as Bordes shows so well, and Nantes was one of the provincial centers that had played a significant role in the political turmoil leading up to the summer of 1789. The busiest port for the triangular trade in France, Nantes was packed with wealthy *armateurs* who financed, prepared, and managed the ships used in the slave trade (*la traite*). In November 1788, the mercantile elites of Nantes, as representatives of the Third Estate, had declared the "Commune of Nantes," which pushed the aristocracy out of municipal government.[2] These credentials interested David, who had recently experienced a stunning political success with the exhibition of *Les licteurs rapportent à Junius Brutus les corps de ses fils* (Musée du Louvre, inv. 3693). In a letter to his friend, the Nantais architect Mathurin Crucy, David expressed his enthusiasm for a more ambitious type of painting than a portrait of the mayor: an allegorical representation of "votre révolution" (p. 50). Indeed, as Bordes sensitively suggests, David may have hoped that Nantes would offer a simpler political tableau in comparison to Paris, one that would lend itself to straightforward painterly glorification (pp. 84-5).

Upon his arrival in Nantes, David was overwhelmed with invitations to parties and dinners at the homes of the city's notables. He would have quickly perceived that the elites of the city were terrified by the possibility that the new government would free the enslaved in the colonies and abolish the triangular trade. This may have sat uneasily with David, Bordes suggests, because in Paris David was associated with the Société des Amis des Noirs, a mildly liberal organization that advocated the immediate abolition of *la traite* and the possibility of a gradual emancipation of the enslaved.[3] If David had concerns, however, he did not express them in any form that

survives. Bordes alludes to accounts of tense conversations over dinner-tables, but the exact content is not specified (p. 103). Bordes points to one haunting drawing, which appears to represent a depot, of the sort used to store merchandise prior to loading it onto ships. A stone wall is pierced by a half-moon opening, closed with a wooden gate. David depicts a crowd of people on the opposite side of the gate, propping themselves on their elbows while looking over its edge. The race or gender of the crowd is not specified, as they are cast in heavy shadow. Nor are their garments discernable; the figures could be bare-chested. Bordes resists drawing explicit conclusions about this drawing, yet he clearly wants to engage with the possibility that this unusual drawing is in some way a reference to human cargoes. The mechanics of *la traite* meant that the newly enslaved did not pass through Nantes; instead, they were taken directly from the coast of Africa to the Antilles and Saint-Domingue. While it is for this reason almost entirely unlikely that the drawing depicts enslaved people, what Bordes wants to suggest is that the shadows of slavery were palpable in David's work in Nantes. As will be discussed below, however, it seems that David's engagement with slavery was limited, quite literally, to questions of shadow.

Of the two projects that awaited David in Nantes, the portrait of the mayor and the allegorical composition, only the former seems to have been completed, although to what level of finish the portrait was brought remains uncertain. Six months after he returned to Paris, David wrote to a friend in Nantes, asking to be paid for his journey and the time he had spent on the portrait, which was with him in Paris, as well as the sketches for the allegorical composition. The portrait has never been securely identified, although Bordes considers the possibility that a smallish, rather uninspiring painting in the collection of the Château des ducs de Bretagne, musée d'Histoire de Nantes (inv. D2004.5.2) may be the lost portrait. The painting, a modello, features a windswept Baroque iconography of curtains and clouds. Seated at his desk, where he tends to the paperwork required by the administration of the city, Kervegan wears the uniform of the National Guard. The style of the painting is absolutely inconsistent with David's contemporaneous portraiture, which tends to present a simply-clothed subject against a bare, tan ground. In an interesting discussion, which is drawn through the book as a whole, Bordes suggests that this very inconsistency may in fact be typical of David's practice during these early years of the Revolution. As Bordes puts it: "comment traduire en image une Révolution qui ne cesse de se configurer? Comment, sans sacrifier le mouvement qui la définit, en dégager le sens?" (p. 118).

The studies for the tableau de Nantes attest to this uncertainty. The large drawing, which was re-discovered in 2009 and is now in the collection of the musée d'Arts de Nantes (inv. 11.2.1.D), offers an allegorical composition, in which a lower register depicts a crowd of people, arranged in an expressive frieze, rushing to board a ship. On the gangplank, they are awaited by a man in classical dress, a heroic figure with arms outstretched, who Bordes likens to Old Horatius. The upper register, which is nearly illegible, but which Bordes has had an artist digitally re-trace, shows a nude female personification of Reason, accompanied by the monarchy tearing its clothes, as well as a troupe of scribes, dutifully recording the transfer of power.

