

Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2022. xi + 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-60606-730-7.

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As Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss explain in their introduction, *The Sun King at Sea* directs historical and art historical attention to a woefully neglected topic--the enslavement of Ottoman subjects in early modern France--in order to reassess servitude as a visual condition, a mode of representation, and a symbol of sovereignty. The project is no straightforward revisionist history, however, as it continually probes why those Turks enslaved as galley oarsmen have been overlooked not only in academic scholarship but also in recent public reckonings with slavery's legacy in France. The vast quantity and diversity of art, archives, and material culture that the authors examine puts to rest any argument that enslaved Muslim oarsmen were not visible in France from the mid-seventeenth century through the first quarter of the eighteenth. So, was this historical erasure of the *esclaves turcs*, especially but not exclusively in Marseille, intentional, both in the period and since? Or was their presence in fact so expected, so integrated into French propaganda about absolute Catholic rule, that it became banal?

Martin and Weiss's answer, as I see it, traces a significant shift from the calculated visual saturation of *esclaves turcs* in Louis XIV's "great enslaver" propaganda, both as actual individuals and in other representational forms, to the equally intentional, rapid decline of enslaved oarsmen and related imagery in France by the middle of the eighteenth century. Motivating the about-face were the swiftly changing political connotations of this precarious iconography within the roughly eighty-year period of consideration. But why was the symbolic significance of the *esclaves turcs* so unstable? Of greatest interest to me is Martin and Weiss's argument that what directly informed the expansion and decline of both actual enslavement practices and related visual representations were significant economic changes in France that stoked widespread anxiety about financial (in)stability. Examples they discuss include Jean-Baptiste Colbert's expansion of domestic military and commercial production, particularly in Marseille, followed by their contentious contraction; new policies about maritime import taxes, free ports, and the regulation of enslaved labor in relation to religious identification; the collapse of the 1720 Mississippi Bubble and ensuing devaluation of French paper currency; and, most importantly, the expansion of trade between France and the Ottoman Empire made possible by the sixteenth-century political and diplomatic terms known as the Capitulations or *ahdnames*. In my subsequent comments here, I address how these economic changes inform *The Sun King at Sea's* argument about the explicitly visual nature

of enslaved Turks' servitude. Moreover, Martin and Weiss's insights into the many, messy intersections of financial risk, political propaganda, and fluctuating iconographies of power and subordination attest to the great methodological value of interdisciplinary scholarship when grappling with questions related to slavery and visual culture in the early modern Mediterranean.

Beginning in 1536, the Ottoman Empire and France negotiated political and commercial terms that came to be known as the Capitulations. These policies, formalized in 1569 and renewed in 1673, expanded commercial trade, particularly in textiles and related raw materials, between the two polities. French merchants quickly moved into *khans* that operated as dual commercial and residential hubs for foreign merchants in Aleppo, the most important early modern Ottoman market city, from which they dispatched goods back to ports like Marseille.[1] Aleppo also became a desirable locale for aspiring French administrators to cut their teeth. Laurent d'Arvieux, for example, worked as a consul in Aleppo from 1679-86 and parlayed his knowledge of commercial trade with the Porte to promote himself in Colbert's administration.[2] While the French were not the only Europeans to negotiate Capitulations with the Porte, by the seventeenth century they had eclipsed their Venetian, Dutch, and British competitors in terms of trade volume and political influence, which led to more than a little grumbling from their rivals.

Indeed, it was the existence of the Capitulations, combined with the vociferous criticism received from European rivals, that Martin and Weiss cite as one of the most significant motivations behind France's mid-seventeenth-century expansion of galley slavery and its visual representation. The correlation is initially confounding--why would France endanger such an advantageous alliance by enslaving Ottoman subjects? Yet, as the authors make clear, it would be a mistake to underestimate the longevity, vigor, and, in some cases, creativity of European critiques of what was seen as France's unholy, dishonorable, and all-too-cozy relationship with the Porte. Their showcase in chapter two of the many pamphlets, prints, and satirical "insolent" medals that proclaim Louis XIV to be, among other things, "the most Christian Turk" emphasizes the relentlessness of this denunciation. It also frames Colbert's expansion, both in number and visibility, of enslaved Muslim oarsmen as a coordinated, vicious response to what was essentially a critique of a trade policy couched in religious rhetoric. It's a chilling reminder that the enslavement of thousands of *esclaves turcs* was, effectively, a public relations rebuttal that also engendered economic advantage for France through an expanded, unpaid labor force.

