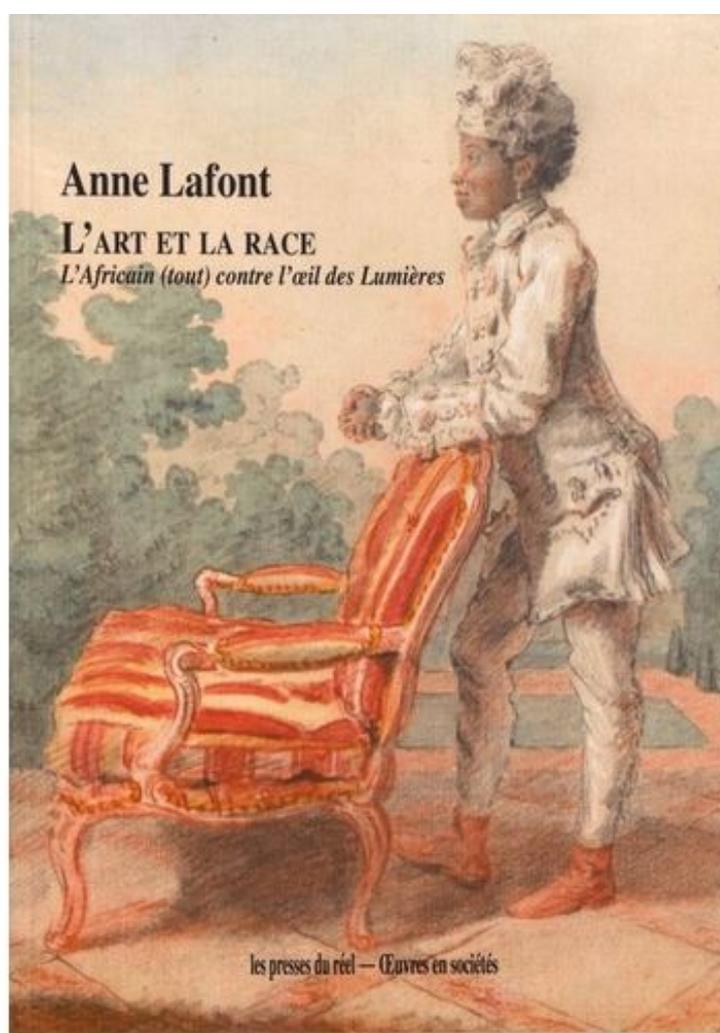


Art and Race: A Review – by Stephanie O'Rourke

journal18.org/nq/art-and-race-a-review-by-stephanie-orourke/

Assistant

November 14,
2019



Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race : L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 2019, ISBN: 9782378960162

Jean-Baptiste-André Dautier d'Agoty's *Portrait de Madame du Barry avec Zamore* (1771) seems to engage with a reasonably familiar conceit in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European courtly portraiture (**Fig. 1**). An elegant, pale female sitter casually

meets the viewer's gaze, while a brown-skinned page named Zamore, perched on the margins of the composition, looks up at the woman as he serves her. The brightly colored and vibrantly rendered details of the page's dress suggest that Zamore, not unlike the other luxury amenities in the scene, functions primarily as a decorative accessory to her aristocratic lifestyle. His pose, diminutive size, position within the composition, and facial expression indicate his subordinate status within the Enlightenment social space of the image. Looking at d'Agoty's aquatint, we are vividly reminded that whiteness often claimed priority and autonomy as a racial identity in eighteenth-century Europe and yet was profoundly reliant on a number of racial "others," a dynamic dramatized in the composition by the inclusion of a large mirror between the two figures that, tellingly, reflects only one of them. Should we then read the delicate cup held by du Barry along these lines, as evoking a significant material dependency between the white aristocrat and her servant? That is, as her reliance on the production of luxury goods such as chocolate and sugar by the labor of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and, more broadly speaking, the staggering affluence that French colonies generated for the metropole?[1]



LEFT: Fig 1. Jean-Baptiste-André Gautier D'Agoty, *Madame du Barry [avec Zamore]*, 1771. Color aquatint, 39.9 x 31.2 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

RIGHT: Fig 2. Marie Victoire Lemoine, *Portrait of a Youth in an Embroidered Vest [Portrait d'un jeune homme or Zamore?]*, 1785. Oil on canvas, 65.1 x 54.61 cm. Cummer Museum, Jacksonville. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

"Zamore the African," as he was often referred to, was not African but Bengali. He probably bore little resemblance to the black painted figures to which his identity has been subsequently attached, such as Marie-Victoire Lemoine's *Portrait d'un jeune homme ou Zamore?* (1785) (**Fig. 2**).[2] Anne Lafont, writing about Zamore in *L'art et la race: L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, takes this very problem—of past and present

