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Centering the Black Woman as a Subject of Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century French Art

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For centuries, the purpose of European art was to depict the powerful, the symbolic, or even just the natural world and turn it into something beautiful. With the expansion of European colonial power leading into the eighteenth century, depictions of non-Europeans and Africans,



Figure 1. Pierre Mignard, *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*, 1682

specifically, increased; although most were placed in servile roles, symbols of colonial conquest to emphasize the wealth and status of the painting's white subjects. (fig. 1) Black women were even less likely to appear in comparison to their male counterparts and were often relegated to the background scenery. However, as the Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century transitioned into the Romantic period and beyond with the turn of a new century, some artists began to throw off old truisms of what art should be

and who could be included in it. A few works from the nineteenth century defy common practice and bring black women out of the margins to place them at the center of the work to be admired as beautiful in their own right. This paper attempts to look at the ways non-traditional depictions of black women in French art evolved over the course of the nineteenth century through analyzing the works of three artists, Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Charles Cordier, and Frederic Bazille.

The treatment of race in France during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a complicated topic. While its ideology was broadly similar to that of its European neighbors, it also reflected key differences in reasoning and expression. Many these differences are due to the inherent conflict between France's cultural idealization of freedom and its simultaneous status as

a slave-holding colonial power.¹ True to their Enlightenment ideals, some prominent French thinkers of the eighteenth century theorized what they saw as logical, scientific reasons why enslaved peoples were an exception to those values, categorizing them as lesser forms of humanity based on what they believed were the fixed characteristics of their racial type.² After 200 years of slavery, Africa and its people began to lose some of the allure they once held in the European imagination, now marred by exposure and the cultural association of darkness with evil and bad character.³ While some took to classifying other races of people as entirely separate and lower subdivisions of humanity, an idea known as polygenism, early French naturalists like Buffon postulated a monogenist theory that stated that the tropical climate and abundant resources of their homeland made Africans lazy, dishonest, and naturally predisposed to slavery.⁴ While not without its critics, this theory became accepted enough to be used in a 1758 court case to argue for the emancipation of a South Indian slave on the basis that despite his appearance, his Indian origins did not give him such predispositions of character.⁵ Abolitionists like Abbe Gregoire took Buffon's hypothesis even further in the opposite direction, arguing for the emancipation of slaves on the belief that freedom from persecution would allow people of African descent to give up their cultures and intermarry with white Catholics which would eventually breed out their degeneracy.⁶ Other abolitionists regardless of racial beliefs equated

¹ Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 71.

² Pierre H. Bouelle, "François Bernier and the Origin of the Modern Concept of Race," In *The Color of Liberty*, edited by Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 14.

³ Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France,"* 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.; Pierre H. Bouelle, "Modern Concept of Race," 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶ Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, "Eliminating Race, Eliminating Difference: Blacks, Jews, and the Abbé Grégoire," In *The Color of Liberty*, edited by Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 33.

slavery with despotism and argued that just as the common French person should be free from the crushing injustice of the monarch, so should the actual slaves be free from slavery.⁷

These theories of race are reflected in the aesthetic principles of the Enlightenment era, which were geared towards realizing the perfect ideals of beauty and morality, best defined by the works of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Both explain their theories using analogies of the inherent dichotomies primarily between the sexes and the feelings provoked by racial differences.⁸ Burke was the first to codify a philosophical criterion of beauty and the sublime in 1757. To Burke, beauty is that which inspires love and tenderness in the observer, associated with things which are light and feminine. Meanwhile the sublime was dark, powerful, and masculine, igniting passionate reactions through its transgression of what Burke saw as the natural social order. The black woman, however, existed outside such order, her existence sublime, to European eyes, in its physical grotesquerie and her alleged lasciviousness turning her into a monstrous figure.⁹ Her physical presence was enough to cause a reaction due to fear of her darkness, which would subside eventually through exposure.¹⁰ But the black woman was also an alluring figure; her abjection provided a thrill outside of the polite and restrained society envisioned by Burke. Kant would build upon Burke's ideas in 1764, with the added dimension of dispositions towards either beauty or the sublime being something inherent in one's national or ethnic origins, with Europeans and their features at the top of the beauty hierarchy and Africans being unable to perceive either. He also introduces the idea that beauty is the perfect realization

⁷ Peabody, "*There are No Slaves in France*," 97.