Colbert's counterimage of French sovereignty visualized Louis XIV's domination of galley slaves, but nonetheless relied on the purchase of slaves. Although enslaved people were also obtained through military conflicts, it was France's commercial network in the Mediterranean that provided the majority of them. Moreover, that network was left largely undisturbed due in part to the Capitulations. Martin and Weiss note that after 1665, Colbert dedicated up to 2% of the galley budget to procurement, which was often paid to the Knights of Malta. Later, France used commercial contacts beyond the Mediterranean to buy enslaved oarsmen, including fifty West

Africans purchased from the Compagnie du Sénégal in 1681. The circulation of *esclaves turcs* within these maritime commercial networks did not cease with procurement. Old and disabled oarsmen frequently continued to serve a “quasi-monetary function” as barter for Christian captives and as diplomatic gifts while others were freed as substitutes for other *esclaves turcs* still considered valuable laborers in the *chiourme* or rowing force (p. 187).

The pressing need to counter negative perceptions of French-Ottoman Capitulations also informed Colbert’s program of explicitly and repeatedly visualizing Marseille’s swelled ranks of *esclaves turcs* in a variety of media subsequently broadcast across France and Europe. We must remember, however, that this goal was pursued in conjunction with the administration’s other financial objectives, including the expansion of domestic ship and arms production. As Martin and Weiss discuss in chapter one, Colbert’s transformation of Marseille into the royal navy’s galley hub demonstrates how the spectacularization of enslaved Muslim oarsmen’s bodies and labor contributed to broader economic objectives. A key case in point is the performative construction in just twenty-four hours of the fleet’s flagship galley, *La Réale*, accomplished through the collaborative, silent effort of 800 workers and 400 galley slaves. Described as masterful and as magic, the event intentionally recalled a similar 1578 demonstration for King Henri III in Venice. However, its restaging on French soil visualized one of Colbert’s key goals--the ascendancy of Marseille’s arsenal as the Mediterranean’s new military and manufacturing powerhouse.

While this and other similar spectacles involving *esclaves turcs* as participants, such as the mock naval battles held at Versailles, were ephemeral, Weiss and Martin point to a wide array of other, more durable or mobile media that reproduced both the great strength and subjection of the *esclaves turcs*. From carved ship decorations and print series to Jean Baubé’s cast canons, these depictions iconographically connected Louis XIV as the “great enslaver” to earlier periods of maritime (and commercial) supremacy as well as specific French kings. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, for one, was a key reference as he not only reconquered Tunis in 1535 but also embraced the production of visual arts, namely prints and tapestries, as a way to promote his victory propagandistically. Yet these works simultaneously indexed the bodies of the living enslaved oarsmen who served as models. Drawing on extensive archival research, the authors detail how the labor of the *esclaves turcs* contributed to the production of the very visual and material culture that depicts them. They thus make the decisive point that both individual French artists, such as Baubé and Pierre Puget, as well as institutional systems of artisanal production, capitalized on enslaved labor.

While undeniably central to the early modern European imaginary attuned to French-Ottoman relations, the Capitulations were far from the only economic issue informing the representations of galley slavery. Martin and Weiss also pinpoint other policy changes with direct commercial relevance enacted under Louis XIV that informed or were communicated through art and architecture associated with the *esclaves turcs*. A notable example discussed in chapter two is the

