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Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race : l'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*. Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019. 476 pp., 132 illustrations couleur, 8 illustrations en noir et blanc. 32 €. ISBN 978-2-37896-016-2

Review Essay by Zirwat Chowdhury, University of California, Los Angeles

Ces pendants, Cependant

About a third of the way through Anne Lafont's *L'Art et La Race: L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, the reader is presented with three pastel portraits by Maurice Quentin de la Tour that were exhibited at the Salon of 1741 in Paris. Two of these were individual, three-quarter portraits of a (now unknown) young, Black man and the dancer Marie Sallé. The third was the monumental, full-length portrait of Gabriel Bernard de Rieux, a prominent officer in the Parliament of Paris who hailed from a family of successful financiers. It is the most well-known of the three to art historians for its success at the Salon in proclaiming the virtuosity of the artist in rendering different surfaces within this fugitive medium. Lafont observes that the polished finish of de Rieux's portrait did not so much conceal the artist's touch as underscore its delicate care and attention. Such was his success at the Salon that La Tour—*agrégé* at the Académie Royale since 1737—was awarded lodgings at the Louvre the following year. The portrait of de Rieux was commissioned together with a companion piece showing the sitter's wife that La Tour completed and exhibited the following year. Pausing over the time lag that separated the completion and exhibition of the two portraits, Lafont asks the reader to imagine how the artist may have sent the portrait of a servant from de Rieux's household as an expedient substitute for the incomplete portrait in 1741 (p. 153). In so doing, not only does she illuminate an alternative pendant pairing—that of de Rieux and the young, Black man—within which to trace the configuration of de Rieux's household, but she also compellingly demonstrates the methodological importance of pendants for describing the imperial contours of eighteenth-century French art.[1]

Lafont situates La Tour's two portraits within a longer genealogy of conventionalized images of Black pages (or as I have called such figures elsewhere, attendants) descended from Pierre Mignard's portrait of the Duchess of Portsmouth (1682).[2] As she observes, this French mistress of Charles II was instrumental in forging the Anglo-French alliance in the 1670s that challenged the maritime supremacy of the Dutch. With their neck encircled in pearls, the attendant appears to count among the gifts of the sea—a coral and a shell full of pearls—that they offer to the Duchess. Noting the docility and diminutive stature of the attendant, Lafont quietly mentions in a footnote that a few years later Mignard also painted a marine portrait of the Marquise de Siegnelay, married to Colbert *filis* under whose direction the Code Noir was proclaimed in 1685 for the governance of slavery across the French empire. She also observes the inauguration of a new visual convention in which the coloristic, if unequal, contrast of black and white skin stages a scene of visual pleasure (pp. 47-49). In this vein, she observes that the trio of portraits at the Salon of 1741, especially the

face and delicately folded arms of Madame Sallé, would have attested to the artist's proficiency in capturing human diversity in the form of coloristic range (p. 154).

Noting one Salon visitor's praise for La Tour's "inimitable" rendering of the interlacing surface of the snuffbox and the wispy, ink-blotted feathers of the quill, Lafont lists the portrait's offering of a veritable inventory of curiosities and exotic objects (p. 153), an increasingly familiar interpretive gesture these days among art historians as we situate works of art and systems of artistic patronage within broader networks of global and colonial trade. She, however, describes the globalized interior of de Rieux's study only to alert us to its exception from and concomitant transformation of the genre of the imperial portrait, a movement that requires viewing this portrait in relation to its alternative pendant at the Salon of 1741. Pulled out of the subtractive (indeed, extractive) imperial space of de Rieux's study, replete as it is with possessions taken from across the globe, La Tour's Black sitter is instead endowed with individuation rather than being enumerated among the bounties of empire. Certain details of the portrait of the young, Black man resonate, however, with observations that Lafont makes earlier in the book about the presumptive whiteness underpinning the theories of monogenesis that largely dominated the study of natural history across the eighteenth century (Chapter 1). If, for example, the white highlights in the portrait sculpt the changes in the topography of the sitter's face, they also imbue it with an ashen quality wherein whiteness surfaces as the otherwise hidden normative truth buried by a dissimulating, however dignified, Blackness. Against the lineage of attendants who appear at the margins of pictures, it is rather tempting to want to see some form of self-possession or dignity in La Tour's portrait, but Lafont astutely, if perhaps with too great subtlety, situates the figure's individuation within an eighteenth-century European intellectual and social history of selfhood.