⁸ Meg Armstrong, "The Effect of Blackness: Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticisms*, 54, no. 3 (1996): 213-236, doi:10.2307/431624.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* As recounted by Burke in his Cheseldon analogy, about a young boy who, upon having cataracts removed at the age of eleven, became uneasy around black objects, and absolutely terrified upon accidentally seeing a black woman.

of a human being, and thus ugliness is the perfect imperfection. This, combined with the racial categorizations of his earlier arguments, placed white women and black women as opposites according to those terms.¹¹

As French political sentiment shifted more republican in the latter half of the eighteenth century, so too did the art being produced, transitioning from the frivolous, ornate Rococo to the more austere and monumental Neo-Classicism inspired by the arts of Ancient Greece and Rome. The preeminent painter of this period was Jacques-Louis David, who used his history paintings to discretely comment upon the degeneracy of the nobility and promote new civic ideals of patriotism and self-sacrifice.¹² This technique, known as civic humanism, can best be explained through the *Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which may have inspired David's own work.¹³ According to Reynolds, any painting of worth was aimed at promoting civic virtues to the viewers, as to remind them of their membership within the wider political body.¹⁴ Under this philosophy, the portrayal of uniqueness and the overt differences between people were discouraged, as they represented a failure to realize the true purpose of man as a political citizen who was expected to subvert his own personal interests in favor of exercising the proper public virtues for the betterment of the nation.¹⁵ For the artist, originality lay not in what distinguished him from his peers but in how closely he captured the subjects' original forms as they would be represented in nature. Nature was, for Reynolds, a term used to designate alternatively visible

¹¹ Janell Hobson, "The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 87-105, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810976>.

¹² Kathryn Calley Galitz, "The Legacy of Jacques Louis David (1748–1825)," In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jldv/hd_jldv.htm.

¹³ Philippe Bordes, "Jacques-Louis David's Anglophilia on the Eve of the French Revolution," *The Burlington Magazine* 134, no. 1073 (1992): 482-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/885156>. Reynolds served as the head of Britain's Royal Academy of Art from 1768 to his death in 1790.

¹⁴ John Barrell, "Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting," *Oxford Art Journal*, 9, no. 2 (1986): 26-41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1360415>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

phenomena not created through artificial means, an Aristotelian imminent force working towards the highest perfection of form, or at least a signification of what is agreeable to the mind or what is beautiful.¹⁶ Smoothing away individual distinctions through the portrayal of total facial and bodily harmony was the ideal, so as to universalize the subjects. David thoroughly utilized these ideas, passing them down to his students, including Marie-Guillemine Benoist.



Figure 2. Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait d'une Négrresse*, 1800

Ideals of civic humanism became increasingly radicalized at the turn of the century and were gradually appropriated by more liberal painters, who were inspired by the fledgling Romantic movement and its values of sentimentality and personal freedoms over reason and conformity.¹⁷ One such painting that emerged from this shift in priorities is Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une négresse*¹⁸ which debuted in Paris in 1800, nine years into the Haitian Revolution and less than a year after the end of the French

Revolution. (fig. 2) The titular woman, likely the Haitian servant of the Benoist family, sits in a chair draped in blue cloth, with no background details to detract the viewer's attention from her.

She is wrapped in a loose white garment held in place by a thin red cord, with the brightness of the cloth accentuating the

darkness of her skin. The white and red of her garment also combine with the cloth draped over



Figure 3. Jean Marc Nattier, *The Spring*, 1738

¹⁶ Walter J. Hipple, "General and Particular in the Discourses of Sir. Joshua Reynolds: A Study in Method," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11, No. 3 (1953): 231-247, doi:10.2307/426762.

¹⁷ Galitz.; Amy Freund, "The 'Citoyenne' Tallien: Women, Politics, and Portraiture during the French Revolution," *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 3 (2011): 326, www.jstor.org/stable/23046580.

¹⁸ Now renamed *Portrait of Madeline*

the back of her chair to form the colors of the flag of the new French Republic. And while her garment falls low enough to expose her right breast, there is no intent towards sexualization in this choice, as the exposed breast was frequently used as a way to mark that the sitter is portraying a goddess or other personification of female divinity, as shown in Natter's *The Spring*. (fig. 3) Additionally, her headscarf is tied in such a way as to be reminiscent of a Phrygian cap. The iconography of this specific piece of headwear arose during the Revolutionary period due to both its resemblance to the typical French workman's cap and to its association with the ancient Roman *pileus*, the felt cap worn by former slaves upon their emancipation.¹⁹ This connected the cap to popular



Figure 4. Henri Baron, *The Tricoteuses of the Guillotine on the steps of the Church of Saint-Roch 16th October, 1793*



Figure 5. Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

revolutionary rhetoric that used the metaphor of slavery to explain the relationship between the monarch and his subjects and was subsequently adopted by working-class revolutionaries like the sans-culottes and the tricoteuses as an expression of their political alliances.²⁰ (fig. 4) When compared to a later work like Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, one can see the similarity in the iconography adorning both Delacroix's *Liberty* and Benoist's model. (fig. 5) While she is portraying a symbolic personification of a concept, Benoist does not idealize her sitter and instead makes the effort to include humanizing elements. Unlike in Delacroix's painting, where Liberty is oversized and charging heroically forward with her

¹⁹ Nicola J. Shilliam, "Cocardes Nationales and Bonnets Rouges": Symbolic Headdresses of the French Revolution," *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 5 (1993): 115, www.jstor.org/stable/20519756.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

fellow revolutionaries towards the viewer, the austerity and confined minimal interior used by Benoist in her painting increases the feeling of intimacy and makes it seem as though the woman is sitting with the viewer. Additionally, her gaze is not directed at the viewer, rather it is somewhere slightly off to the side, which, with the intimate feel of the painting, makes it seem as though she is lost in thought. It is especially poignant that Benoist chooses a black woman as the subject for this particular portrayal of Liberty, rather than using the standard, classically beautiful white woman. While Benoist's sitter was not a slave, she still most likely would have been read as one. Especially in the climate of the Haitian Revolution and the island's long ongoing fight for independence, Benoist utilizes the essential ideals of civic humanism to remind her viewer that liberation is to be achieved for all people, not just Europeans.