Bordes pays welcome attention to the figures in the lower register. Using the shallow, frieze-like structure of *Le Serment des Horaces* and *Les licteurs rapportent à Junius Brutus les corps de ses fils*, David creates a magnetic tension between the serpentine figures of women and children in

distress and the rigid musculature of a stoic male figure. With an impeccable sense of rhythm, David distributes clusters of entwined figures, silhouetting each group against the backdrop of the port. He is not afraid of a certain static, frozen quality (this would come to a fore in *Les Sabines* [Musée du Louvre, inv. 3691] as well as the late masterpiece, *Léonidas aux Thermopyles* [Musée du Louvre, inv. 3690]), in which the expressivity of the pose triumphs over the liaisons between the figures. This variety of heightened pantomime, at the expense of academic advice encouraging blending and finessing, is the signature of David's most enduring historical tableaus.

But what, exactly, does the allegory represent? The boat is the ship of (the new) state, Bordes suggests, captained by the toga-clad father figure, who promises to take the women and children to a place where they will no longer be the slaves of tyrannical despots. Indeed, revolutionary rhetoric had promised and would continue to promise that it would free the "enslaved" French people, and hence the presence in David's drawing of a broken chain trailing from the body of a male figure, who has sought shelter in the skirts of a woman whose pose amalgamates several figures from the *Niobe* ensemble discovered in Rome in 1583. As Bordes points out, citing the work of Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, while this discourse steamrolled over the fact that there were legally enslaved people in France and in its colonies, it derived its resonance from actual practices of enslavement. In other words, the "emancipation" of white Frenchmen meant little unless there were people who remained enslaved. The possibility, raised by Bordes, that David intends to depict an enslaved Black person in the Nantes drawing, speaks to what Grigsby describes as this "profound and untenable repression" (p. 101). The man, whose chains have been broken, wears a slave collar, a clear allusion to historical practices of enslavement. Although there is no indication of the projected skin tone of the figure, David would not have specified this at this stage in the design process, when he was working with line, not color. Bordes also points to the short curls of the figure's hair, a convention for representing the hair of Black Africans. It seems plausible that this figure could have been David's single representation of a Black person, but even if this were the case, David would have been working in the register of allegory, in which a Black person was more likely to stand for the condition of enslavement as applied (erroneously) to white French people.

His upper body buried in the skirts of the woman in front of him, the head of the figure of the formerly enslaved man is cast in shadow. This shadow, formed of a coat of gray wash, plays a role in Bordes's argument, because the contrast between light and dark in David's work had already been noted, and racialized. In paintings like *Le Serment des Horaces* (Musée du Louvre, inv. 3692) and *Les licteurs rapportent à Junius Brutus les corps de ses fils*, David had created a new pictorial tonality, "a manière noire" combining the dramatic chiaroscuro of Caravaggio with the bold, saturated colors of Nicolas Poussin (p. 19). Because of a longstanding "préjugé de couleur," which associated white and black with the moral poles of good (lightness, whiteness, purity) and evil (darkness, blackness, opprobrium), the liberal use of dark shadows in David's paintings raised concerns amongst critics (p. 21). Astyanax, the mourning son in the *La Douleur et les regrets d'Andromaque sur le corps d'Hector* (Musée du Louvre, DL1969 1), was described by one critic as a "négrillon" (p. 20). In developing this argument, Bordes shows that the reception of David's work contributed to the performative elaboration of a widespread discursive bias in the form of the "préjugé de couleur," the manifestations of which have been explored by Anne Lafont, Mechthild Fend, and Angela Rosenthal.[4]

It is unclear whether David received a response to his letter asking to be paid. Certainly, he did not complete the tableau de Nantes, but instead turned to the *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume, le 20 juin 1789* (Château de Versailles, inv. DESS736), a composition that is metropolitan and historical.[5] Knowing that David was considering a cloud-strewn allegorical frieze in the upper register of the tableau de Nantes makes the conspicuous emptiness of the upper half of the *Oath* even more striking. But this painting would also remain unfinished. Bordes's account is a welcome reminder, particularly to students of art history, that the Revolution was a long and complex affair that it took place in the provinces as well as Paris. Even in this early moment, in the spring of 1790, it was clear that the Revolution would unfold according to the terms of what Bordes aptly characterizes as a "mille-feuille" of competing interests (p. 87). As Bordes ultimately concludes, there is no clear answer to this question of why David abandoned the tableau de Nantes, but again, nothing was particularly clear during these years, when all sides were acting, as it were, in the dark, making grand gestures in the face of total uncertainty about what the next months, days, or minutes would hold.

