

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.

Review Essay by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University

In the springtime one often sees university crew teams rowing on Lake Carnegie in Princeton, New Jersey, where I live. It's mesmerizing to watch their boats skim across the water, the muscled athletes' oars moving in perfect unison, sending sprays of water into the air, the coxswains' shouts distantly audible from shore. This "gentleman's sport," as rowing once was known, traditionally traces its origins to eighteenth-century barge races on the river Thames in England, but its older incarnation as a method for propelling ships of transportation, commerce, and war is unmistakable. Less visible is the history of slavery, which is equally entangled with the roots of this competitive sport but, except for the strident commands of the coxswain calling strokes, nearly forgotten. Perhaps coincidentally but perhaps not, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France* was co-authored by two Princeton alumnae: art historian Meredith Martin and historian Gillian Weiss. Did they see those racing shells when they were students here, and think then of seventeenth-century galley slaves?

Regardless of whether the rowers of Princeton can be credited with providing any subliminal inspiration, Martin and Weiss—who each came to this project from quite separate intellectual pathways—have produced a marvel. *The Sun King at Sea* is a work of the highest erudition that combines historical and art historical expertise in equal measure to produce something greater than a study limited to one or the other discipline could have been. It is, moreover, both beautifully written and beautiful to look at. The authors have spoken publicly about their collaborative writing technique, and indeed I could not identify one voice over the other at any point in the text despite the distinctly individual writing styles evident in their respective previous books on Mediterranean slavery (Weiss) and royal pleasure dairies (Martin).[1] As a work of art history, the volume offers a stunning visual compendium of rare maritime art, much of it never previously reproduced, let alone analyzed, including 80 color images that range from full-page spreads to usefully enlarged details presented to the reader for close analysis. As a work of history, the volume expands upon a wealth of prior studies of royal absolutism, Louis XIV's navy, and French relations with the Islamic Mediterranean, three subjects not often tied together and never before focused around the intense dissection of images as the present book is.

The idea which propels the present book is startling: pairing the Sun King and the enchained men who rowed in his galleys, the most and least powerful residents in seventeenth-century France, to think through portrayals of power. Many historians have focused on Louis XIV's use of visual and material arts at Versailles to promote his monarchical might.[2] In recent years, a number of art historians have addressed the wider phenomenon of *turquerie* (representations of Turks in the

early modern French visual and decorative arts).[3] However, convicts and slaves seldom feature in any of these studies.

*The Sun King at Sea* is the first book to consider how Louis XIV and his subjects used maritime displays and art focused on coerced galley oarsmen—specifically the use of *forçats* (convicts, often guilty of nothing more than being Protestant) and *esclaves turcs* (a flexible term of the era encompassing chiefly Muslims, North Africans, and subjects of the Ottoman sultan)—as a program for asserting the power of French absolutist monarchy at home and abroad. This is all the more surprising when you realize, as Martin and Weiss demonstrate energetically, that these visual statements were unmissable in Louis XIV's France, whether at the palace of Versailles, in the public squares of Paris, in the port cities (particularly but not exclusively Marseille), or tacked to the walls of public spaces around the kingdom in the form of almanacs and other prints. Louis XIV and his surrogates routinely wielded maritime art and artefacts centered on figures of shackled *turcs* to assert his spiritual and military dominance over the Mediterranean Sea. The arsenal of Marseilles, distant though it was from Versailles, emerges in this study as a significant staging ground for representations of absolutist French Catholic monarchy. Yet Martin and Weiss also reveal the profound weaknesses of this propagandistic program: it persuaded few if any observers outside France, and it was remarkably short-lived. Well before Louis XIV's death, his fleet of galley ships and the coerced labor force needed to power them were already becoming relics of a bygone era. By the middle of the eighteenth century, they had faded away to near oblivion.

In 2014, I had the privilege of reviewing Weiss's excellent monograph, *Captives and Corsairs*, for H-France.[4] It is a careful and detailed history of French people enslaved by North African corsairs from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Its only real flaw, as I noted in my review, was the absence of an in-depth discussion of the countless *Turcs* reciprocally enslaved in France during the same period. *The Sun King at Sea* provides us with that wished-for study, and the results are fascinating. The volume is divided into four chapters, plus an excellent introduction contextualizing the project's genesis and the early history of the *chiourme* (the French galley fleet's term for its rowing force), and an epilogue tying this history to the present. Chapter one focuses on how the Marseille arsenal was constructed, often literally, by galley slaves. Chapter two carries the reader from "port to palace" as the authors trace the migrating visual presence of *esclaves turcs* from Marseille to Paris and Versailles. Chapter three transports us into a bookish realm of manuals written about galley construction, and back to reality and to the coast, to the quayside in Marseille where ceremonies of communion and conversion were performed in the presence of, and sometimes upon, galley slaves. Chapter four ends this history by considering the role of *esclaves turcs* in a pair of monumental paintings about the plague that swept through Marseille in 1720 and challenged its reputation as an important French hub of global commerce. Finally, the epilogue brings the narrative up to the present as the authors ponder echoes between the long-forgotten history of *esclaves turcs* in France and the present Black Lives Matter protests and the related "transnational movement to force a reckoning over the legacies of slavery and colonialism" (p. 227).

