The Aesthetic Redemption of the Black Body in Eighteenth-Century France

Oliver Wunsch

When Marie-Guillemine Benoist exhibited her *Portrait of a Black Woman* (*plate 1*) at the Paris Salon in 1800, critics who denigrated the model nonetheless found much to admire about the painting. Jean-Baptiste Boutard, in the lengthiest commentary on the painting from the time, insisted that African women were 'uniformly ugly', but he praised the picture for its 'beautiful technique' (*beau faire*).[1] According to Boutard, the supposed distastefulness of Black models forced artists to produce beauty through qualities specific to art itself: 'The artist can only showcase her abilities through the pose of the model and the correctness of the design, in the parts that at least present forms familiar to art, and finally through the choice of accessories and the general execution. That is what madame Benoit [sic] has done'.[2]

Such comments pose a challenge for scholars who study the relationship between art and the historical construction of the Black subject. By decoupling the aesthetic merits of a painting's execution from the human value of its subject, Boutard denied a link that art historians often take for granted. 'Distinction as a work of art distinguishes the subject', Hugh Honour observed in the introduction to the fourth volume of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. 'Want of skill', Honour noted, 'often suggests that a painting was merely good enough for its subject — as in innumerable stereotyped images of blacks as humbly kneeling slaves, deferential servants, grinning banjo strummers, or dancing savages'.[3] Versions of this idea have appeared in numerous studies of art and race in the decades since. Major exhibitions, such as the 2008 *Black is Beautiful* show at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, have treated beautifully crafted paintings of Black subjects as a reflection of the 'positive attitude of artists (or patrons) towards black people'.[4] Visually subtle and complex portraits have often been seen as a challenge to simplistic caricatures and scientific illustrations, which reduce 'individuals' to 'types'.[5] Despite the efforts of several scholars to complicate the dichotomy of artistic humanisation and stereotypical objectification, it has proven remarkably resilient.[6] The Musée d'Orsay's recent exhibition *Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*, for example, emphasised the power of art to 'break with stereotypes' by moving 'from the type to the individual'.[7] Reinforcing the point, the curators provocatively retitled Benoist's *Portrait of a Black Woman* as *Portrait of Madeleine* based on the recent identification of the model. For the exhibition's organisers, the dignified and individuated title suited the formal character of the work, which used the 'stylistic adornments of the most refined painting' to place its subject 'on equal footing' with white sitters from the period.[8]

Detail of Anne-Louis Girodet, *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley*, 1797–1798 (*plate 13*).

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1 Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of a Black Woman*, 1800. Oil on canvas, 81 × 65 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais/Mathieu Rabeau/Art Resource, NY.

Boutard's comments, however, suggest a disconcerting alternative: for viewers at the time, it was possible to appreciate the 'stylistic adornments' of a portrait while maintaining abhorrent views of its subject. In fact, in Boutard's opinion, the formal refinement of the work was all the more necessary because the subject was supposedly objectionable. Aesthetic distinction, from this perspective, did not distinguish the subject — it compensated for what the subject lacked. This view was neither unique to Boutard nor was it new. The idea that artists could produce pleasing depictions of unpleasant subjects went back to antiquity, and it surfaced regularly in Renaissance art theory.[9] But the compensatory pleasures of artistic representation acquired newfound importance in eighteenth-century France, where the growth of art theory from the firmament of courtly artifice and subterfuge encouraged the masking of 'low' subjects with the trappings of 'high' art. French art theorists and critics such as Roger de Piles and Denis Diderot explored the topic at length, arguing that properties internal to painting — form, materiality, light, and colour — could produce a type of pleasure that was unique to art itself.[10] 'The effect or harmony of

light and colour can subsist in a painting independently of the imperfection of the objects that it represents', Diderot observed in the *Encyclopédie*.[11] In his Salon criticism, he argued that nothing better demonstrated the magic of the artist's touch — what Diderot called 'the sublime of technique' — than the contrast between an ostensibly distasteful subject and the pleasure of its artistic representation.[12]

The eighteenth-century belief in amelioration through artistic representation amounted to what I will refer to here as a theory of 'aesthetic redemption'.[13] The term itself did not exist at the time, but it encapsulates the rhetoric of mystical transformation in the aesthetic theory of the period. 'To save' and 'to redeem' (*racheter*) were, in fact, verbs that Diderot frequently used when characterising the capacity of an artist to turn an ugly or simply imperfect subject into a source of pleasure. In his *Salon of 1767*, he used variants of the phrase 'redeemed by marvellous execution' no fewer than five times.[14] He applied the expression both to 'contemptible' subjects, such as the face of a 'drunk beggar', and to merely homely ones, such as a woman 'without grace'.[15] In both cases, he demanded that 'a marvellous execution redeem the poverty of the subject'.[16] This application of the word 'redeem' was novel. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, French dictionaries treated *racheter* as an economic or religious act. In financial terms, *racheter* could refer both to repurchasing something one had sold and to buying the freedom of an enslaved person. This emancipatory connotation carried over to the religious use of the word to denote Christ's deliverance of humanity from sin.[17] Only in the eighteenth century did French writers begin using *racheter* with an aesthetic inflection to describe pleasures that compensate for faults.[18] Simultaneously secularised and tinged with sanctity, the word reinforced the quasi-divine power that Diderot and his contemporaries assigned to artistic creation and the mysteries of aesthetic experience.[19]

Theories of aesthetic redemption have largely been overlooked in studies of art and race, perhaps because this scholarship has tended to minimise the unique status of 'high' art. For example, David Bindman's recent book *Race is Everything: Art and Human Difference*, despite its title, cautions against granting art priority over the wider world of visual culture. Bindman observes that 'different genres were not necessarily separate from or antithetical to each other' in their treatment of race, arguing that high art and other imagery 'have had — disconcertingly — much in common'.[20] His book provides abundant evidence of these commonalities, tracking motifs across canonical works of art, popular caricatures, and scientific diagrams. Similarly, Anne Lafont, in her landmark study of art and race during the Enlightenment, has persuasively highlighted the need 'to rework the traditional binary artistic categorisation that seeks to establish impenetrable boundaries between major and minor art'.[21] Lafont analyses how racial tropes circulated across what she describes as a 'heteroclite corpus' that includes everything from oil paintings to naturalist prints. The eclectic perspective of this scholarship has been salutary, demolishing the myth of aesthetic autonomy while revealing connections between art and a much broader world of science and society. But the approach also has its limits. Most notably, it leaves art's specific role in the construction of race unresolved.

In what follows, I argue that the theory of aesthetic redemption that took hold in France over the course of the eighteenth century granted art a unique position in the construction of race. Because those who believed in the possibility of aesthetic redemption distinguished between art's content and its manner of representation, they created the conditions for artists to represent people of colour using materials, techniques, and formal structures whose qualities would otherwise be considered at odds with the subject. The specific combination of these qualities changed with

the evolving stylistic preferences of the period. Despite the vicissitudes of style, what remained remarkably consistent was the idea that great art could depart from anatomical and philosophical prejudices about human difference without necessarily contradicting those preconceptions in the minds of viewers.

The phenomenon was particularly pronounced when it came to the representation of Black people, whose physical appearance was frequently denigrated in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory.[22] To be sure, eighteenth-century writers sometimes acknowledged the possible beauty of Black subjects, but such virtues were commonly treated as exceptions to be measured against a presumed European ideal.[23] To the extent that the topic was debated, disagreement focused on whether the alleged deficiencies of African anatomy were absolute or relative. Voltaire, for example, combined an essentialising disdain for the appearance of African people with a belief that ideas of beauty varied across the globe: 'Ask a negro from Guinea; beauty for him is an oily black skin, deep-set eyes, a flat nose'.[24] Diderot, for his part, rejected such relativism, declaring emphatically, 'I believe that negroes are less beautiful to negroes themselves than whites are — both to negroes and to whites'.[25] Yet even as Diderot and his contemporaries trafficked in demeaning tropes about Black anatomy, they established a framework through which artists could depart from these stereotypes without any sense of incongruity. A belief in art's uniquely transformative powers ensured that eighteenth-century audiences could take pleasure in a seemingly sensitive representation of a Black subject without needing to fundamentally question their assumptions about Black people.

My aim is not to resuscitate the myth of aesthetic autonomy or to assert that art had no connection to the racial biases of its time. On the contrary, I wish to show how the increasingly distinct status of art during the eighteenth century gave it an exceptional role within the construction of race. The specificity of art was not the same as its autonomy. Indeed, aesthetic redemption allowed art to diverge from other forms of biased imagery while implicitly reinforcing their denigrating messages. The more the viewers believed in the inferiority of the subject, the more they could admire the artist's skill in supposedly overcoming it. Redemption, after all, presumes the need to redeem. This form of artistic participation in the construction of race requires art historians to qualify the positive messages we find in seemingly sensitive depictions of marginalised subjects. Rather than view the subtlety and refinement of such works as a means of resisting prejudice, we need to consider how viewers at the time could admire aesthetic departures from stereotypes precisely because the audience took those stereotypes for granted.

The Artifice of Redemption

How could an artist turn a supposedly ugly or flawed sight into a source of aesthetic pleasure? The question was an ancient one. For Aristotle, mimesis itself delighted the eye, which meant that the mere imitation of a distasteful subject could gratify viewers: 'we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses'.[26] Aristotle's thesis resurfaced throughout the early modern period, but not always with the same faith in pure and precise mimesis. By the late seventeenth century, the French art theorist Nicolas Boileau had arrived at a subtle reformulation of Aristotle in his *Art poétique*: 'There is no serpent or odious monster, / That, through imitative art, cannot please the eyes: / The agreeable artifice of a delicate brush / Makes an admirable object of the most horrible one'.[27] Shifting the emphasis from illusionistic precision to the 'agreeable artifice of a delicate brush', Boileau modified the classical concept of mimetic pleasure to focus on artful deceit.[28] The amended

theory complemented the gallant norms of courtly expression, softening the hard edges of Aristotelean realism with the charming elan of worldly society.[29] This fusion of mimesis with artifice developed into what René Démoris has identified as a major strand of eighteenth-century art theory on the possibility of producing beauty from seemingly malformed and impoverished subjects.[30] What emerged from this discourse was the idea that seemingly repellent sights could be transformed into objects of delectation through the skilful way the artist had handled them. It was the disjuncture between the disagreeableness of the subject and the delightful artifice of its representation that was understood to demonstrate the artist's creative abilities.

