

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 Robert Wellington, Australian National University

We have long understood that the arts of Louis XIV's France exemplify the role of art in the service of political ideology. Jean-Marie Apostolidès, Louis Marin, Peter Burke and many others have shown the complex mechanism of royal representation used to “fabricate,” to borrow Burke's word, an idea of the absolute monarch. Absolutism—one supreme agent appointed by God to rule—sits uncomfortably with us today in the age of democratic government. That system is an extreme example of structural inequality, contrary to enlightenment principals epitomised by the catch cry of the 1789 Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss's book *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France* uncovers the nadir of *louis-quatorzien* representations of inequality with an engaging, thorough, and at times horrifying study of the visual culture of enslavement.

This book expels the myth that there were no enslaved people on French soil during the Sun King's reign through evidence gleaned from archival documents, and a broad array of artefacts of visual and material culture that were “hiding in plain sight” (p. 5). Many of the representations of enslaved people that were once part of the *grands décors* of Versailles and public monuments of the city of Paris have now disappeared. Charles Lebrun's oval medallion of the *Reestablishment of Navigation*—a small part of the vast cycle for the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles—is an exceptional survival. Chosen as the image for the front cover image of their book, it was through a discussion of that painting that Martin and Weiss began their collaboration on this topic. The image of Louis XIV enthroned holding the trident (a reference to Triton, God of the Sea) signals his control of maritime trade. Behind the king a personification of abundance holds the cornucopia, and the king's left hand gestures to the bales of merchandise being unpacked by a burly merchant. Beneath the throne, and under the Sun King's trident are two turbaned figures, usually described as representing the Barbary pirates of the Mediterranean who posed a challenge for maritime trade. It was Gillian Weiss who suggested that these figures may also represent *esclaves turcs* (enslaved Turks, subjects of the Ottoman Empire). At one time, similar figures of men in chains could be found in other decorative schemes at Versailles, notably beneath the form of a ship's prow that decorated the corner of the ceiling of the Ambassador's Staircase, a casualty of Louis XV's remodelling of the chateau in 1752.

Likewise, figures of captives were once found at the base monuments erected to the glory of Henri IV, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV in Paris. Those statues were torn down during the 1789 revolution, those that replaced them after the Bourbon restoration conveniently elided the figures of slaves and captives. The visual representation of enslavement was wiped from the public face of France. To reconstruct a less sanitized version of Royal commemoration than what we find in France today, Martin and Weiss turned to an expanded field of material culture: prints, medals, books, designs for royal galleys, and in one case, an extraordinary

bronze cannon recovered after languishing for more than two hundred years on the ocean floor (pp. 60-1).

Cast by the master founder Jean Baubé in 1680, this thirty-six-pound bronze cannon, now owned by the Musée national de la Marine and placed at the entry to the Brest dockyards, is capped with the bust of an *esclave turc* bound in chains. It is a startling object. Neck stretched so that his head faces forward, aligning with horizontal body of the cannon, the figure of a man is a recognisable Ottoman type with a shaved head and top knot. That cannon was very likely installed on the *Royal Louis*, a ship so heavily decorated with the Sun King's iconography that it ceased to function effectively as an instrument of war. Isolated from its original context, the figure on Baubé's cannon might be mistaken for another fantastical element among the gods and monsters that populate *louis-quatorzien* imagery. Martin and Weiss show us that it was, in fact, far too real. It would have been an indexical element that transposed the straining bodies of a galley slaves found on the oared galleys in the Sun King's fleet into bronze, a medium valued in the seventeenth century for its potential to capture moments in time to transmit to posterity.

