

H-France Forum
Volume 17 (2022), Issue 5 #2

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 Andrew Curran, Wesleyan University.

The subtitle of this impressive book, *L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, may appear confusing to the Anglophone reader. Being *contre* is, of course, being against and certainly reflects the plight of Africans during or even versus the Enlightenment. But being *tout contre* does not mean all against; it means butting right up against something, as in it is best to keep your enemies *tout contre soi*. What Lafont asserts in this bracketed word play is that she does not see the representation of Black people in European art as separate from the essential concerns (or the eye) of the Enlightenment itself. Far from being a static reflection of the economic and racial reality of the era's colonialization and African chattel slavery, the portrayal of Africans during the long eighteenth century—be they Africans living free in Africa, enslaved Africans, Caribbean or Creole Africans working in Europe, artists models in Europe, or revolutionary heroes—are shown to be doing powerful work in the overall fabrication of the ideas, concepts, and prejudices during the Enlightenment era (or project). The result is a remarkable book: an image-driven history of race that defies national boundaries, destroys the hierarchy of *œuvres* that exist in the history of art, and that grapples fully with the various contexts, institutions, and debates within which the racialization of Africans took place. Lafont herself describes this process as processing a number of “facteurs extra-picturaux,” a method that allows her to “déliier le nœud au fondement de l'image d'un homme, ou d'une femme (le modèle), par un autre homme ou une autre femme (l'artiste)” (p. 133). *L'art et la race* is a tour de force.

As Lafont herself suggests, there are many ways to study the nexus of ideas that gave structure to the eighteenth-century representation of the African. The most direct, though I am not an art historian, might have been to put a tracer on a set of art historical concerns related to Africans and follow such ideas chronologically throughout the time period she is discussing, c. 1680-1810. Lafont could also have divided up the visual representation of Blackness into a long series of tropes reflecting what some discourse-theory-oriented scholars have seen as a timeless grammar of representation handed down from generation to generation. Such a work might include chapters on: Africans as allegories of various countries or a primeval nature itself; as pagans or infidels; as Christian saints; as potential subjects to convert; as physical specimens; as diabolical beings; as emblems of profound indigeneity and primitivism; as hypersexual members of the human race; as melancholic; as enslaved beings (by Africans themselves, as well as by Muslims and Christians); as objects of scientific knowledge and experimentation; as domestic servants; as human *décor* in European courts; as subjects in various forms of cultural production; as powerful kings and monarchs; as eunuchs in the Orient; and as avenging heroes envisioned by romantic painters.

Lafont, however, does not tie herself either to a strictly linear narrative or an entirely thematic (or discourse theory-type) method; rather, her book has an organic and hybrid structure that allows her to tell a multi-level story. Her first chapter introduces the increasingly trenchant understanding of both whiteness and Blackness that takes shape during this era. Deeply embedded in the history of ideas, this section (along with the second chapter on the rising authority of natural history) underscores the fact that the coalescing of the notion of whiteness is far from a simple story of contrasts in pigmentation. This is, rather, is a story of progressive classification, and not only the type that we associate with Linnaeus or Blumenbach.

By the 1660s, independent of any formal classification scheme, whiteness began to emerge from the de facto reality on the ground in slave colonies like Barbados and Martinique, after indentured (white) labor was progressively replaced with African (Black) enslaved labor. From that point forward, a certain political status was indelibly mapped onto Black bodies, a fact that shows up in the era's slave codes (as early as the 1660s in the English colonies). Natural history classification schemes came about soon thereafter, and outside of the colonial context, in metropolitan spaces such as Paris and Uppsala. It was here where natural philosophers and philosophers tout court provided the initial intellectual (taxonomical) infrastructure upon which generations of thinkers were able to assemble centuries of xenophobia and cultural misunderstanding in new and dreadfully effective ways.