Among artists and amateurs, the redemptive power of artifice found an early proponent in Boileau's friend Roger de Piles, who regularly touched on the issue in his theoretical writings on art.[31] Starting in the late seventeenth century, de Piles challenged the assumption that painting's highest purpose lay in historical narration

2 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Drunken Silenus*, 1616–1617. Oil on panel, 212 × 214.5 cm. Munich: Alte Pinakothek. Photo: bpk Bildagentur/ Alte Pinakothek/Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen/ Art Resource, NY.

and moral instruction, instead presenting its ultimate aims in terms of sensual pleasure.[32] He described the essence of painting as makeup (*un fard*), a dissimulating surface meant to beguile the eye.[33] For de Piles, the greatest demonstration of these charms could be found in the work of Rubens, particularly in the artist's depiction of flesh. The carnal allure of these bodies was all the more remarkable because, according to de Piles, it did not depend on the beauty of the depicted figures. On the contrary, de Piles rhapsodised over Rubens's painting of the 'fat and heavy' Silenus (*plate 2*), marvelling that the notoriously ugly deity was 'painted and coloured with a force and artifice without parallel'.[34] According to de Piles, Rubens enhanced the effect through the interplay between dark and light skin: 'To make his painting succeed in this aim, the painter placed to one side a Moor who pinches Silenus in the buttocks, and whose colour combined with the shaded neighbouring bodies, highlights the strongly illuminated man'.[35] De Piles did not mean that the Black figure made Silenus himself more attractive by comparison — this was not a 'mistress and page' portrait where

3 Pierre Mignard, *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*, 1682. Oil on canvas, 120.7 × 95.3 cm. London: National Portrait Gallery. Photo: National Portrait Gallery/Art Resource, NY.

4 Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Kitchen Maid*, 1651. Oil on canvas, 78 × 64 cm. Stockholm: Swedish National museum. Photo: Anna Danielsson/National museum.

a Black attendant was meant to enhance the beauty of the white figure's complexion (*plate* 3).[36] Instead, de Piles stressed the enthralling power of the overall effect, the way the range of flesh tones and surfaces came together with a 'suaveness and altogether extraordinary force'.[37] The inherent beauty or ugliness of the individual figures, in de Piles's eyes, became subordinate to the magic of paint turned into sensate matter.

Behind de Piles's theory of painting was a radical transformation of the role that subject matter played in artistic creation. The traditional view of painting as an instrument of narration and instruction had taken subject matter as a picture's organising principle; the composition and visual effects of a painting, according to this orthodox view, needed to follow what the subject demanded, matching and reinforcing its overall tone according to the laws of propriety or *convenance*.[38] De Piles, by redefining painting as a means of seducing the viewer through artificial means, ruptured this previously indissoluble tie between subject matter and visual effect. As Thomas Puttfarken has observed, de Piles 'sees the expressive force of the immediate visual effect of a picture as different in kind from the passions and emotions of the

5 Antoine Coypel, *Angola, Trumpeter of Louis XIV, Holding a Basket of Fruit*, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Oil on canvas, 28 × 21.5 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais/Stéphane Maréchalle/Art Resource, NY.

subject-matter; and he re-defines the relationship between the two in order to endow the visual effect with that critical superiority which in theories of decorum had been attached to subject matter'.[39] The gap that de Piles established between subject matter and visual effect — and the reversal of their relative priority — meant that scenes that prominently featured 'lowly' people and things could nonetheless rise to the highest levels of his esteem.[40] For example, he saw Rembrandt's painting of a humble servant girl (*plate 4*) as the apex of art's seductive artifice, a prime demonstration of art's capacity to, 'through its effect, call out to spectators'.[41] The qualities that 'arrested the eyes of those who passed in front of it' were not, according to de Piles, the contours of the servant's face or any elevation in her expression: 'it was…neither the beauty of the design (*dessein*) nor the nobility of expression that had produced the effect'.[42] Instead, it was the artist's 'use of his colours and his chiaroscuro' and his 'beautiful brush' that entranced spectators, prompting de Piles himself to purchase the painting.[43]

De Piles did not explicitly address race or human variety in his exploration of painting's redemptive power, but the distinction that he drew between subject matter and visual effect held significant implications for the representation of bodily difference. If subject matter ultimately served as a vehicle for producing ravishing surfaces and illusions, then an artist's selection and positioning of any given figure need not amount to a statement of that subject's inherent worth. In this context, pinning down the ideological implications of an artist's choice in subject matter becomes increasingly difficult.

How should we interpret, for example, the decision of Antoine Coypel, a friend of both de Piles and Boileau, to structure a composition around a young Black man holding a basket of fruit (*plate* 5)? The work has attracted the interest of art historians because it involves an intriguing departure from the traditional 'mistress and page' motif in which the Black figure functioned as a decorative accessory of the white subject.[44] Nearly reversing this formula, Coypel placed the Black subject at the centre of the composition while pushing the white woman to the side. The emphasis on the Black figure assumes greater importance in light of an annotation in the margins of a 1733 inventory that supplies a name for the young man: 'Angola, negro trumpeter of the king with his mistress'.[45] The note completes the inversion of the traditional mistress and page relationship, supplying Angola with an identity while rendering his mistress anonymous. As Anne Lafont has aptly put it: 'the small Black person without a name here passes from decorative accessory… to an *individuated subject*'.[46]

Should we therefore take the painting as an assertion of Angola's dignity and personhood? Or does it merely represent the artist's confidence in his own power to transform the most marginal subject into an alluring spectacle? It is certainly possible that Coypel wished to capture the humanity of Angola. Scholars have sometimes argued that the intensity of a modelling session naturally pushes artists to move past stereotypical assumptions and toward empathetic identification with their subjects.[47] The painting might also register the complex feelings of intimacy that Europeans sometimes felt toward the very people they subjugated; such relationships, as Jennifer Palmer has documented, could produce affective bonds that the philosophy and law of the period did not recognise.[48]

At the same time, the larger iconography and formal structure of Coypel's picture suggests that the pleasures of artifice, not the dignity of the human subject, constituted the artist's principal preoccupation. The curtain and parapet that frame the composition accentuate both the theatrical structure of the scene and the artifice of its illusionistic effects, much as the window frame in Rembrandt's portrait of a servant had done. The sumptuous brocade that hangs over the balustrade, with its rippling folds and glistening highlights, flaunts the manufactured surface that lies between representation and reality. But perhaps the most conspicuous exploration of imitative artifice involves the drama that unfolds between Angola and the monkeys who attempt to steal the contents of his basket. The subject of monkeys stealing fruit had frequently appeared in seventeenth-century Flemish painting, having been explored extensively in the work of artists such as Frans Snyders (*plate* 6).[49] The original motif had symbolically evoked the subject of mimesis; the grapes that invariably featured prominently in the fruit basket conjured the ancient legend of Zeuxis tricking birds with his illusionistic depiction of the fruit, and monkeys had long been associated with the act of imitation.[50] Coypel, by casting Angola as the defender of the fruit, added an additional layer to the theme. Angola's position mirrors that of the monkey on the right, their arms encircling the basket from opposite sides. The hue

6 Frans Snyders, *Two Monkeys Raiding a Fruit Basket*, c. 1630–1640. Oil on canvas, 84 × 119 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais/Thierry Olivier/Art Resource, NY.

of Angola's skin matches the colour of the opposing monkey's fur, differing only in the brushstrokes that suggest their textures. The juxtaposition, of course, alludes one of the oldest and most pernicious racial stereotypes about the supposed closeness of African people to primates.[51] Here, the racist trope of simian similitudes becomes part of a larger exploration of similarity itself, the comparisons and substitutions on which representation depends.

Coypel's decision to place the Black figure in front of the white mistress was therefore far from a straightforward assertion of Angola's individual subjectivity. On a practical level, it allowed the racist comedy of Angola's predicament to unfold in full view, positioning the scuffle over the fruit at the centre of the composition. The displacement of the white figure to the background did not diminish her social status relative to Angola so much as it turned her into a spectator whose role paralleled that of the outside audience. Pausing to take in the scene, she enacts the amusement that the picture was presumably meant to elicit from the courtiers who saw the painting in its original home at the Château de Meudon.[52] By embodying the charmed viewership that de Piles celebrated, the white woman provides a model for the comportment that the painting expects of its beholders.

Of course the outside viewers could contemplate the additional spectacle of the painting as a physical object. Only they could see the final link in the chain of similitudes, the alchemy of paint transformed into silk, gold, fur, fruit, and flesh. The grapes that hang over the edge of the basket, luminous with impasto highlights, beckon the audience closer, near enough to inspect the artifice of the illusion. De Piles himself had invoked grapes as the defining metaphor for a cohesive composition

that held the viewer's attention, the bunching of fruit on the vine demonstrating the unified relationship between part and whole.[53] Here, light and dark grapes function as a microcosm of the entire painting, echoing the juxtaposition of white and Black bodies that set each other in relief. With the grapes, as with the people, the individual elements are ultimately subordinate to the overall illusion, the ensorcelling effect that constitutes the painting's organising principle.

The Philosophy of Race and the Redemption of Flesh

In emphasising the primacy of the pictorial effect over the depicted subject, I do not mean to suggest that an artist's decision to foreground a Black model was arbitrary. When Coypel depicted Angola, he was undoubtedly responding to both the real presence of Black attendants in French court society and the growing interest in Blackness in elite circles. Around the time that Coypel completed his painting, the French writer François Bernier published the first known treatise to describe skin colour — and Black skin in particular — as a means of dividing the global population into 'races'.[54] In the decades that followed, philosophical and anatomical writing on the causes of skin colour dramatically expanded, with major Enlightenment thinkers meditating on the physiological origins of Blackness.[55] The painters who depicted Black models during this period certainly stood to benefit from public interest in this commentary, and they may well have chosen their subjects accordingly.[56] What I wish to highlight, however, is how the differing goals of artists and philosophers yielded divergent forms of engagement with Blackness. To share a subject is one thing; to share a purpose is another. Artists, with their growing attachment to the redemptive effects of material representation, were less preoccupied with the revelation of genealogical lineages and the supposed causes of racial 'degeneration' than they were committed to the production of visual pleasure. Indeed, while philosophers from Voltaire to Maupertuis typically described the anatomy of Black people as unappealing or even repellent, artists and their audiences treated the material representation of African subjects as a source of attraction.