I could write reams about the abundant materials and ideas in *The Sun King at Sea* that struck me as particularly novel and interesting. In chapter one, we learn in startling detail the ways in which galley slaves were employed in building the very ships they rowed and in crafting some of the

artworks which used images of their own bodies to convey messages of French absolutism and control of the Mediterranean Sea. Another example of this book's originality is chapter three, in which the authors contend that the often-overlooked presence of *esclaves turcs* in the cartouches of maritime ship-building manuals represents a visual argument about the need "to both conjure and contain savage forces that imperil the domains of rationality and civilization" (p. 151). I could go on and on. However, as is often true of even the best studies, there are a few areas where additional evidence could have enriched the authors' contention that during the reign of Louis XIV, the image of not just the Sun King but indeed his court, courtiers, and kingdom became intimately linked with depictions of slavery and, more specifically, with enslaved Muslims.

These lacunae are most noticeable in chapter two, "From Port to Palace." In this chapter, the authors argue that visual representations of the king's galley ships and enslaved crews displayed at court and at Paris "helped fabricate a maritime vision of Louis XIV as conqueror of enemies, enslaver of infidels, and unrivaled sovereign of the seas" (p. 80). Louis XIV had a life-long history of proclaiming himself a leading defender of the Catholic Church, as manifested particularly against two enemies of the faith: Protestants and Muslims. However, much of the celebratory imagery associated with these claims was really "factual distortion French propagandists peddled in the late seventeenth century" (p. 107). Predictably, quite a few critical voices emerged to satirize the king of France for his hypocrisy in these matters, for example that he signed commercial treaties (called Capitulations) with the Ottoman sultan, or that he sat out international battles against Ottoman forces taking place in central Europe, as for example at the 1687 battle of Mohács. Martin and Weiss provide us with several wonderful examples of such criticisms, beginning with the well-known British 1690 tract *The Most Christian Turk: Or, a View of the Life and Bloody Reign of Lewis XIV* (discussed on pp. 107-108). However, given that the present volume's subject is galley slaves—the majority of whom were in fact not foreign captured Muslims but French subjects, many convicted for being Protestant—I was surprised to find no discussion of the equally famous pamphlet *Les soupirs de la France esclave, qui aspire après la liberté* (1689), a tract which framed Louis XIV as a tyrant for his oppression of Huguenot liberties, and couched these complaints very specifically using the charge of enslavement.[5]

Chapter two also addresses the popular custom among high-ranking female members of the Sun King's court for featuring a dark-skinned servant or protégé in their painted portraits. Martin and Weiss acknowledge that this practice was a pan-European artistic trope, designed to make a claim for white women being "in a position of power over their enslaved retainers: as superior in race if not gender," and that it has roots stretching back to at least the sixteenth century. By limiting their analysis to paintings, specifically a 1680 portrait of the Princesse Palatine by François de Troy which they note is "possibly the earliest of its kind in France," they are able to focus their argument on the possibility that the servants depicted in these double portraits represented "real-life *Turcs* or *Maures*—and not enslaved Africans brought from the Caribbean, as is sometimes presumed," whom their mistresses could induct into the Catholic faith through careful upbringing (p. 104). Thus, paintings like that of the Princesse Palatine become a venue in which female members of court could extend Louis XIV's conquests over Muslims at sea to the domestic zone, where they too could transform infidels into Catholics. While not disputing this interpretation, I would have liked to see some acknowledgement of the French fashion press

where similar images also appeared, and which predate de Troy's painting by half a decade or more. Paintings like de Troy's should be interpreted in dialogue with the widely-circulating prints with which they shared so many common attributes, and which may well have inspired de Troy and others. The work of Lise Schreier on depictions of black servants as accessories in the ancien régime fashion press, and Anne Lafont on Africans in early modern French art, would have been invaluable here, yet neither is cited.[6]

These observations aside, *The Sun King at Sea* easily is one of the most splendid histories I have read in some time. It is a gorgeous object and a deeply intelligent work of both history and art history. It is filled with memorable images and often quite astonishing details about the lives of galley slaves who lived and worked during the brief but notable period when the French monarchy tried to dominate the Mediterranean Sea both via a fleet of forty galley ships powered by some eleven thousand enslaved rowers, but also via an even more impressive propaganda machine. In short, this is a book that will linger in my memory for years to come.

#### NOTES:

[1] Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), and Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[2] Three notable examples are: Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial ambitions and the gardens of Versailles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Elizabeth Hyde, *Cultivated Power: Flowers, Culture and Politics in the Reign of Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[3] See for example Haydn Williams, *Turquerie: An Eighteenth-Century European Fantasy* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), and Elisabeth A. Fraser, *Mediterranean Encounters: Artists Between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, 1774-1839* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

[4] Julia Landweber, "Review of Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)," in *H-France Review*, Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 33: 1-5.

[5] Pierre Jurieu and Michel Le Vassor (presumed authors), *Les soupirs de la France esclave, qui aspire après la liberté* (n.l., 1689). Available on Gallica at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k83508g/f2.item.texteImage>.

[6] Although Lise Schreier has been giving public talks on her research for many years, her only print publication to date (that I know of) on the subject appeared after *The Sun King at Sea* went to press, so I can understand if Martin and Weiss were simply unaware of her work; see Lise Schreier, "Setting the Tone: Commodified Black Children and Slave Imagery in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Fashion Press," *H-France Salon* Vol. 14 (2022), Issue 8, #6: 1-

16. See also Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race: l'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019).

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