Some six years before Jean Baubé cast the cannons in the form of *esclaves turcs*, he was awarded a gold medal by the king for his service (p. 60). While that might be an incidental detail for many readers, it piqued my interest. It connects directly to my own research on the royal medals awarded by Louis XIV during his reign to both French citizens and foreign allies. Some of the earliest records of medals recorded in the archives of royal gifts were presented to those involved in the construction of galleys and their arms. Alongside Baubé, who received his medal in 1674, three members of the Chabert family of master ship builders in Marseilles received medals in recognition for their work in 1673, 1684, and 1686 respectively. The same archive notes a gold medal awarded to a Sr. Matthieu Suart of the Versailles Galley in 1699. At the time of writing this, it is unclear to me whether Suart captained a galley named after the famous chateau, or whether he oversaw a small galley rowed by enslaved men on the Grand Canal at Versailles, a subject covered in the second chapter of Martin and Weiss's book.

The bodies of enslaved men were recognisable commodities in the Sun King's France. Muslims who were converted to Christianity became emblems of piety for courtly women, accoutrements to prove their devotion to Catholicism (104-5). Enslaved men would carry wealthy people about the cities of Marseilles and Paris in sedan chairs, the caste of their skin thought to add aesthetic appeal to public presentation (132). Dressed in an exoticized manner, with turbans and rich liveries, those men became chattels of conspicuous consumption.

Martin and Weiss have revealed that it is not just the visual representations of enslaved bodies that speaks to the aesthetics of slavery in ancien régime France. One artefact that has stayed with me is a page from a naval register of enslaved rowers illustrated in the first chapter of this book (fig. 1.4.). The names Amet de Tripoly, Issouf Valyer, Moustafa de Bellegrade alongside others betray their Ottoman origins. Those names are written in the beautiful curling calligraphy as if they were an ancient sculpture or old master painting in the inventory of the objects decorating a chateau. The descriptions below the names record the dates they were placed in forced service—at the time this inventory was written, Amet de Smirne had been enslaved for twenty-five years. The beautiful script of a royal inventory belies a tragic story of human suffering.

Versailles was the Sun King's universe in microcosm. The axis that bisects the Petit Parc of the chateau, with its bosquets and fountains, is continued by the Grand Canal where gondolas and miniature galleys were put afloat to amuse the king and his courtiers and impress the power of the French Crown upon the diplomatic envoys that toured the chateau and its gardens. In 1680, "to enhance the flotilla's authenticity and thus its image of subjugation and strength [. . .] 'fifty-four Moors, true Africans'" were purchased to propel the galleys (p. 92). Those men, Weiss and Martin argue, were likely from West Africa. They were described in the French gazette, *Le Mercure galant*, as dressed only in yellow shorts, lined up in the grand courtyard at Versailles so that the king could inspect their gleaming black bodies (p. 92). The bodies of those enslaved men were objectified as an element of the material magnificence of the chateau. They survive in the margins of art and material culture: in the descriptions of gazettes; in the archives that record them transacted; in a print of a masquerade ball in 1683, where Louis XIV's oldest legitimised daughter dressed two of them in thick silver chains as staffage for her costume. The grim history of the aesthetics of enslavement is a bitter pill to swallow for those who delight in the arts of Louis XIV's France.

For the uncomfortable history of slavery in ancien régime France uncovered in this study, richly supported with analysis of a wide range of archives and artefacts, this is the most original and important book about the arts of Louis XIV's France to be published in recent times. I have one minor quibble. The image on the front cover of the book—Lebrun's medallion from the ceiling of the Hall of Mirrors—is a rare survivor of the iconography of slavery at Versailles. Using an element from that canonical cycle to represent this study reinforces a hierarchy of the arts—painting above all else—even though the most compelling evidence presented here is found in other media. I do not blame the authors, nor the publisher for their choice. In many ways it makes perfect sense. It was the image that sparked the authors' collaboration. It is visually splendid, and lends itself perfectly to colourful, seductive cover design. But I think it is the least interesting of the artefacts to be found within the pages of this brilliant, but deeply unsettling book, which shines a bright light on ugly objects that cast a grim shadow on the Sun King's glittering image.

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H-France Forum,
Volume 18, Issue 2, #4