Consider Maurice-Quentin de La Tour's pastel portrait of a Black man (*plate 7*). The exhibition of the portrait at the Salon of 1741 coincided with the culmination of a two-year long competition sponsored by the Bordeaux Academy of Sciences devoted to 'the physical causes of the *nègres*' colour, of the quality of their hair, and of the degeneration of the one and the other'.[57] It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise, as several scholars have done, that La Tour's portrait responded to the interest in Blackness generated by the contest.[58] Yet very little about the portrait directly corresponds to the contest entries, which tended to treat Blackness as an execrable condition that offended the senses. For example, the doctor Pierre Barrère, who published the most influential submission to the competition in the summer of 1741, likened Black skin to an extreme version of jaundice, claiming that it originated in a dark bile or 'sap' that permeated the body. He asserted that this pathological bile seeped to the surface of African bodies, giving their skin a black, greasy sheen: 'if one touches a Negro's skin with one's fingertips, an oily and fatty humour detaches, somewhat soapy and with a disagreeable odour'.[59] Barrère, like all the contest entrants, made no effort to convey Black personhood. His purportedly 'empirical' observations were based on the dissection of a cadaver, whose lifelessness only augmented the dehumanising tone of the analysis. La Tour's portrait, conversely, presents its sitter as a vital subject with a depth of interiority. Set against the low horizon of the sea, the man looks over his shoulder with a wistful expression that perhaps alludes to his displacement across oceans.[60] And although La Tour carefully

attended to the material representation of the man's complexion, the result differs markedly from the descriptions of Black skin in the Bordeaux competition. There is no hint here of Barrère's dark, oily bile. La Tour deployed the delicate, matte texture of pastel to produce a subtly modulated face that radiates light and life.[61] Reddish hues, set off by cool shadows, give the cheeks a pulsing warmth. The texture of the paper, which La Tour relied on to produce flecks of light across the man's face, imbue the skin with a velvety luminosity. The man's eyes, with their thicker application of pastel and more assiduous stumping, set the airiness of the skin into relief, glistening with crystalline clarity. These qualities, in their tantalising animacy and varied materiality, could hardly have differed more from the reductive and objectifying physiology of authors such as Barrère.

If anyone noticed that the effects of the portrait diverged from the descriptions of Black skin found in writing from the period, they did not complain. La Tour's

7 Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Portrait of a Black Man*, c. 1741. Pastel on paper, 65 × 53.5 cm. Geneva: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. Photo: Musées d'art et d'histoire, Ville de Genève/Yves Siza.

portrait, according to one contemporary critic, earned the admiration of all the connoisseurs at the Salon.[62] Does this positive response indicate that the audience at the Salon held less biased views of African people than did the writers who responded to the Bordeaux competition? Such an optimistic interpretation needs to be balanced against the expectations set by contemporary aesthetic discourse, which commended the capacity of art to redeem imperfect or unattractive subjects by artificial means. The portraitist Louis Tocqué, for example, delivered a lecture to the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1750 that described how the 'disadvantageous' appearance of a portrait sitter could be salvaged through the artist's technique: 'the beauty of the brush can lend them grace'.[63] According to Tocqué, this 'marvellous art' did not involve 'correcting' the anatomy of the actual model so much as it required knowing 'how to cut the paint in some places and to loosen it deftly in others', to have the confidence 'to apply the brush boldly'.[64] Echoing de Piles, Tocqué presented the materiality of art itself as the source of a portrait's most beguiling attractions, advising artists to develop a 'vigorous and lively touch' because 'it is touch that gives life and movement' to any figure, and 'one loves to draw near to well touched works'.[65]

The comte de Caylus, who owned a version of La Tour's *Portrait of a Black Man*, was a staunch proponent of such redemptive effects, which he explored in his capacity as an honorary member of the Academy of Painting and Sculpture.[66] Caylus devoted special attention to the issue in a lecture he delivered to the Academy on ancient statues of 'hermaphrodites' that he admired. Caylus argued that the sculptures were not 'simple imitations of nature's games' because 'these types of monsters cannot carry with them the quality of beauty, still less that of elegance'.[67] He noted that he had seen a living example of such a 'monster' himself and, while it was in 'very good health', he nonetheless believed that it 'would have been of very little advantage to draw'.[68] What made the statues so remarkable to Caylus was the fact that their makers, through 'beautiful workmanship' (*beau travail*), had achieved 'an elegant union' that 'nature had not produced at all'.[69] Caylus did not admire the sculptures because he held a favourable impression of 'hermaphrodites' — it was precisely his negative views about intersex anatomy that enhanced his appreciation for the artifice of the sculptures. If Caylus harboured negative views about the appearance of Black people, then La Tour's *Portrait of a Black Man* presumably would have appealed to him all the more for transforming the supposedly inopportune subject through the magic of 'beautiful workmanship'.

Caylus's belief in the redemptive power of artists' materials and techniques also helps explain the distinctive appearance of another portrait whose construction he supervised: Jean-Baptiste Perronneau's pastel of an albino child known as Mapondé (*plate 8*). A French ship captain had brought Mapondé to Paris in 1744, and the child became an immediate sensation in elite society. Paraded in front of the French Royal Academy of Sciences and several fashionable salons, Mapondé attracted the attention of leading philosophers such as Voltaire, Maupertuis, and Buffon.[70] Their debates soon circulated well beyond Paris. When the Swedish diplomat and art collector Carl Gustaf Tessin read about the controversy, he and his wife Ulla asked their associates in Paris for a portrait of the boy, delegating Caylus to make the arrangements with Perronneau.[71] Art historians have singled out the resulting portrait as evidence that 'artists participated in' the emergence of racial science during the period, but many aspects of Perronneau's pastel are not easily reconciled with the scientific discourse that surrounded Mapondé.[72] The portrait, in its subtle materiality and psychological complexity, represents Mapondé with a degree of humanity that found no place in the philosophical commentary on him. Philosophers from the period described Mapondé as an abominable exception to the general rules of heredity, not as a

8 Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, *Portrait of Mapondé*, 1745. Pastel on paper, 75 × 56 cm. Stockholm: Swedish National museum. Photo: National museum.

dignified subject with inner life. Maupertuis, whose writings on Mapondé proved most consequential, actually said very little about the child's appearance or affect. Instead, he treated Mapondé as a prompt to set forth a much larger epigenetic theory of reproduction, according to which the form of organisms is determined by a combination of ancestral characteristics and the dynamic processes that unfold from the moment of conception.[73] To the extent that Maupertuis and other philosophers discussed Mapondé as an individual, they characterised him as a repulsive sight — Maupertuis stated that he would 'gladly forget' his encounter with the 'vile negro', describing Mapondé as 'a child of four or five years who has all the traits of negroes, and whose very white and sickly pallid [*blafarde*] skin only augments the ugliness'.[74]

Perronneau, on the other hand, deployed varied textures and tones to give Mapondé's face a vital radiance. Mapondé's cheeks, with their pinkish hue, course

with life. Perronneau enhanced the effect by slightly lightening the areas around the face, creating a faint halo that suggests both the glow of skin and the spark of the soul. The impression of intersubjective encounter becomes all the more powerful through the directness of Mapondé's stare and the assertiveness of his downward pointed index finger, a gesture that rhetorical guides going back to antiquity had described as a sign of authority and insistence.[75] The confidence of the pose and expression may well have been Perronneau's invention. We can hardly expect that a four- or five-year-old child, kidnapped from his family and transported across an ocean, stared back at his captors with such a look of fortitude. The Academy of Sciences, in an unintentionally poignant aside, gave a more plausible description of Mapondé's gaze when noting that 'his eyes

9 'Chief Eunuch', from *Le sérail et divers personnages turcs*, c. 1720. Watercolour on paper, 18 × 11 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Photo: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

are always trembling' (the members of the Academy attributed the eye movements to the light sensitivity of the child's retinas).[76] Mapondé's self-assured presentation in the portrait is potentially as contrived as his outfit, an exoticising pastiche of Ottoman fashions that vaguely evoke the costumes worn by the Chief Eunuch of the Sultan (*plate 9*).[77] Mapondé's forward-thrust paunch heightens the association, granting him the corpulent proportions befitting a proud representative of a foreign court. If Mapondé stands here as a human subject endowed with inner life, then it is a life of the artist's making, a soulful presence fashioned from powdered pigment.

Any liberties that Perronneau took in the picture's construction appear not to have troubled the couple who commissioned it. The Tessins never sent their Parisian correspondents any response to the portrait when it arrived, but they were pleased enough with the pastel to later offer it as a gift to the Queen of Sweden.[78] Their apparent satisfaction with the picture is important because it underscores that the expectations

10 Olof Fridsberg, *Countess Ulla Tessin's Cabinet at Åkerö*, 1762. Watercolour on parchment, 22 × 17 cm. Stockholm: Swedish National museum. Photo: Cecilia Heisser/National museum.

11 Anne Claude Philippe de Caylus, after François Boucher, *At the Pagoda*, 1740. Etching and engraving, 28.2 × 18.9 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

surrounding art differed from those that governed philosophical inquiry into human difference. The Tessins had learned about Mapondé from Maupertuis's writing, but they evidently did not mind that the portrait diverged from the philosopher's words.[79] Their reaction is hardly surprising. The Tessins themselves were not philosophers but *curieux* (curious collectors), who freely integrated the pleasures of artifice with the study of nature's variety.[80] Olof Fridsberg's watercolour of Ulla Tessin in her cabinet at Åkerö castle in 1762 gives a sense of the aesthetic principles that they adopted, freely integrating artful deceit with natural inquiry (*plate 10*). Almost no surface of the interior is left unadorned, from the Turkish carpet on the floor to the intricately patterned floral wallpaper. The most spectacular showpiece, Fridsberg's trompe l'oeil painting of a

lacquered shell cabinet, stands in the corner. Based on the calling card that François Boucher had designed for the Parisian luxury merchant Edme Gersaint (*plate 11*), the cabinet is laden with porcelain, shells, and coral in a conspicuously disordered mixture of natural and man-made specimens. The deceptive illusionism of trompe l'oeil adds one more layer of artifice, art masquerading as art masquerading as nature.