Arguably, this book is Bordes's attempt to contribute to the ongoing effort to de-colonize the field. In the area of revolutionary and post-revolutionary French art, such efforts have revolved around two remarkable paintings by two of David's students, Anne-Louis Girodet's *Jean-Baptiste Belley, ancien député à la convention et au Conseil des Cinq-Cents* (Château de Versailles, inv. MV4616) and Marie Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait de Madeleine* (Musée du Louvre, inv. 2508). These portraits have been the subject of virtuosic accounts by some of the field's most influential scholars, including Anne LaFont, Helen Weston, and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby.[6] The focus on these portraits can be attributed to the fact that they are excellent, complex works of art, which can be made to bear out a wealth of interpretive discourse. There are relatively few depictions of Black subjects from this period, particularly by artists who the field considers interesting or simply, good. Prints offer a valuable corpus, but thus far, efforts to decolonize the art historical study of the French Revolution have been closely pinned to aesthetic questions: the influence of the classical, styles of drawing, coloring, designing, and the relative success of different pictorial gambits. Most French prints from this era do not offer that kind of material.[7] New approaches will be welcome. Meredith Martin and Hannah Williams have recently launched a digital humanities project that will critically counter-map eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue to account for Black and Indigenous geographies of art.[8]

To his credit, Bordes is scrupulously historical. He has thoroughly studied the moment in David's career when the artist, given the opportunity to make a statement about race and enslavement, declined to speak. Rather than try to make David into a hero, Bordes unpacks the intricate politics of Nantes as a port city whose mercantile elite wanted to defend their own liberty while continuing to profit from *la traite*. The result is a far better understanding of David's work during this period, for all its failures, for all its possibilities, for its essential ambivalence. Yet Bordes leaves unsaid the rather excruciating revelation that David seems to have seriously considered depicting revolutionary freedom as a crowd of people rushing to board a boat in a city whose ships carried the enslaved to Nouvelle France.

NOTES

[1] Bordes is the author of one of the most significant recent exhibition catalogues on David's work, for the show held at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Sterling and Francine Clark Institute in Williamstown: Philippe Bordes, *Jacques-Louis David: Empire to Exile* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

[2] This would have been a messy process, because, as Laure Pineau-Defois has shown, in an article cited by Bordes, many Nantais *armateurs* had been ennobled over the course of the eighteenth century. Laure Pineau-Defois, "Une élite d'ancien régime: les grands négociants nantais dans la tourmente révolutionnaire (1780-1793)," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 359 (2010): 97-118.

[3] Bordes cites Florence Gauthier, who has described this organization as "ni antiesclavagiste ni anticolonialiste, mais bien au contraire au service d'une politique colonialiste [...]." This phrase comes from Gauthier's 2008 "note additive" to her 1988 compte-rendu of Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1988). Url: https://revolution-francaise.net/2008/06/08/233-benot-revolution-francaise-fin-des-colonies.

[4] Angela Rosenthal, "*Visceral* Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture," *Art History* 27, 4 (2004): 563-592; Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race: L'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2019); Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing out surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Mechthild Fend, "Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négresse* and the Visibility of Skin Color," in Caroline Rosenthal and Dirk Vanderbeke, eds., *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 192-210; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). For a bibliographic essay on this literature, see Marika Takanishi Knowles, "Making Whiteness: Art, Luxury, and Race in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal18* 13 (2022), https://www.journal18.org/6214.

[5] Bordes has authored several significant publications on *The Oath of the Tennis Court*, including Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de Paume de Jacques-Louis David: le peintre, son milieu et son temps, de 1789 à 1792* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983).

[6] In addition to the accounts cited above, all of which deal with these portraits, see Helen Weston, "Representing the Right to Represent: The Portrait of Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies by A.-L. Girodet," *RES* 26 (1994): 83-99; Helen Weston, "'The cook, the thief, his wife and her lover': La Ville-Leroulx's *Portrait de Négresse* and the signs of misrecognition," in Valerie Mainz and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Work and the Image* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 53-73; See also the excellent account: Viktoria Schmidt-Lensenhoff, "Who is the subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's Portrait d'une Négresse," in Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (eds), *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 315-43.

[7] Anne Lafont's *L'art et la race* (see note 4) presents numerous prints of interest. Bordes also cites Peggy Davis, "La réification de l'esclave noir dans l'estampe sous l'Ancien Régime et la Révolution," in Catherine Gallouët et al., *L'Afrique du siècle des Lumières: savoirs et représentation* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009), 237-53. See also Marika Takanishi Knowles, "Theatricalizing (and Marketing) Race in Sicardi's 'Mirate che bel visino'," *Journal18* (June 2023), https://www.journal18.org/6997.

[8] "Colonial Networks: Remapping the 'Paris' Art World in Haiti/Saint-Dominigue," http://colonialnetworks.org.

Marika Takanishi Knowles
University of St Andrews
Mk283@st-andrews.ac.uk

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