One of Lafont's key interventions is to see visual cultures and works of art across a diffusive terrain of circulation across the Atlantic and within mutually interdependent vectors of transformation. While it may frustrate a mode of art historical reading that relies on the singularity of works of art, arguably an inheritance from Enlightenment art criticism, it also echoes another register of Enlightenment aesthetics, perhaps better rehearsed across the Channel, where new imaginations can come into being on the edges of formal similarities and incongruities ("wit" and "judgment" respectively). Such a play of resemblance and relation on the verge of dissimulation is not only an incisive method of study for that capacious formation known as the Enlightenment, but it is admittedly in emulation of an Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy that could both avow the pleasures of pursuing variety in nature and yet recoil (with melancholy, as with torsion) from its attendant horrors. In Lafont's French text, this intellectual operation finds a beautiful expression as a study of *ces pendants* that, *cependant*, are revelatory of surprising instances of both complacency and disruption. Art historians are all too familiar with the comparative method that has shaped our discipline since the interventions of Heinrich Wölfflin—most conventionally as a stylistic dialectic of a stoic classical and an irrepressible baroque—but Lafont's pendants (from the Latin *pendere*, to suspend or weigh down) mutually transform one another through the gravitational force that inheres in the word and unsettles its durational and associative qualities. To hang together is thus not merely an invitation for comparison; it is an exercise in observing the pull of one work/object on the efficacy of the other.

Lafont enacts this operation most magisterially across two successive chapters of the book in her respective discussions of Anne-Louis Girodet Trioson's portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley (1797)

and the visual culture of military portraits of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Although attentive to the revolutionary tenor of the portrait of Belley (pp. 163-180), Lafont offers one of her most historicist readings in the book to demonstrate how Girodet's painting nonetheless remains within an abolitionist circumference of Black liberation as both paternalistic gift and transformative futurity (p. 250). This aspect of the painting is especially striking when seen in relation to the absence of any such monumental portraiture of L'Ouverture, in spite of his widespread portrayal across an Atlantic print culture that mirrored (and perhaps even generated) the conventions of a revolutionary, heroic military portraiture that is usually better known for its iteration in Napoleonic painting. Offering an incisive study of the chronology of these prints, Lafont attributes L'Ouverture's absence in the more academically vaunted medium of painting to Napoleon's decision to ally with enslavers in overturning abolition, a direction that transformed L'Ouverture from an icon of revolutionary action into a dangerous force of revolutionary overthrow (pp. 237-251). Marshalling a vast array of objects across diverse media and a wide geography, Lafont reserves the art historical convention of the detailed visual analysis for the portrait of Belley, even as she places it within a rewardingly bewildering terrain of anatomical and revolutionary prints, sculpture, and clocks. It leaves the reader with the task of working through or completing in their own minds (another Enlightenment gesture) some of the possibilities that she elegantly and tantalizingly proposes elsewhere across the book.

The alternative pendant pairing from the Salon of 1741 is another such instance, where Lafont's brilliant insight invites a broader reconsideration of de Rieux's imperial portrait. She observes, for example, how the screen behind de Rieux partitions the young, Black man in the pendant portrait from the imperial conventions upon which his (in)visibility would have conventionally depended. But what then of the portrait of de Rieux? With a neighboring portrait on the wall of the Salon showing the young, Black man on his own, how might de Rieux's portrait have been transformed in relation to it? The translucent skin of de Rieux's face, not only receives the light from an unseen source but appears itself to illuminate, however dimly, the surrounding space, including the map of the west coast of the African continent represented on the globe on the left. Elegantly conducting the weight of his responsibilities across the span of his pose, de Rieux casts a light shadow over the interior of the African continent with the extension of his right sleeve. This shadow appears to accrue in density behind the globe, as the room appears to collapse into the indeterminate spacing of the corner.

Stretching the image far beyond the medium's conventional dimensions, the portrait of de Rieux might appear to show its sitter in the world- and self-making space of his study, but it also gives form to the attenuated scales of relation that inhere within any imperial project. If enlightened commerce in the hands of men like de Rieux promised to usher civilizational progress across the globe, his portrait also formalizes the assonant and disjunctive relations (between humans; between humans and other forms of life) that inhere within the mapping of imperial space. Take, for example, the inventory of luxury goods around the sitter: leather-bound manuscripts whose pages have become worn from use; lithe golden tassels that appear on the brink of collapsing from the improbable task of carrying the weight of a glimmering silk tablecloth; the dissolving ground of a coloristic Persian rug. Most importantly, the painted screen behind de Rieux takes on an accordion-like effect of expanding and contracting (in) the space as its frame and curvilinear patterns reverberate respectively into the borders of the bookshelves built into the walls in the background and the gilded curves of the cornice and ormolu clock on top. If the objects around de Rieux appear,

at first, to amass in their provenance the breadth of the globe, the screen behind him fails to compartmentalize and neatly organize the space. Instead, it invites unsettling formal correspondences that make the room and its contents and inhabitant appear to dissolve or collapse into it. Such is the pull of the portrait's pendant.

NOTES

[1] I use “imperial” here with reference not to the portrayal of a sovereign but to the expansionist and deleterious forces of imperialism.

[2] Zirwat Chowdhury, “Blackness, Immobility & Visibility in Europe: A Digital Collaboration,” *Journal 18* (September 2020), <https://www.journal18.org/5199>.

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