The philosophers who dominated the discourse on human variety, by contrast, expressed growing impatience with such curiosity cabinets, disparaging their riotous mixture of nature and artifice as an expression of dilettantism.[81] Buffon, in the first volume of his *Histoire naturelle,* would make the point explicit: 'the majority of those who, without any prior study of natural history, wish to have cabinets of this type, are people of leisure, little occupied, who look to amuse themselves, regarding being placed in the ranks of the curious as an achievement'.[82] Diderot similarly drew a distinction between exceptional collections that were 'arranged by methodical order', such as Buffon's configuration of the Cabinet du roi, and less systematic enterprises that combined, 'at great effort and expense, a multitude of productions, only to present them mixed up pell-mell, without any regard, whether for the nature of things or for the principles of natural history'.[83] Linnaeus, who was close with the Tessins and received financial support from them throughout his career, was no less wary of curiosity cabinets that blurred the boundary between art and nature.[84] His own collections consisted almost entirely of natural specimens, with no notable works of art or decorative objects.[85] Linnaeus also generally excluded illustrations from his publications, believing that surface appearances were as apt to mislead as to inform.[86] 'Who could ever deduce a firm argument from a drawing? But from written words it is easy', he wrote in the introduction to his *Genera plantarum* from 1737.[87] Images, he insisted, were useful to people 'who have more brainpan than brain', serving only the interests of the 'unlearned'.[88]

In this context, art was poorly positioned to make any direct intervention in the philosophical discourse on human variety. Linnaeus presumably saw Perronneau's portrait of Mapondé on his many visits to see the Tessins, but it appears not to have played any role in his writing on albinism. In the tenth edition of his *System of Nature* from 1758, Linnaeus literally dehumanised white Africans, classing them not as *Homo sapiens* but as a type of *Homo nocturnus*, cave-dwelling 'troglodytes' who avoided the light of day.[89] Linnaeus here repeated details that he had found in Voltaire's description of Mapondé, such as the allegedly yellow-white pupils of albinos, emphasising their difference from humankind.[90] It is possible, of course, that Linnaeus never saw Perronneau's portrait of Mapondé in the collection of the Tessins. The historian Renato Mazzolini has concluded as much, arguing that the picture would have forced Linnaeus to recognise the humanity of albinos, and the naturalist 'probably would have modified his classification' had he seen the portrait.[91] A more likely possibility, however, is that Linneaus simply dismissed the portrait as irrelevant to his work. While Linnaeus did not categorically reject all forms of visual representation in his research, he generally relied on illustrations for discrete purposes, such as when they could be used to demonstrate the function of particular anatomical features in an organism.[92] These 'analytical drawings', as Isabelle Charmantier has described them, tended to prioritise structure over external form.[93] Their marks were schematic, maintaining the visual economy of the diagram rather than a sensual surfeit of painterly effects. In fact, Linnaeus did communicate with representatives in London about the possibility of obtaining a drawing of an albino person in England at the time, but his request focused on highly specific anatomical features, such as 'the space between the canine teeth and the others', which he believed to be a salient factor in

distinguishing humans from apes.[94] These were material concerns of a very different sort from those that Perronneau's portrait addressed. Where the naturalist sought the transparency of a diagram that revealed the structure of its referent, Perronneau offered the opacity of a portrait whose material richness made it impossible to disentangle the signified from the signifier.

The redemptive effects of Perronneau's pastel, then, point to a broader problem in the epistemology of art during the eighteenth century: the properties that gave art its powers of aesthetic redemption — its irreducible materiality and sensorial richness — called into question its validity as an instrument of knowledge production. The clearest articulation of these challenges came from Diderot, for whom the transformative sensuality of paint was so resistant to understanding that he could only describe it in terms of 'magic' or with religiously inflected language of 'saving' and 'redeeming'. Chardin's depiction of a flayed sea ray (*plate 12*), for example, contained in its materiality what Diderot described as 'the secret of saving through talent the disgust of certain things in nature'.[95] The secret itself remained obscure to Diderot — 'we understand nothing of this magic' — but it resided somewhere in the substance of the painting: 'It is the layers of thick colour, applied one over the other, and whose effect emanates from below and above. Other times one would say that it is a vapor that was blown on the canvas; elsewhere, a light foam that was tossed on it'.[96] Here we encounter a more elaborate description of the 'delicate artifice'

12 Jean-Siméon Chardin, *The Ray*, 1727. Oil on canvas, 115 × 146 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Photo: Musée du Louvre/RMN-Grand Palais/Angèle Dequier/Art Resource, NY.

that Boileau and de Piles had celebrated, but Diderot went further in examining the epistemological implications of the effect. What made Chardin's *Ray* so bewildering to Diderot was not just that it created beauty out of ugliness, but that it also appeared real: 'it is the flesh of the fish itself'.[97] Diderot indicated that such effects arose when the falsehoods within a work were internally consistent, when the deviations from nature produced a unified whole: 'the best work, the most harmonious, is nothing more than a fabric of falsehoods that cover each other. There are some objects that gain, others that lose, and the great magic consists in coming close to nature, and making everything lose or gain proportionally'.[98]

Close to nature, but by no means equivalent to it. According to Diderot, 'this is no longer the real and true scene that we see; it is only, so to speak, a translation'.[99] Verisimilitude, he suggested, was not the same as veracity. Chardin's *Ray*, after all, possessed a beauty that Diderot refused to believe existed in the flesh of any actual fish. The difference lay, he argued, in the hands of the artist, the genius who could take the ugly and turn it into the beautiful: 'There are undoubtedly disagreeable subjects, but it is only for the ordinary artist that they are common'.[100] It was in this sense that Diderot described the great painter as a 'magician', because only a person endowed with occult faculties could produce from nature what nature itself did not achieve.[101] Elsewhere, Diderot would describe this power in divine terms, writing of Chardin, 'if it is true, as the philosophers say, that there is nothing real but our sensations…what difference is there for them, four feet from your paintings, between the Creator and you?'[102] Diderot, who relegated religion and magic alike to the same level as superstition in the *Encyclopédie's* 'System of Human Knowledge', thus preserved a vaunted place for the supernatural in art, above all in the sorcery of the painter who produced pleasure from nature's most unpleasant spectacles.[103] The artist's magic was not simply his protean capacity to transform paint into flesh, but also his ability to go a step further, to produce a harmonious effect that nature could not match. Here the artist and the philosopher parted ways.

Artistic Genius and the Beneficiary of Redemption

Diderot's attribution of aesthetic redemption to the quasi-divine power of the artist underscores an uncomfortable reality: the benefits of redemption generally accrued to the redeemer more than the redeemed. Diderot did not, for example, conclude his response to Chardin's *Ray* with a reconsideration of rays themselves, nor did Caylus revise his opinion of intersex people after seeing their sensitive portrayal in ancient sculpture. Instead, these men bestowed their praise on the makers of the works they admired. This tendency became all the more pronounced under the late eighteenth-century cult of genius, which presumed that artists possessed the capacity to invest any subject with their transcendent spirit.[104] Artistic genius became especially important to the discourse of aesthetic redemption as the fortunes of the Rococo declined, making sensual artifice a less viable means of elevating a supposedly inauspicious subject. In a cultural climate increasingly suspicious of dissimulative surfaces, genius provided an alternative framework for redemption that focused on the purifying effects of the artist's subjectivity. It was in this vein that the artist Anne-Louis Girodet observed in his poetry that 'The sprit makes one adore a lovable ugliness'.[105] The 'spirit' here belonged to the artist who could produce beauty from nature's most abhorrent sights. Because Girodet believed that spiritual genius was itself a gift from nature, he argued that its redemptive effects were never unnatural: 'You must know, sometimes using an honest artifice, / Helpful lying, how to attenuate a vice, / And, without concealing the simple truth, / How to compensate

13 Anne-Louis Girodet, *Portrait of Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley*, 1797–1798. Oil on canvas, 159 × 111 cm. Versailles: Palace of Versailles. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais Gérard Blot/Art Resource, NY.

for ugliness, to embellish beauty'.[106] In Girodet's 'honest artifice', we find a modified form of the 'delicate artifice' that had shaped ideas of aesthetic redemption since the late seventeenth century. Whereas de Piles and his followers delighted in the artificial materiality of paint, Girodet admired the mediation that took place in the mind of the artist, the place where 'genius sparkles'.[107] The visual manifestations of redemption evolved — richly textured surfaces gave way to pellucid finishes — but the artist remained the primary recipient of the reputational benefits.

For evidence of these continuities, we need look no further than Girodet's own portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley (*plate 13*). The portrait is among the most contested representations of a Black subject in the history of Western art. On the one hand, art historians have persuasively argued that the work emphasises Black political agency

by placing Belley, the first Black deputy in the French National Convention, at the same level as the white abolitionist philosopher Raynal, whose bust appears at his side.[108] On the other hand, scholars have pointed to Girodet's admiration for the racist physiognomic theories of Johann Kaspar Lavater as an indication that the work may carry a more pernicious message.[109] The changing titles that Girodet gave to the portrait compound the difficulty of determining his intentions. The picture is now generally catalogued under the title that Girodet gave it when he exhibited the work at the 1798 Salon: *Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies*. But when Girodet first showed the work the previous year at the Hôtel de l'Élysée, he did not include Belley's name in the title, instead listing the painting as 'The Portrait of a Negro'. The description that he submitted with the painting also made no mention of Belley, but it referred to the subject of the bust alongside him: 'The bust of the famous Raynal, philosopher and historian, is a tribute of recognition that men of colour owe to the first apostle of the liberty of French Americans'.[110] The fact that Girodet identified the inanimate bust as a depiction of Raynal but referred to the living figure simply as a 'Negro' (*Nègre*) calls into question the degree to which he conceived of the work as a tribute to Belley as an individual. And Girodet's use of the pejorative term *nègre* complicates any effort to present the painter as a radical anti-racist (while the word *nègre* was commonly used among white Europeans at the time, it had already been condemned for its demeaning implications by abolitionist groups such as the *Société des amis des noirs*).[111] The disconnect between the picture's seemingly progressive themes and Girodet's more troublesome personal views becomes understandable, however, when seen in the context of his comments on aesthetic redemption and racial difference.