“identification” —to be significant in its own regard. Only by attending to both the historical specificity of d’Agoty’s aquatint and the institutional structures through which we now access it can we begin to apprehend fully the role prints like this played in the visual (re)production of racial hierarchies. The attribution of a single identity, “Zamore the African,” to a wide range of brown-skinned subjects from multiple places is one of many ways that the individuality of non-white historical subjects has been rendered invisible in French Enlightenment art. Zamore’s identity drops out altogether in the Art Institute of Chicago’s version of the print, which titles it *Madame du Barry*.^[3] Each form of naming enacts its own kind of oppression: “seeing” Zamore everywhere reduces many different non-white individuals to a single, generalized identity; omitting Zamore’s name from d’Agoty’s title symbolically denies the presence of a specific non-white historical figure.^[4]

Zamore may seem like an unlikely way into Lafont’s subject, a history of the “African presence” in eighteenth-century French art. But he raises some important questions about how such a history can be written. What set of objects is in play here? What *defines* an “African presence”? And what form should its history take, if some of the traditional academic concepts we have inherited from the eighteenth century were originally predicated on the disavowal of that very presence? These are not the precise questions with which Lafont opens *L’art et la race*, but they motivate a significant portion of this bold, inventive, and deeply researched book.

Lafont charts an alternative path through Enlightenment visual culture in France and its colonial networks that aims, in her words, “to establish that which had not been seen, which remained on the margins of [art]works while Africans were then, and from then on, everywhere (12).” Continuing her discussion of “this discrete, allusive, apparently minor but extremely diverse omnipresence,” she notes how it corresponded “to the reality of not only a black France but also a remarkable presence of the imperial character of European metropolises, to the point that *africanité* installed itself in the foreground of artistic activity (12).” It is a paradox evocatively captured by the book’s subtitle. “(Tout) contre” expresses in French both the opposition *between* and the extreme proximity *of* the African figure and the Enlightenment gaze. Lafont’s words disclose several of the challenges that accompany this subject, which was both “omnipresent” and “marginal” in eighteenth-century visual culture and which has been “simultaneously fetishized and neutralized” by the discursive and museological structures through which we encounter it today (5).

Many of the basic categories that art historians use to structure our inquiries—such as subject matter, model, genre, medium, and place—impede our ability to reckon with this plural and diffuse set of objects. They range from Salon portraits and mahogany furniture to revolutionary prints and medical illustrations; they were made in Cap-Français, in Boston, in Paris, and elsewhere. Nor could one easily deploy concepts like “race” or “blackness” or “African” consistently across such a corpus, for, as Lafont observes, race itself lacked categorical fixity in Enlightenment discourse. Zamore, after all, was not African—but his name and the images to which it has been affixed have much to say about the “African presence” in French art.

I point out a few of these challenges not to emphasize the difficulty of Lafont's undertaking but because they illuminate precisely what is so ambitious about the history she puts forward, which takes the heterogeneity of her objects as an intellectual prompt rather than a problem. The resulting analysis is wide-ranging and plural, drawing together works both well-known and relatively obscure from different discursive and pictorial contexts. Instead of organizing the book around a single line of argumentation, Lafont's underlying claim, I believe, is that this history only comes into view when one is willing to think diagonally, as it were, across mediums, styles, and settings—to move fluidly across the kinds of conceptual boundaries that Enlightenment thought itself constructed. Instead, her objects are grouped around a number of interrelated themes and modalities. An "African presence" (in the many senses evoked by that phrase) shaped and interrogated Enlightenment ideas about human beings, morality, revolutionary politics, and violence—ultimately, testing the very "frontiers of European knowledge circa 1800 (407)." Zamore's placement on the margins of d'Agoty's aquatint takes on a different and particularly suggestive light in this regard: a portion of his figure remains outside of the bounded contours of the pictorial field, and perhaps also outside of the bounds of the epistemological framework within which the image was produced.

The opening chapters of *L'art et la race* focus largely on aesthetic and scientific categories of race, in which portrayals of black subjects from different geographies and contexts triangulated eighteenth-century notions of moral beauty, academic color theory, and racial identity. Through a dexterous analysis of comparative anatomy illustrations, Lafont draws out conceptual affinities between artistic neoclassicism's "over-investment in line to the detriment of color" and the abstracting, standardizing imperatives of Enlightenment sciences of the human, both of which struggled to assimilate black figures in various forms (93). Subsequent chapters on portraiture and the visual culture of the American, Haitian, and French revolutions trace how prints and portraits did more than simply reflect the political status of black subjects. Rather, Lafont argues, these images were "*agents* forging new political, social, and individual or even collective realities whose protagonists are black (135; emphasis mine)." Although she provides extended accounts of well-known figures such as Jean-Baptiste Belley and Toussaint Louverture, Lafont situates them within a decidedly heterogeneous field of Atlantic revolutionary visual production. She examines a world characterized by circulation and transformation, in which images migrated across geographical borders but also across visual media.