1670-74 remodeling of Paris's Porte Saint-Bernard, an arch located adjacent to the prison known as the "tour des Galériens," where criminals, as well as some Huguenots and *Turcs*, were held until the chain gangs (*chaînes*) marched to Marseille. The new Porte's central bas-relief by Jean-Baptiste Tuby celebrated Louis XIV's recent elimination of taxes on goods arriving by water. The king was shown as Mars or Apollo guiding a large ship, a symbol of his support for French maritime commerce. Martin and Weiss argue that the proximity of the prison, and the visibility of the enslaved therein, to the monumental arch communicated to Parisians that free trade and human subjugation were two sides of (making) the same coin. Together, the two structures made clear that France's financial prosperity, celebrated in Tuby's relief, relied on the violent suppression of, and unpaid labor by, *Turcs* as well as Huguenots and *forçats*. That late seventeenth-century viewers saw brutality as a leitmotif in this and other Louis XIV-era propaganda is evinced by the broad European condemnation of his "great enslaver" imagery, particularly when it represented enslaved Protestants either real, as in depictions of the *chaînes* (p. 88), or allegorical as in the 1686 Place des Victoires monument (p. 113-115).

Additional new royal policies with commercial implications, such as the 1681 marine code and the 1685 Code Noir, similarly justified the perpetuation of galley slavery and its concomitant economic advantages, deploying religious-based arguments. To countenance Muslim enslavement as the first step in an evangelizing mission seeking to conquer the souls of non-believers, the marine code amplified the visibility of Catholic chaplains and rituals aboard galleys. Despite being subject to elaborate baptismal spectacles, the Muslim oarsmen who did convert, known as *Turcs faits chrétiens*, were not manumitted but rather given "conditional emancipation" based on their continued, permanent employment with the galley fleet (p. 142). In other words, their overall condition of servitude changed little apart from receiving a few benefits, such as a small salary and the option to live in the community. The slightly later and more well-known 1685 Code Noir struck down arguments about the incompatibility for Christianity and bondage (p. 142). Although it primarily set up a legal regime for France's Caribbean colonies, the policy also reaffirmed the existing treatment of *Turcs faits chrétiens*. Despite conversion being the ostensible goal of enslavement as articulated in the 1681 marine code and other propaganda, embracing Christianity by no means guaranteed manumission, as the Code Noir made clear, since the labor of the *esclaves turcs* was considered too valuable to lose.

Moreover, the influence of economic change on galley slavery practices and representations were not all the result of top-down royal decisions. In chapters three and four, Martin and Weiss discuss multiple examples in which Marseille elites used depictions of *esclaves turcs* to promote themselves and their city. Fluctuating amounts of monetary and infrastructural support from the crown to Marseille in the late seventeenth century provoked considerable anxiety among professionals, such as Jean-Antoine de Barras de la Penne, whose work relied on the galleys or the arsenal. The authors use formal analysis to highlight repeated representations of brutal violence against *esclaves turcs* as well as panopticon-esque scenes of total surveillance in Barras's *Album*

des galères made around 1680. These subjects, they suggest, may both show actual violence against enslaved oarsmen and index an effort by elites like Barras to exert order and control (at least visually) over an unwieldy civic economy during a period of uncertainty.

A similar case of an individual seeking greater financial agency appears in Martin and Weiss's discussion in chapter four of artist Michel Serre, a member of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. In 1723 he displayed his Marseille plague paintings at the Foire Saint-Germain in Paris and charged admission, a violation of the Académie's policies. While Serre blamed the money-making scheme on his artist son, who may have also funded the flattering review in the *Mercure de France*, supporting oneself through the Académie alone was an increasingly risky bet. The institution had been rocked by the death of its main patron Louis XIV and the John Law scandal, which prompted enterprising artists to expand the visibility of their work through public notices and print series. Jacques Rigaud, too, created multiple print series about the Marseille plague that imbue *esclaves turcs* with different connotations, from spiritual depravity to orderly labor, in what may have been a strategic campaign to attract a variety of buyers.