Girodet's most extensive remarks on these topics came later, in 1817, when he delivered a lecture on artistic originality during the annual public meeting of the Institut de France. In a lengthy section of the lecture on varied concepts of beauty across the world, Girodet turned to the topic of Black skin:

> All the people of Europe represent the devil with black skin, while Ethiopians give their evil spirits a white face; one can, therefore, reasonably suppose that the most strangely original, I almost said the most ridiculous, even the most frightening figure, in the untravelled eyes of a negro from Abyssinia or a Kalmuck Tartar, would be, for example, the Apollo Belvedere.[112]

Seen in isolation, the comments appear to propose a relativistic view of beauty, resisting any categorical claim about white superiority.[113] Indeed, the remarks might retrospectively imply that Girodet's juxtaposition of Belley with a white bust of Raynal was meant to convey two equally valid aesthetic ideals. When read within the context of the larger lecture, however, the meaning of the statement nearly turns on its head. Girodet did not endorse beauty as it was seen through the 'untravelled eyes of a negro', declaring emphatically: 'Let us leave the hideous forms and discordant lighting of their crude arts to the isolated admiration and distant ignorance of savage people'.[114] For Girodet, the important point about the beauty standards of Africans was not that they carried the same validity as European ideals, but that they could provide the European artist with a stimulating shock, a 'sudden novelty' on which artistic originality depended.[115] Girodet made clear that he regarded European conceptions of beauty as forming 'an immutable and absolute empire'.[116] Ugliness, he nonetheless stated, could be a generative artistic force for the sufficiently sensitive artist: 'we need to be moved, even by ugliness, provided that it offers us novelty, or if it is animated by the spirit and by the grace that it often shares with beauty itself'.[117]

The process of deriving originality, even grace, from ugliness involved what Girodet described as 'finding a physiognomy'.[118] The remark is revealing because it clarifies Girodet's much debated relationship with physiognomic theory. Scholars universally acknowledge Girodet's interest in Lavater's writing on facial structures, but the influence of these ideas on his work, especially the portrait of Belley, remains unresolved.[119] Richard Brilliant and Sylvia Musto have described the contrast between Belley and Raynal as an endorsement of Lavater's racist claims about the supposed superiority of European physiognomy, while Helen Weston and other scholars have suggested that Girodet may have adopted Lavater's comparative approach to physiognomy without embracing its hierarchical assumptions.[120] Girodet's own comments about physiognomy require us to integrate the two interpretations. While he left little doubt that he believed in the 'absolute empire' of European beauty standards, he nonetheless described deviations from the norm as a productive aesthetic force to be harnessed by capable painters. What appealed to Girodet about physiognomic theory was not simply its promise of decoding the inner character of people from their outward form, but the 'originality' that artists could extract from physiognomic difference. Thus, he advised the audience of his lecture, 'what most displeases us is that which has no distinct imprint: this is why insignificant faces, as well as indecisive characters, leave us completely indifferent, while we can be passionate about the least regular figures, and for that type of spirit known as original spirit'.[121]

To whom did this 'original spirit' belong? Did it exist within the person who possessed the 'irregular' physiognomy, or did it originate in the perceiving subject? Ultimately, Girodet suggested, it was the sensitivity of the artist that turned the merely ugly into an 'original' aesthetic effect: 'Laudable originality, that which pleases and captivates, is then always the product of a fecund imagination, regulated by enlightened judgement, guided above all by the fine and sure tact that focuses the artist on the delicate choice from what nature offers that is most analogous to the direction of his sentiments and the needs of his sensations'.[122] Girodet did not specify what it would mean for a European painter to find something 'analogous' to his sentiments in the physiognomy of the other, but the premise aligned with his abiding conception of the artist as a figure who feels a degree of alienation from his own society — already in 1789, he referred to his suffering in 'coming to know society only to despise it, and, consequently, to flee it'.[123] Such ideas would flourish among the self-described 'primitive' artists who, emerging from David's studio in the final decade of the eighteenth century, rejected the more rigid and idealising tendencies within Neoclassicism in favour of eclectic originality.[124] The 'original spirit' that Girodet associated with 'ugly' physiognomy represented an extension of these ideas. The important point, for him, was to understand non-normative bodily structures as a potential means of demonstrating authorial individuality and independence. A depicted figure's physical appearance, from this perspective, was as much a product of the artist's inimitable subjectivity as it was a sign of the model's character.

The reception of Girodet's *Belley* indicates that critics saw the portrait's virtues in similar terms. As Helen Weston has pointed out, none of the critics who wrote about the painting at the 1798 Salon referred to Belley by name, even after Girodet had added him to the work's title.[125] The most positive reactions stopped short of explicitly transferring their admiration of the painting to Belley himself. Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard praised 'the brush of Girodet' and paid homage to the illustrious Raynal, but he made no mention of Belley beyond a general reference to 'the liberty of negroes'.[126] Only one critic came close to commenting on Belley the man, quoting

the supposed reaction of a woman whose initial revulsion toward the painting turned to admiration as she drew closer:

> Yes, black, but not so much a devil.
> Seeing him closer
> I find him admirable…
> How mistaken I was.
> Yes, learned Giraudet [sic]
> This painting pleases me!
> Let us take a break from the caustic humour.
> No satirical quips.
> Never will any criticism
> Diminish your talent
> Truly,
> Truly,
> This portrait is full of life [*parlant*].[127]

It is possible to read this passage, as Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has argued, as 'an allegory of painting's capacity to overcome the viewer's racist disposition'. [128] The woman's statement 'I find him admirable' and her admission 'how mistaken I was' certainly indicate that the painting had elicited a change of heart. At the same time, it is not entirely clear that the woman extends her admiration of Belley in pictorial representation to Belley in life. Her description of the painting as *parlant*, a term which referred both to a lifelike resemblance and to the animating powers of the artist's technique, encapsulates the ambiguity.[129] The woman's emphasis on the 'talent' of the 'learned Giraudet' indicates that she attributed the effect, at least in large part, to the painter's skill. What Girodet's painting had overcome, then, may not have been the viewer's racism, but her assumptions about the capacity of the artist to produce a pleasing and spirited representation of someone whom she regarded as an inauspicious subject.

To put the issue more generally: for the art historian who seeks evidence that a sensitive portrait of a Black subject could challenge racist preconceptions from the era, Salon criticism tends to disappoint. Hugh Honour noted the problem in his ode to Marie-Guillemine Benoist's painting of the model Madeleine (see *plate 1*). Honour hailed the work as 'a tribute to the French emancipation of slaves' in which the sitter 'looks at us with a gaze of reciprocal equality', but he also acknowledged that no writer from the period described the painting in similar terms.[130] Critics at the time tended to regard the portrait, in Honour's words, as 'the beautiful picture of an ugly subject'.[131] Where Honour and the contemporary critics most disagreed was in their understanding of the artist as a mediating agent. For Honour, the crystalline clarity and precision of the work suggested that Benoist had virtually eliminated her own subjectivity from the painting, presenting the model through 'objective' eyes: 'The painting is…a masterpiece of visual sensitivity, the soft black skin being exquisitely set off by the crisp white, freshly laundered cotton headdress and drapery. Few, if any, European images of non-Europeans are as calmly and clear-sightedly objective'.[132] When Salon critics commented on the work, by contrast, they generally framed it as a product of artistic intervention. Boutard, for example, praised Benoist for posing the model 'with intelligence, that is to say in a gracious attitude, which is not at all habitual among women of her colour'.[133] Others focused on technical qualities that they regarded as products of Benoist's skilful handling of the brush. 'It is easy to see

14 Detail of Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of a Black Woman*, 1800.

in the purity of the drawing that she is the student of David',[134] one critic observed. Another writer praised Benoist's understanding of colour while expressing some doubt about whether the painting depicted a specific person or a fantasy figure ('maybe it is a portrait').[135]

The significance of these responses lies in the distinction that they drew between the qualities of the artist and those of the sitter. One critic, who expressed 'horror' at the sight of a Black subject in Benoist's painting, made the contrast between artist and model explicit in declaring that 'it is a pretty white hand that made for us this blackness'.[136] Benoist herself invited this consideration of differing hands by electing to sign the painting just above the fingers of her model (*plate 14*). Helen Weston, the first art historian to call attention to the placement of the signature, interpreted it as an invitation to imagine the beauty of the white artist's hand juxtaposed with the supposed ugliness of the Black model.[137] More recently, several scholars have contested Weston's interpretation, instead describing Benoist's placement of her signature as a sign of subjective identification between the artist and the model,

perhaps even an acknowledgment that the portrait constituted a collaborative production.[138] The unusual arrangement of the model's fingers, which look as if they could be holding a brush, provide some visual basis for reading the signature as an assertion of amalgamated authorial identities, as does the shared brown colour of the signature and the model's skin. Yet Weston's analysis of the painting is hard to dismiss given the degree to which it aligns with the work's original reception, which contrasted the 'ugliness' of the model with the 'pretty white hand' of the artist.

One way to reconcile the two perspectives is to recall how the discourse of aesthetic redemption involved a degree of subjective displacement, infusing the non-normative body with the spirit of the painter. When Boutard described Madeleine's graceful pose as the product of Benoist's intelligence, for example, he assumed that it was the artist's mind that controlled the subject's body (the critics who attributed the virtues of the picture to David's influence on Benoist also offer a reminder that, according to the misogynistic logic of the period, genius ultimately needed to be traced back to a male artist).[139] The depicted figure was therefore understood to have acquired her charms through the animating force of another person's subjectivity. In that respect, the picture was indeed regarded by contemporary viewers as presenting a union of artist and model, but it was an integration based on bodily inhabitation, not collaboration. Seen in this way, the placement of the signature underscored the painter's authorial presence within the depicted subject, the redeemer expressing herself through the bodily shell of the redeemed.

We need not agree with this conception of artistic creation in order to recognise its impact on a picture's historical meaning. It is entirely possible that Madeleine played an active role in shaping the form of her pictorial representation while the artist and her viewers simply did not wish to see the work in this way. The portrait could, in fact, convey something of Madeleine's authentic character — in the absence of other depictions of the model, it is impossible to say — even as Salon visitors in 1800 refused to consider the work in these terms. Looking at Benoist's painting today, it is difficult to resist searching the figure's eyes for a glimmer of the real person behind the painted face. The directness of the gaze encourages such scrutiny, tempting us with the possibility of an intersubjective encounter without fully offering it.[140] The specificity of the model's features convey her individuality, while the shadow that creeps across the far side of her face evokes the withholding of identity. Like the faintly translucent corner of the headwrap that nearly touches her shoulder, the figure's face suggests the luminous presence of what it also obscures. Is this Madeleine? Is the slight hint of a smile her own? It would be both simplistic and overly cynical to reject the possibility. Models, after all, can exert a degree of control over their self-presentation, even against an artist's will, even against audience expectations. The sovereignty of the artistic genius, like aesthetic autonomy itself, was an eighteenth-century myth whose limits we now recognise. What I wish to stress, however, is that these myths had real consequences for the way art acquired meaning. They shaped how artists and audiences made sense of paintings, and they determined art's capacity to influence its viewers.