Like many scholars who have worked on the question of race, Lafont underscores the importance of the first real classifier, the explorer François Bernier and his 1684 "Nouvelle division de la terre." This very short article, which, along with the 1685 *Code Noir*, is one of the rationales for beginning the book in the 1680s, was conceived of as something of a salon amusement and later published in the era's premier scientific revue, the *Journal des sçavans*. Unlike his contemporaries, Bernier eschewed sacred history and also denied humankind its special status as supposedly *inclassable* (because of its soul). On the contrary, he looked at phenotypes in what he understood as empirical terms and asserted the existence of either *races* or *espèces*, the latter term which we might also translate as *types*. Bernier, in short, encouraged natural historians to look at the human species as a purely zoological phenomenon.

The one endnote that I might add to this part of the book is that Bernier did not invent the category of whiteness. On the contrary, he grouped pale Europeans, "tawny" Turks, North Africans, Native Americans, Jews, Arabs, light- and very dark-skinned Indians (southeast Asians), Amerindians, as well as some of the inhabitants of contemporary Thailand and Malaysia as one race![1] Indeed, unlike many classificatory-minded thinkers who would follow in his footsteps, Bernier dismissed differences in pigmentation in this particular group as insignificant and accidental, nothing more than the effect of climate and the sun. The only race he described as universally white, to a person, was the Asian race.

But Lafont is absolutely correct that Bernier helped facilitate the creation of whiteness in a different way, by dividing or separating Africans from other races by dint of several physiological features. In addition to drawing attention to their soft and oily skin, their inability to grow a beard, their wool-like hair, and their "grosses lèvres et leur nez écaché," Bernier underscores the importance of African pigmentation for his argument.[2] In contrast to what he

says about South Asians, for example, Bernier affirms that Black African skin was the race's "essential" or defining trait and is in no way caused by "l'ardeur du soleil" (p. 135). He then infers from this statement that these physical features can only be explained on a hereditary level, in Africans' sperm and in "leur sang" (p. 135).

The most fascinating part of these early chapters comes when Lafont integrates her analysis of the "authority" of natural history with the discipline's powerful iconography. This is particularly true when examining the rise of the era's conjectural histories of humankind, e.g., Buffon's, that affirmed that while Africans were members of the family of "man," they were nonetheless a degenerated version of an original white prototype. Working back from the notion that whiteness was assumed to be humankind's default setting (and highest expression), Lafont shows how natural history looked to nature's extreme data points (such as the "albino" and the "piebald negro") in order to reinforce category assumptions regarding race and whiteness. Lafont allows those of us who have pored over related iconography to see it in a new way. Take, for example, her treatment of the famous and often-republished drawings of the Dutch naturalist Petrus Camper, which she describes as "un rayon virtuel" that "était aussi un calque graphique des tablettes – bien réelles celles-ci – des étagères et des vitrines de son cabinet, sur lesquelles étaient disposés les crânes qui faisaient l'objet d'études comparatives" (p. 92). Lafont's analysis of the iconography produced by Camper (and others, such as Petit) speak to the powerful role that visual culture played in assimilating the African into European science. Her analysis also allows us to see how this same iconography could escape the intentions of its creator. Camper's view of Africans was anything but intentionally racist, but his theory of facial angles became one of the most important sources for some of the most dangerous forms of racializing pseudoscience of the nineteenth century.

Lafont's substantive and well-argued introduction to the various contexts and disciplines of representation becomes the backdrop to the remaining four chapters (and the conclusion) of *L'Art et la race*. All of these sections follow the same periodization scheme more or less (c. 1680-1810) and introduce us to different aspects related to the question of racialized representation. Chapter three, on the transition of the represented Black African from servant to citizen is an example of the type of careful synthesis that this book adds to the field. At first glance, this chapter title ("Du serviteur au citoyen : le portrait de l'Africain") might seem to chart an overdetermined progression, but Lafont does not provide a triumphalist periodization at all. Rather than charting three major time periods of, say, indifference (to 1750), guilt (1750-1770), and engagement, valorization, and humanization (c. 1770-), Lafont underscores the varied contexts of representation alongside the contradictions of this era. Among these is the major paradox that is at the heart of the Enlightenment era; the fact that one racializing strand of the era's thought undoubtedly produced the most profound and complete dehumanization of any one human category of human in history, while still another extended the *universalist* assumptions of some of the era's thought to categories of people for whom such benevolence was not originally intended. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in Lafont's penetrating interpretation of the profoundly complex portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley that Girodet painted in 1797. Given all the work she has done previously in the book, Lafont's analysis can move lucidly from domain to domain, from the institutional conventions of high art to the larger ideological movements of the period. Establishing that Belley's portrait is directly related to a "système des Beaux-Arts le plus élitiste et le plus situé possible [...]" she concludes that this painting is also more allegory than