Fig. 3. Jean-Simon Deverberie (attr.), An Empire Clock "The Sailor", c. 1805-1810. Gilt and patinated bronze, 37 x 30.5 x 11 cm. Photo courtesy of Richard Redding Antiques Ltd., <http://www.richardreddingantiques.com>.

One of the most creative and experimental passages in the book addresses decorative arts and "geographies of taste," focusing on textiles on the one hand and richly ornamented clocks on the other. This piece based on designs by Jean-Simon Deverberie (c. 1800) is one of many examples of how the African body could be present, implicitly and explicitly, within the elite Parisian domestic interior (**Fig. 3**). While it is unclear if Deverberie took inspiration from Anne-Louis Girodet's *Portrait de Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797) (whose pose the black figure seems to imitate), it is certainly an object laden with colonialist resonances. Deverberie's clocks traded in conventions of the colonial picturesque (signalled by the figure's contrapposto and state of leisure), and yet they also participated in a moment of late eighteenth-century abolitionism (note that the figure elegantly holds one of the instruments of his enslavement directly above an imbalanced set of Justice's scales.) Lafont shrewdly reminds us of the broader role that time-keeping played in maritime navigation technologies and therefore its facilitation of both

commerce and colonial expansion. From this vantage point, the clockface, nested within a gilded bundle of cotton, affirms that time—the unpaid time of slave labor—is one of the many valuable resources generated by the black body that leans upon it, the fruits of which are weighed and tallied by putto in the scene set in relief below. In an object like this, the African body was both near and far; his portrayal was both a luxury commodity and a reminder of the bodies whose violent exploitation generated such luxury.

L'art et la race offers a historical account of staggering subtlety, breadth, and insight. The book will be essential reading for students and scholars of eighteenth-century French visual culture, a field that has perhaps been somewhat slower to acknowledge the significance of its “African presences” than its British counterpart.[5] Not all of the objects about which she writes will be new to readers, but the conceptual framework she puts forward will be tremendously generative for future research. Lafont’s focus on the Caribbean and metropolitan spheres of the French empire also leaves space for additional work on colonial territories like New France and the Indian Ocean. If bounded lines were indeed essential to hegemonic modes of knowledge production in eighteenth-century France, Lafont’s new book attests to the profound and urgent gains to be made when one is willing to cross them.

Stephanie O'Rourke is Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews

[1] Writing about African servants in the metropole as “avatars” for their counterparts on colonial plantations, Lafont observes, “on both sides of the chain of slavery—a chain on which [French] aristocratic luxury relied—you have the absolute control of the black body” in the service of its “unlimited exploitation” for the benefit of white Europeans (141). All translations from Lafont’s book are my own.

[2] On the changing racial identities attributed to Zamore over the nineteenth century, see Lise Schreier, “Zamore ‘the African’ and the Haunting of France’s Collective Consciousness,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 38:2 (2016), 123-139. The identity of the artist is likewise contested. Although the Cummer Museum attributes the portrait to Marie Victoire Lemoine, Neil Jeffares argues that it was produced by Jacques-Antoine-Marie Lemoine in “Jacques-Antoine-Marie Lemoine (1751-1824),” *Gazette des beaux-arts* CXXXIII (1999), 61-136, catalogue no. 56.

[3] Online catalogue, the Art Institute of Chicago.
<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/61073/madame-du-barry> (accessed 7 October 2019.)

[4] On naming, race, and eighteenth-century French colonialism, see Jennifer L. Palmer, “What’s In A Name? Mixed-Race Families and Resistance to Racial Marginalization in Eighteenth-Century La Rochelle,” *French Historical Studies* 33:3 (2010), 357-385. This is elaborated on in Palmer’s *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[5] In addition to Lafont's own work on this subject in *Une Africaine au Louvre en 1800: la place du modèle* (Paris: Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2019), a few important recent texts that focus on race in eighteenth-century French art include: Pap Ndiaye and Louise Madinier, eds, *Le modèle noir: de Géricault à Matisse* (Paris: Flammarion, 2019); Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); David Bindman, ed., *The Image of the Black in Western Art Vol. III, Part 3 ('The Eighteenth Century')* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Cite this note as: Stephanie O'Rourke, "Art and Race: A Review," *Journal18* (November 2019), <http://www.journal18.org/4471>.

Licence: CC BY-NC

Journal18 is published under a [Creative Commons CC BY-NC International 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Use of any content published in *Journal18* must be for non-commercial purposes and appropriate credit must be given to the author of the content. Details for appropriate citation appear above.