The theory of aesthetic redemption, which drew its strength from the eighteenth-century belief in the autogenous power of both art and the artist, was among the most consequential ideas to emerge from these myths. By presuming the artist's ability to transcend the alleged deficiencies of the depicted subject, aesthetic redemption permitted viewers to treat the borders of a painting as an ideological barrier, insulating real-life commitments from cultural encounters. A paradox is worth noting here: the belief in aesthetic redemption, while nominally enlarging

art's powers, also curtailed them. In giving artists the authority to invent new realms of experience, it circumscribed their capacity to affect perceptions of the actual world that they inhabited and represented. 'Fiction is truth when it emanates from the head of a genius; he creates a magic world more beautiful than the existing one', Louis-Sébastien Mercier declared in 1776.[141] Such a view did much for the status of the artist, who now assumed the role of a divine creator. But this celebration of autonomous genius promised nothing to the artist's subject, whose continued abasement provided the necessary foil for aesthetic transcendence.

Notes

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1 Jean-Baptiste Boutard, 'Exposition de peintures, sculptures et gravures', *Journal des débats*, 1800, Collection Deloynes 22: 632, 684–685.

2 'L'artiste ne peut se faire valoir que par la pose de son modèle et la correction de son dessin, dans les parties qui présentent du moins des formes familières à l'art, enfin par le choix des accessoires et l'exécution générale. C'est ce qu'a fait madame Benoit [sic]'.

3 Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, part 1, *Slaves and Liberators*, Cambridge, 1989, 17.

4 Vincent Boele, Esther Schreuder, and Elmer Kolfin, *Black Is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, Amsterdam, 2008, 9.

5 For a classic framing of the issue, see Brian Wallis, 'Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes', *American Art*, 9: 2, 1995, 54–59. For a more recent account of artistic individuation as a form of resistance to typological imagery, see Jennifer Van Horn, *Portraits of Resistance: Activating Art during Slavery*, New Haven, 2022, especially 82–87.

6 See especially Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, 'Introduction: Envisioning Slave Portraiture', and Marcia Pointon, 'Slavery and the Possibilities of Portraiture', both in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, New York, 2013, 8–11 and 41–69. See also Cécile Bishop, 'Portraiture, Race, and Subjectivity: The Opacity of Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négresse*, *Word & Image*, 35: 1, 2019, 1–11.

7 *Le modèle noir: de Géricault à Matisse*, ed. Cécile Debray, Stéphane Guégan, Denise Murrell and Isolde Pludermacher, Paris, 2019, 15.

8 *Le modèle noir*, 15, 58.

9 For an overview of the issue, see Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, 'Ugliness', in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, Chicago, 2003, 281–295; Robert Doran, 'Mimesis and Aesthetic Redemption', in *Rethinking Mimesis: Concepts and Practices of Literary Representation*, ed. Saija Isomaa, Sari Kivistö, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Sanna Nyqvist, Merja Polvinen and Riikka Rossi, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012, 203–227. For renewed interest in the topic in Renaissance Italy, see Olivier Chiquet, *Penser la laideur dans l'art italien de la Renaissance: De la dysharmonie à la belle laideur*, Rennes, 2022.

10 See especially René Démoris, 'Chardin and the Far Side of Illusion', in *Chardin*, ed. Pierre Rosenberg, New York, 2000, 99–109; Herbert Dieckmann, 'Das Abscheuliche und Schreckliche in der Kunsttheorie des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Die Nicht mehr schönen Künste; Grenzphänomene des Ästhetischen.*, ed. H. R. Jauss, München, 1968, 271–317.

11 'L'effet ou *harmonie* de lumière & de couleur peuvent subsister dans un tableau, indépendamment de l'imperfection des objets qui y sont représentés'. Denis Diderot, 'Harmonie', in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, vol. 8, Paris, 1765, 51.

12 Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, ed. Else Marie Bukdahl and Annette Lorenceau, Paris, 1984, 111.

13 Other scholars have similarly used the term to describe the generally transformative effects of art (see, for example, Doran, 'Mimesis and Aesthetic Redemption'), but I want to insist here on its roots in a rhetoric of consecration that existed in the eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse.

14 Denis Diderot, *Ruines et paysages: Salon de 1767*, ed. Else Marie Bukdahl and Annette Lorenceau, Paris, 1984, 290, 309, 423, 427, 448.

15 'Quand on expose une tête seule, il faut qu'elle soit très belle, et celle de ce chanteur de rue, de ce gueux ivre demandait une exécution merveilleuse pour en excuser le bas caractère. …Qui est-ce qui regarderait les Téniers, les Wouwermans, les Berghem, tous les tableaux de l'école flamande, la plupart de ces obscénités de l'école italienne, tous ces sujets empruntés de la fable qui ne montrent que des natures méprisables, que des mœurs corrompues, si le talent ne rachetait le dégoût de la chose?'; 'Tête de femme sans grâce. … Qu'une exécution merveilleuse rachète la pauvreté du sujet'. *Diderot, Salon de 1767*, 427, 448.

16 *Diderot, Salon de 1767*, 448.

17 The first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* provides the following definitions: 'Acheter ce qu'on a vendu. …Il signifie aussi, Délivrer, retirer des mains d' autrui, une personne, moyennant certain prix, payer le prix de la liberté de quelqu'un. …*Racheter*, Se dit aussi en parlant de Nôtre- Seigneur Jésus-Christ'. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise*, Paris, 1694, 1:10. For the sixteenth-century meanings of the word, see Edmond Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle*, vol. 6, Paris, 1965, 309.

18 The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* first gestures toward this new meaning in the fourth edition (1762) by adding the example sentence 'Racheter ses défauts par ses agréments'. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie françoise*, Paris, 1762, 2:523.

19 On the eighteenth-century veneration of art as secular faith, see especially Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*, New York, 2013, 71–75; Paul Bénichou, *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750-1830*, trans. Mark K. Jensen, Lincoln, 1999.

20 David Bindman, '*Race Is Everything*': *Art and Human Difference*, London, 2023, 30, 36–37.

21 'Il a fallu aussi travailler la catégorisation artistique traditionnelle binaire, qui voudrait dresser des frontières étanches entre art majeur et art mineur'. Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race: l'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières*, Dijon, 2019, 40–41.

22 Bindman provides a succinct overview of the issue in the introduction to *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, vol. 3, part 3, *The Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2011, 6–10.

23 Consider, for example, Buffon's description of Senegalese people as 'les plus beaux' Africans because they 'ont les traits du visage aussi beaux, le nez aussi élevé, et les lèvres aussi minces que les Européens'. Georges-Louis Leclerc comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière: avec la description du Cabinet du Roy*, 15 vols, Paris, 1749–67, vol. 3, 1749, 459.

24 'Interrogez un nègre de Guinée, le beau est pour lui une peau noire huileuse, des yeux enfoncés, un nez épaté'. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, London, 1764, 47. On Voltaire's views of Africans more broadly, see Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*, Baltimore, 2011, 137–49.

25 'Je crois que les nègres sont moins beaux pour les nègres même que les blancs, pour les nègres et pour les blancs'. Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, 236.

26 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. William Hamilton, Loeb Classical Library 199, Cambridge, 2014, 37.