anything else; it puts on stage “un éminent représentant de la race noire, étroitement lié à une figure symbolique de l’humanisme universel des Lumières, [et qui] incarne donc l’avenir de la France républicaine par les moyens magnifiés de l’art pictural néoclassique” (pp. 178-180). Chapter four deepens these analyses of the heroic Black figure, considering the presentation of historical figures such as the Boston patriot Crispus Attucks and Toussaint Louverture, figures who could be praised, written out of history, or demonized as well.

Chapter five reorients us from the world of portraiture toward the era’s production and merchandising of what Lafont calls *Africaneries* in the decorative arts, e.g., clocks and textiles. Lafont’s discussion of these objects – the book contains stunning color images of *pendules* depicting Africans smoking, relaxing, or supporting the clocks – reveals how allegorical representations of Africans were being absorbed into forms of artisanal cultural production, not to mention French and European interiors. In addition to emphasizing the basic orientaling or exoticist feeling that these clocks conjured up, Lafont underscores the fact that these objects were also synonymous with the basic means of production (slave labor) that was either directly or indirectly responsible for generating much of the era’s luxury. Elsewhere in the chapter, Lafont also demonstrates how some *objets* were designed to inculcate or reflect the humanization of the African, as was the case in Josiah Wedgwood’s famous “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” medallions or in the plates (both porcelain and printed) related to the “benevolent” or mistreated slaves who figure in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*. The political force that some of this iconography had is demonstrated by attempts to censure it in the late 1780s. In this confusing era of so-called negrophilia, the fear was that this iconography could further incite antislavery sentiment, not to mention the enslaved Africans themselves (p. 280).

There are far more wonderful things that one can say about this book. The most important is that Lafont has produced a field changer, adding an entire visual layer to the history of race that most specialists of the topic have always known was there, but have never been able to fully contextualize. This is Lafont’s method, deciphering with the widest context possible:

La fabrique d’une image, à vocation scientifique, religieuse ou politique engage différents agents (destinataires individuels, institutionnels et potentiels, idéologies conscientes ou inconscientes, ambitions personnelles...) qui se manifestant dans la succession de choix que le fabricant opère. Ces strates interviennent selon des proportions variées et à des moments divers de la réalisation mais, c’est en les interrogeant toutes, qu’un ou des sens de l’image se donnent à voir et à comprendre (p. 121).

The overall effect of this book, including the revealing last chapter on the representation and association of violence with enslaved Africans, is cumulative. By moving through the same period, more or less, in each of the chapters, Lafont fruitfully builds on the initial foundation that she lay in the introduction and first chapters. This method not only allows Lafont to produce far more complex readings of these works of art than has often been the case; as important, it permits her to move beyond the simple condemnation of some of the era’s canvases and statues as emanating from a place of pure evil (even if in some cases that is perhaps the case).

NOTES

1] Bernier initially expressed hesitation about how to class the geographically isolated inhabitants of the New World, but ultimately declared that their differences were not big enough to warrant making them a special type distinct from the first race.

[2] François Bernier, “Nouvelle division de la terre par les différentes espèces ou races d’hommes qui l’habitent,” *Journal des sçavans* (April 24, 1684): pp.134-135.

[3] Lafont’s work follows in the footsteps of the multi-volume inventory of this subject, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, first proposed by the art collectors Jean and Dominique de Menil, and now currently being undertaken by the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. For the period corresponding to Lafont’s book, see David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Karen C.C. Dalton, et al., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, volume three, *From the ‘Age of Discovery’ to the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010). In 2019, the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Orangerie, in collaboration with the Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University, organized an exhibition entitled *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*. Its excellent and extensive catalogue was published by the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Orangerie and Flammarion press. Lafont was associated with this project.

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