Martin and Weiss's most sustained attention to the intersections of economic upheaval and the visual culture of galley slavery is their analysis in chapter four of the chaos wrought by the 1720 Marseille plague and financial collapse of the Mississippi Bubble in the same year. They convincingly demonstrate how anxieties about both international trade and domestic systems of speculative finance were displaced iconographically onto Levantine cloth and the bodies of *esclaves turcs* as contaminating agents, physically and morally. Cloth and the Capitulations were two key enemy agents in the Marseille plague's origin story, in which the 400 bales of Anatolian cotton, silk, wool, and calicoes aboard the *Grand Saint-Antoine* introduced the disease to the city. The ship was owned in part by Marseille's deputy mayor, Jean-Baptiste Estelle, who, like D'Arvieux, had learned the ins and outs of the Ottoman trade by working as a French consul in Morocco and Syria. Estelle's political position, coupled with the commercial elites on the city's Bureau de la santé, enabled the ship to evade quarantine and unload illegally. The value of cloth, however, remained high notwithstanding its association with plague, and protectionist exceptions continued to be made for French textile traders. The October 1720 edict forbidding the import of other fabrics from the East made an exception for textiles sold by directors of the Compagnie des Indes, despite evidence of the company's imminent collapse.

Cloth's retention of value, according to Martin and Weiss, also parallels the resistance Marseille elites had to sending highly valued, healthy enslaved oarsmen to do the city's "dirty work" particularly clearing pestilential corpses, during the 1720 plague. Akin to the message communicated by the Porte Saint-Bernard and the tour des Galériens, Marseille's identity as a thriving free port was understood to rely on the subjugation of the enslaved Muslim rowers. Cloth and *esclaves turcs* were thus both treated as valuable, albeit risky assets and guarded out of a future-oriented, financial self-interest that stemmed in large part from the broader loss of

confidence in French currency and monetary policy. These examples evince why corporate and governmental mismanagement, as well as outright, self-interested profiteering, became central themes in representations of both the Marseille plague and the Mississippi Bubble. The authors point out thematic overlaps in the representation of contagion as an invading foreign illness, comparing the monumental plague paintings by Serre and the popular satirical prints known as *Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid*, or *The great mirror of folly*, which Martin investigates in greater depth in another recent book.[3] Both crises forced French citizens to confront the financial and moral stakes of global commerce and raised questions about the kingdom's susceptibility to physical, financial, and religious ruin.

The Sun King at Sea succeeds, as I hope to have demonstrated, in foregrounding the inextricable relationship between economic anxieties surrounding French-Ottoman trade and the systematic increase in the production and circulation of visual representations of the *esclaves turcs* during a particularly tumultuous period in early modern France. It is a densely woven argument that, in order to follow it, requires careful attention to a great number of people and objects, policies and constantly evolving iconographies. Yet the effort is rewarding. Many, if not all, of the thematic questions that Martin and Weiss explore, from ethical considerations of the labor involved in arts production to the economic pressures faced by artists in a volatile market, are still relevant today. Indeed, their analysis of how Marseille elites discussed and visualized their city's free port as an ideal economic system makes me reflect on the rise of freeports today. These storage facilities exist formally outside of the territorial jurisdiction of any country and can be used to store just about anything--including, increasingly, art bought as a speculative investment--without paying taxes or disclosing information about the objects therein.[4] Like Marseille's early modern free port, our own freeports raise critical questions about the intersections of art and speculative capitalism, as well as the access (and exemptions) granted to those who are well-connected or wealthy, at the expense, quite literally, of many others.

NOTES

[1] For more on the French *khans* in Aleppo, see Jean-Claude David and Thierry Grandin, "L'habitat permanent des grands commerçants dans les khans d'Alep à l'époque ottomane," in Daniel Panzac, ed., *Les villes dans l'empire ottoman activités et sociétés*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1994): 85-124.

[2] See Michèle Longino's chapter on Laurent d'Arvieux in *French Travel Writing in the Ottoman Empire: Marseilles to Constantinople, 1650-1700* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 57-107.

[3] Nina Dubin, Meredith Martin, and Madeleine Viljoen, *Meltdown! Picturing the World's First Bubble Economy* (New York: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2020).

[4] See chapter seven, “The Art Market in the Margins,” in John Zarobell, *Art and the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017): 232-253.

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