27 'Il n'est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux,/Qui, par l'art imité, ne puisse plaire aux yeux:/D'un pinceau délicat l'artifice agréable/Du plus affreux objet fait un objet aimable'. Nicolas Boileau Despréaux, *Art poétique: épitres, odes, poésies diverses et épigrammes*, ed. Sylvain Menant, Paris, 1998, 98.
28 On the significance of Boileau's position in the evolving theory of aesthetic redemption, see especially Doran, 'Mimesis and Aesthetic Redemption', 210–11; René Bray, *La formation de la doctrine classique en France*, Paris, 1927, 152.
29 For the influence of courtly norms on Boileau's aesthetic theory, see Annie Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne: de la raison classique à l'imagination créatrice, 1680-1814*, Paris, 1994, 62; Jean Ehrard, *L'idée de nature en France dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1963, 260.
30 Démoris, 'Chardin and the Far Side of Illusion', 99–109.
31 The artist Antoine Coypel stated that he and Roger de Piles counted Boileau as a mutual friend, noting that the three dined together. See the 'Preface' in Antoine Coypel, *Discours prononcez dans les conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, Paris, 1721, n.p. De Piles also painted a portrait of Boileau. See Bernard Teyssèdre, *Roger de Piles et les débats sur le coloris au siècle de Louis XIV*, Paris, 1965, 513–519.
32 Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish, Berkeley, 1993, 161–195.
33 'La peinture n'est qu'un fard...il est de son essence de tromper'. Roger de Piles, *Dialogue sur le coloris*, Paris, 1673, 68.
34 'C'est une ivresse mélancolique, représentée sous la figure grasse & pesante du même Silène, que les fumées du vin ont entièrement abruti…elle [la figure] est peinte et coloriée d'une force et d'un artifice sans pareil'. Roger de Piles, *Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture, et sur le jugement qu'on doit faire des tableaux*, Paris, 1677, 143–144.
35 'Le peintre pour faire réussir son tableau dans cette intention a placé d'un côté un More qui pince le Silène à la fesse, et dont la couleur jointe aux autres corps ombrés qui lui sont voisins, relève celle du vieillard qui est fort éclairé'. De Piles, *Conversations*, 144.
36 On the 'mistress and page' genre, see David Bindman and Helen Weston, 'Court and City: Fantasies of Domination', in *The Image of the Black*, vol. 3, part 3, 2011, 125–170; David Bindman, 'Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture: From Courtly to Commercial Societies', in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, 70–87.
37 'Tout y est plein de vie, d'un dessein correct, d'une suavité et d'une force tout ensemble extraordinaire'. De Piles, *Conversations*, 146.
38 Thomas Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art*, New Haven, 1985, 24–26.
39 Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art*, 24–26, 41.
40 Thomas Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400-1800*, New Haven, 2000, 272–277.
41 Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris, 1708, 8–11.
42 'Ce n'était, comme on peut bien se l'imaginer de Rembrant, ni la beauté du dessein, ni la noblesse des expressions qui avaient produit cet effet'. De Piles, *Cours de peinture*, 10.
43 De Piles, *Cours de peinture*, 10.
44 Jean Michel Massing, *Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, vol. 3, part 2, *Europe and the World Beyond*, Cambridge, 2011, 234; Lafont, *L'Art et la race*, 233–234.
45 Fernand Engerand, *Inventaire des tableaux du Roy rédigé en 1709 et 1710*, Paris, 1899, 458. For the chronology of inventories, see Nicole Garnier-Pelle, *Antoine Coypel, 1661-1722*, Paris, 1989, 95–96.
46 'Le petit personnage noir sans nom passe ici d'un accessoire décoratif… à un *sujet individué*' (emphasis in original). Lafont, *L'Art et la race*, 233–234.
47 Honour, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 4, part 1, 1989, 23. For a more ambivalent version of this argument, see Bindman, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 3, part 3, 2011, 15–16.
48 Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*, Philadelphia, 2016.
49 Susan Koslow, *Frans Snyders: The Noble Estate: Seventeenth-Century Still-Life and Animal Painting in the Southern Netherlands*, Antwerp, 1995, 280–283.
50 On the lore of grapes and mimesis as an inspiration for Northern European still life painting, see Koslow, *Frans Snyders*, 45–51. On the monkey as symbolic of artistic imitation, see H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, London, 1952, 287–314.
51 In Western art, the comparison of African people with monkeys goes back at least to the eleventh century, when both were associated with demonic forces. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore*, 49.
52 Engerand, *Inventaire des tableaux*, 458.
53 For the significance of grapes in de Piles, see Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles*, 87–88.
54 François Bernier, 'Nouvelle division de la terre, par les différentes espèces ou races d'hommes qui l'habitent', *Journal des sçavans*, April 24, 1684, 133–140. Anne Lafont was the first scholar to call attention to the shared timing: Lafont, *L'art et la race*, 37. Coypel's painting is undated but has been plausibly situated in the 1680s based on circumstantial evidence: Garnier-Pelle, *Antoine Coypel*, 94–96.
55 Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*.
56 On the larger parallels between scientific and artistic representations of Blackness during this time, see especially Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650-1850*, Manchester, 2017, 143–191.
57 For a recent study of the competition, including translations of the entries, see Andrew S. Curran and Henry Louis Gates Jr, eds, *Who's Black and Why?: A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race*, Cambridge, 2022.
58 David Bindman, Paul Kaplan, and Helen Weston, 'The City between Fantasy and Reality', in *The Image of the Black*, vol. 3, part 3, 2011, 173; Lafont, *L'art et la race*, 32; Oliver Wunsch, 'Discriminating Taste: Skin Color and Connoisseurship in Eighteenth-Century France', *H-France Salon*, 14: 8, 2022, 1–12.
59 Pierre Barrère, *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des nègres*, Paris, 1741. Translated in Curran and Gates, *Who's Black*, 185.
60 Bindman, Kaplan, and Weston, 'The City between Fantasy and Reality', 173.
61 For the material and optical properties of the medium, see Thea Burns, *The Invention of Pastel Painting*, London, 2007, 1–40; Neil Jeffares, 'Prolegomena', in *Pastels & Pastellists*, 2025, 15–57.
62 Antoine Bauderon de Sénecé, *Lettre à Monsieur de Poiresson-Chamarande, Lieutenant-Général au bailliage & siège présidial de Chaumont en Bassigny*, Paris, 1741, 15.
63 'La beauté du pinceau peut leur prêter des grâces'. Louis Tocqué, 'Sur la peinture et le portrait', in Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel, eds, *Les Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, 6 vols, Paris, 2007–2015, vol. 5, 2012, 456.
64 '…couper la couleur en certains endroits et la lâcher en d'autres avec adresse pour produire ces beaux passages. … appuyer fièrement la brosse ou le pinceau'. Tocqué, 'Sur la peinture et le portrait', 456.
65 'cette touche hardie et nourrie…. C'est la touche qui donne la vie et le mouvement. L'on aime à s'approcher des tableaux bien touches, plus on les examine et plus on est satisfait'. Tocqué, 'Sur la peinture et le portrait', 457.
66 The inventory of Caylus's possessions at the time of his death included a pastel described as a 'bust of a *nègre*'. The inventory did not list the artist, but the work was later attributed to La Tour when it reappeared among the possessions of the duc de Caylus, who inherited much of the comte de Caylus's collections. For the first inventory, see Cordélia Hattori, 'Le comte de Caylus d'après les archives: première partie', *Les cahiers d'histoire de l'art*, no. 5, 2007, 64. For the duc de Caylus, see *Catalogue du cabinet d'histoire naturelle et d'antiquités de M. le duc de Caylus, grand d'Espagne de la première classe*, Paris, 1772, 208; Pierre Remy, *Catalogue des tableaux, miniatures, bronzes, vases de marbre, figures de la Chine et porcelaines du cabinet de M. ****, Paris, 1773, 11.
67 'Je ne crois pas qu'on doive les regarder comme des imitations simples d'un jeu de la Nature. …ces espèces de monstres ne peuvent porter avec eux le caractère de la beauté, encore moins celui de l'élégance'. Caylus, 'Sur l'Hermaphrodite', in Lichtenstein and Michel, *Les Conférences*, 6, 2015, 547.
68 'Celui que j'ai vu, jouissant d'une très bonne santé, aurait été très peu avantageux à dessiner'. Caylus, 'Sur l'Hermaphrodite', 547.
69 'Ce qui pouvait plaire davantage…par une élégante réunion…telle que la Nature ne l'avait point produite'. Caylus, 'Sur l'Hermaphrodite', 548.
70 The best overview of the controversy to date is Andrew Curran, 'Rethinking Race History: The Role of the Albino in the French Enlightenment Life Sciences', *History and Theory*, 48: 4, 2009, 151–179,

elaborated in Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*. See also Renato G. Mazzolini, 'Colonialism and the Emergence of Racial Theories', in *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell, New York, 2018, 364–66; Renato G. Mazzolini, 'Albinos, Leucoaethiopes, Dondos, Kakerlakken: sulla storia dell'albinismo dal 1609 al 1812', in *La natura e il corpo: studi in memoria di Attilio Zanca: atti del convegno, Mantova, 17 maggio* 2003, ed. Giuseppe Olmi and Giuseppe Papagno, Florence, 2006, 161–204.

71 The documentation surrounding the commission is detailed in Dominique d'Arnoult, *Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, ca. 1715-1783: un portraitiste dans l'Europe des Lumières*, Paris, 2014, 207.

72 Anne Lafont, 'How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 51: 1, 2017, 102.

73 On the novelty of Maupertuis's epigenetic framework, see Michael H. Hoffheimer, 'Maupertuis and the Eighteenth-Century Critique of Preexistence', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 15: 1, 1982, 119–144; Marco Storni, 'Experience, Analogy and Mechanism in Maupertuis's Theory of Generation', in *Mechanism, Life and Mind in Modern Natural Philosophy*, ed. Charles T. Wolfe, Paolo Pecere, and Antonio Clericuzio, Cham, 2022, 155–174.

74 Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, *Vénus physique*, n.p. 1745, 147.

75 Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald Andrew Russell, vol. 5, Cambridge, 2014, 132–133. The code is frequently repeated in rhetorical guides throughout the early modern period. See, for example, John Bulwer, *Chirologia, or, The Naturall Language of the Hand*, London, 1644, 79.

76 'Diverses observations anatomiques', in *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences*, Année 1744, Paris, 1748, 12.

77 I am grateful to Emine Fetvaci for calling my attention to the similarity of the clothing. On the visual presentation of the chief eunuch, see Jane Hathaway, *The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker*, New York, 2018, 248–264. On French fascination with the chief eunuch, see Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature*, New Haven, 2000, 66–73, 119–126.

78 Arnoult, *Jean-Baptiste Perronneau*, 207.

79 Carl Reinhold Berch, *Lettres parisiennes adressées à ses amis 1740-1746*, ed. Jan Heidner, Stockholm, 1997, 96.

80 On the tastes and collecting practices of the Tessins, see Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage, eds, *Collecting Enlightenment: Carl Gustaf Tessin and the Making of National Collections*, Stockholm, 2017; Guillaume Faroult, Xavier Salmon, and Juliette Trey, *Un Suédois à Paris au XVIIIe siècle: la collection Tessin*, Paris, 2016; Jan Heidner, 'Carl Gustaf Tessin—en samlare och konstförmedlare', in *Carl Gustaf Tessin: kulturpersonen och privatmannen, 1695-1770*, ed. Gunnar von Proschwitz, Stockholm, 1995, 21–40.

81 On the growing suspicion of curiosity cabinets among philosophers, see Bettina Dietz and Thomas Nutz, 'Collections Curieuses: The Aesthetics of Curiosity and Elite Lifestyle in Eighteenth-Century Paris', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 29: 3, 2005, 47; Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Berkeley, 1994, 398.

82 'La plupart de ceux qui, sans aucune étude précédente de l'Histoire Naturelle, veulent avoir des cabinets de ce genre, sont de ces personnes aisées, peu occupées, qui cherchent à s'amuser, & regardent comme un mérite d'être mises au rang des curieux'. Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, 1, 1749, 23.

83 'À quoi bon avoir rassemblé dans des édifices, à grande peine & à grands frais, une multitude de productions, pour me les offrir confondues pêle-mêle & sans aucun égard, soit à la nature des choses, soit aux principes de l'histoire naturelle?' Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, 1, 1749, 23.

84 For the importance of the Tessins in Linnaeus's career, see Lisbet Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*, Cambridge, 1999, 105, 159.

85 Hanna Hodacs, 'Linnaean Natural History: Materiality, Commerce and Change', in *Linnaeus, Natural History and the Circulation of Knowledge*, ed. Hanna Hodacs, Kenneth Nyberg, and Stéphane Van Damme, Oxford, 2018, 91.

86 Nils Ekedahl, 'Collecting Flowers. Linnaean Method and the Humanist Art of Reading', *Symbolae Botanicae Usaliensis*, 33: 3, 2005, 47–59; David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History*, Chicago, 2002, 412–413.

87 Carl Linnaeus, 'A Translation of Carl Linnaeus's Introduction to *Genera Plantarum* (1737)', trans. Staffan Müller-Wille and Karen Reeds, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 38: 3, 2007, 568.

88 Linnaeus, 'Introduction to *Genera Plantarum*', 568.

89 Carl Linnaeus, *Systema naturae per regna tria naturae*, vol. 1, Stockholm, 1758, 24.

90 Voltaire, 'Relation touchant un maure blanc', 197.

91 Mazzolini, 'Albinos', 183.

92 Isabelle Charmantier, 'Carl Linnaeus and the Visual Representation of Nature', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, 41: 4, 2011, 365–404.

93 Charmantier, 'Carl Linnaeus and the Visual Representation of Nature', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences*, 41: 4, 2011, 365–404, 378.

94 Linnaeus to John Ellis, February 8, 1758, in James Edward Smith, *A Selection of the Correspondence of Linnaeus, and Other Naturalists*, London, 1821, 89. On the significance of teeth for Linnaeus, see Christina Skott, 'Linnaeus and the Troglodyte', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 42: 123, 2014, 146.

95 '…le secret de sauver par le talent le dégout de certaines natures'. Denis Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture: Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, Paris, 1984, 220.

96 'On n'entend rien à cette magie. Ce sont des couches épaisses de couleur, appliquées les unes sur les autres, et dont l'effet transpire de dessous en dessus. D'autres fois on dirait que c'est une vapeur qu'on a soufflée sur la toile; ailleurs, une écume légère qu'on y a jetée'. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, 220.

97 'C'est la chair même du poisson'. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, 220.

98 'Le meilleur tableaux, le plus harmonieux, n'est-il qu'un tissu de faussetés qui se couvrent les unes les autres. Il y a des objets qui gagnent, d'autres qui perdent, et la grande magie consiste à approcher tout près de nature, et à faire que tout perde ou gagne proportionnellement'. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, 213.

99 'Mais alors ce n'est plus la scène réelle et vrai qu'on voit; ce n'en est, pour ainsi dire, que la traduction'. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, 213.

100 'Il y a sans doute des sujets ingrats; mais c'est pour l'artiste ordinaire qu'ils sont communs'. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, 61.

101 Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, 'Note sur Diderot et la magie de l'art', *Critique*, 673-674: 6, June 2003, 498–513.

102 'S'il est vrai, comme le disent les philosophes, qu'il n'y a de réel que nos sensations, … quelle différence il y a pour eux, à quatre pieds de tes tableaux, entre le Créateur et toi?' Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, 117.

103 On anti-religiosity in the 'System of Knowledge', see Andrew S. Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, New York, 2019, 115–117.

104 For theories of genius in the late eighteenth century, see McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 67–103; Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique*, 695–741.

105 'L'esprit fait adorer une aimable laideur'. Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson and P.-A. Coupin, *Œuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson, peintre d'histoire: suivies de sa correspondance*, 2 vols, Paris, 1829, 1:394.

106 'Sachez, usant parfois d'un honnête artifice,/Menteur officieux, atténuer un vice,/Et, sans dissimuler la simple vérité,/Pallier à la laideur, embellir la beauté'. Girodet-Trioson and Coupin, *Œuvres posthumes*, 1:391

107 'Souvent sans la beauté le génie étincelle'. Girodet-Trioson and Coupin, *Œuvres posthumes*, 1:394.

108 On the painting as an expression of Black political agency, see especially Honour, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 4, part 1, 1989, 104–106; Helen D. Weston, 'Representing the Right to Represent: The "Portrait of Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies" by A.-L. Girodet', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 26, 1994, 83–99; Grigsby, *Extremities*, 9–63; Anne Lafont, 'Un portrait entre cliché racial et émancipation sociale', in *Portraits du pouvoir: actes du colloque*, ed. Anne-Lise Desmas, Olivier Bonfait, and Brigitte Marin, Paris, 2003, 110–113; Anne Lafont, 'Les rencontres hypothétiques du peintre et de son modèle: clefs sociales dans l'interprétation du tableau', in *Portraits du pouvoir*, 114–125; Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, 167–175.

109 Sylvia Musto, 'Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation: Anne-Louis Girodet's Citizen Belley', *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/ Canadian Art Review*, 20: 1/2, 1993, 60–71; Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture*, Cambridge, 1991, 32–37.

110 'Le portrait d'un Nègre. Le costume dénote un Représentant du Peuple Français. Le buste du célèbre Raynal, philosophe et historien, est un tribut de reconnaissance que les hommes de couleur doivent au premier apôtre de la liberté des Américains Français'. Sylvain Bellenger, 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen', in *Girodet, 1767-1824*, ed. Sylvain Bellenger, Paris, 2005, 322, 330.

111 William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880*, Bloomington, 1980, 132. See also Serge Daget, 'Les mots esclave, nègre, Noir, et les jugements de valeur sur la traite négrière dans la littérature abolitionniste française de 1770 à 1845', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 60: 221, 1973, 511–48.

112 'Tous les peuples de l'Europe représentent le démon avec une peau noire, tandis que les Ethiopiens donnent à leurs mauvais génies un visage blanc; on peut donc penser assez vraisemblablement que la figure la plus étrangement originale, j'ai presque dit la plus ridicule, la plus effrayante même aux yeux non encore dépaysés d'un nègre de l'Abyssinie ou d'un Tartare Calmouk, serait, par exemple, celle de l'Apollon du Belvédère'. Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité dans les arts du dessin', in *Œuvres posthumes de Girodet-Trioson*, 2:199.

113 The quote is presented in these terms in Bellenger, *Girodet, 1767-1824*, 333.

114 'Laissons à l'admiration isolée et à l'ignorance lointaine des peuples sauvages, les formes hideuses et les discordantes enluminures de leurs arts grossiers'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 203.

115 'Et si son goût ne s'est point corrompu, si ses yeux ne se sont point déshabitués des charmes du beau absolu, que d'objets cependant l'auront frappé par leur immense variété, leur nouveauté soudaine, ou leur originalité piquante!' Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 198.

116 'Il est de l'essence de la haute beauté d'exercer un empire immuable et absolu'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 201.

117 'Nous avons besoin d'être émus, fût-ce même par la laideur, pourvu qu'elle nous offre l'attrait de la nouveauté, ou qu'elle soit animée par l'esprit et par la grâce qui se partagent souvent entre elle et la beauté même'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 201.

118 'Où cette beauté sublime n'est pas, et elle est bien éloignée de se prodiguer, nous voulons du moins trouver une physionomie'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 201.

119 For an overview of Girodet's engagement with Lavater, see George Levitine, 'The Influence of Lavater and Girodet's *Expression des sentiments de l'âme*', *The Art Bulletin*, 36: 1, 1954, 33–44.

120 Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 32–37; Musto, 'Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation', 60–71; Weston, 'Representing the Right to Represent', 85, 97.

121 'Ce qui nous déplaît le plus, c'est ce qui ne porte aucune empreinte déterminée: voilà pourquoi les visages insignifiants, ainsi que les caractères indécis, nous laissent complètement indifférents; tandis que nous pouvons nous passionner pour les figures les moins régulières, et pour cette espèce d'esprit qu'on nomme esprit original'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité, 201.

122 'L'originalité louable, celle qui plaît et qui attache, est donc toujours le produit d'une imagination féconde, réglée par un jugement éclairé, guidée surtout par ce tact fin et sûr qui fixe l'artiste au choix délicat de ce que la belle nature lui offre de plus analogue à la direction de ses sentiments et aux besoins de ses sensations'. Girodet-Trioson, 'De l'originalité', 201.

123 'Il est bien dur, mon ami, de n'apprendre à connaître la société que pour la mépriser, et, par conséquent, pour la fuir'. Letter from Girodet to François Gérard, 30 December 1789, in Henri Alexandre Gérard, ed., *Lettres adressées au baron François Gérard, peintre d'histoire*, vol. 1, Paris, 1888, 128.

124 George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism: The Barbu Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France*, University Park, 1978.

125 Helen Weston, 'Girodet's Portrait of C. Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies: In Remembrance of "Things Sublime",' in *The Art of Forgetting*, ed. Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, Oxford, 2001, 81.

126 'Que d'objets sublimes! Raynal, la liberté des nègres et le pinceau de Girodet!' Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, 'Exposition des ouvrages de peintures, sculptures, architectures, gravures', *La Décade philosophique*, 1798, Collection Deloynes 20: 539, 118.

127 'Oui, noir; mais pas si diable./Le voyant de plus près,/Je le trouve admirable…/Combien je me trompais. (bis)/Oui, savant Giraudet,/Ce tableau-là me plaît!' *La Vérité en riant, ou Les Tableaux traités comme ils le méritent, en vaudevilles*, Paris, 1798, 6.

128 Grigsby, *Extremities*, 56. See also Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, 175.

129 'Un portrait ne sera *parlant*, aux yeux des connoisseurs, que lorsqu'il sera fait artistement, que lorsque l'expression l'animera d'un esprit de vie. L'expression est, dans tous les genres, la première partie de l'art, puisque c'est par elle seule que la toile ou le marbre respire'. Claude Henri Watelet and Pierre Charles Levesque, *Dictionnaire des arts de peinture, sculpture et gravure*, vol. 3, Paris, 1792, 717.

130 Honour, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 4, part 1, 1989, 7.

131 Honour, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 4, part 1, 1989, 22.

132 Honour, *The Image of the Black*, vol. 4, part 1, 1989, 7.

133 'C'est ce qu'a fait madame Benoit; sa négresse est posée avec esprit, c.a.d. dans une attitude gracieuse et qui ne soit point de l'habitude des gens de sa couleur'. Boutard, 'Exposition de peintures', 685.

134 'La couleur en est bien entendue'. *Notice sur les ouvrages de peinture, de sculpture, d'architecture, etc.*, Paris, 1800, 15. 'Il est facile de voir, à la pureté du dessin, qu'elle est élève de David'. Tønnes Christian Bruun de Neergaard, *Sur la situation des beaux-arts en France, ou Lettres d'un Danois à son ami*, Paris, 1801, 42.

135 'peut-être est-ce un portrait'. *Notice sur les ouvrages de peinture*, 15.

136 'C'est une main blanche et jolie/Qui nous a fait cette noirceur'. C. Th., *Le Nouveau Arlequin et son ami Gilles au Muséum, Ou La Vérité dite en plaisantant.: Critique piquante, en vaudevilles des tableaux, dessins, sculptures, et autres objets précieux*, Paris, 1800, 9.

137 Weston, 'The Cook', 58, 61.

138 Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 'Who Is the Subject? Marie-Guilhelmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Négresse*', in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal, New York, 2013, 336–38; Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces*, 183; Charlotte Guichard, *La griffe du peintre*, Paris, 2018, 213–214.

139 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a New Feminist Aesthetics*, Bloomington, 1990; Mary D. Sheriff, *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France*, Chicago, 2004, 43–84.

140 On the portrait's withholding of subjectivity as a productive prompt for imagination and empathetic experience, see Bishop, 'Portraiture, Race, and Subjectivity'.

141 'La fiction est vérité, quand elle émane de la tête d'un homme de génie; il crée un monde magique plus beau que le monde existant'. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 'Le Bonheur des gens de lettres', in *Éloges et discours philosophiques qui ont concouru pour les Prix de l'Académie françoise et de plusieurs autres académies*, Amsterdam, 1776, 50.