Along with rejecting the Enlightenment's need for reason and categorization in favor of sentimentality, Romanticism also espoused medievalism and the fantastic while rejecting the neoclassical aesthetic. Artists in this tradition embraced the sublime, often depicting scenes of chaos, disorder, and tragedy. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the early 1800s inspired an additional subgenre within Romanticism: Orientalism, which would eventually grow to outlast its parent movement. Popularized by the works of Gérôme, Delacroix, Ingres and others, images of lily-white odalisques being bathed, dressed, or otherwise served by dark, bare breasted African women became characteristic of the Orientalist genre. While European depictions of non-western cultures were never rare, the artists who travelled with Napoleon's retinue returned with images of exotic sights, ancient monuments, and a whole new realm of sensual



Figure 6. Eugene Delacroix, *Women of Algiers*, 1834

experiences. Artists flooded French salons with imagined exotic landscapes and people. These images served to paint the East as socially regressive, violent, and alluring, the embodiment of everything the Romantics found appealing about the sublime, without the animal baseness ascribed to sub-Saharan Africa. Fictionalized harem scenes were of particular interest, as Europeans were fascinated with the idea of these foreign Islamic rulers and their pleasure quarters full of beautiful, mostly European concubines kept apart from the outside world with only the company of black eunuchs and maidservants. Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* is a particularly influential example, depicting a trio of Algerian women lounging in their home attended by their black maid. (fig.6) The women were likely real, although the household was most likely Jewish due to cultural taboos surrounding the women of Islamic households, but the black servant was an addition by Delacroix.²¹

As a visual shorthand, the image of the black servant was frequently used as a symbol of illicit and deviant sexual activity in European art, but it wasn't until around the nineteenth century that the image of the black women in proximity to a white woman carried a specific meaning.²² This was in part, a result of the introduction of the South African Sarah Baartman to the European imagination in 1810. Baartman's body, and most specifically her buttocks, became a point of obsession, and was used as evidence of European racial superiority. As with Burke and Kant, Baartman's excessive voluptuousness was displayed as proof of the assertion that black women were naturally more libidinous in comparison to white women.²³ Lending to this

²¹ *Civilizations*, Season 1, episode 8, "The Cult of Progress," performed by David Olusuga, aired June 26th, 2018, on PBS, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81012425>

²² Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 204-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343468>.

²³ Hobson, "The "Batty" Politic," 94. Black men were objectified as well, but usually their portrayals were more in the vein of the "noble savage," tied down by his connection to his immoral women.

objectification, the attributes of black womanhood were additionally associated with those of white sex workers and other unchaste women who were said to develop similar attributes due to their lifestyles and inner corruption. These motifs combined so that the presence of the “overtly sexual black woman” in nineteenth century art was frequently used to communicate the covert sexuality of her white companion or her surroundings.²⁴

Positioned in the transition between the fantasy of the Romantics and the growing desire



Figure 7. Charles Cordier, *African Venus*, 1851

for artists to depict the realities of the world was sculptor Charles Cordier, a frequent collaborator of Paris’ new Natural History Museum. As an ethnographer, Cordier’s work provides an interesting insight into the evolving French appetite to consume commodified images of the Other. Cordier was considered an innovator of polychromatic sculpture, often producing pairs of busts carved from materials imported from the subjects’ native lands.²⁵ This served not

only to separate his work from the unblemished white marble favored by the Neo-Classicalists who preceded him, but also to further entrench the subject in their commodified otherness. His *African Venus* debuted in 1851, a companion to his previous work, *Said Abdallah, of the tribe of Mayac, Kingdom of Darfur*, two years before. (fig. 7, 8) Modeled after a Sudanese former slave named Seïd



Figure 8. Charles Cordier, *Said Abdallah, of the Tribe of Mayac, Kingdom of Darfur*, 1848

Enkess, this sculpture was also made to commemorate the abolition of slavery in France’s newly

²⁴ Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” 212.

²⁵ Barbara Larson, “The Artist as Ethnographer: Charles Cordier and Race in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France,” *The Art Bulletin* 87, no. 4 (2005): 714-22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067210>.

formed Second Republic in 1848.²⁶ Both sculptures debuted with great success, and Queen Victoria even ordered casts of both to be presented to her husband, Prince Albert.²⁷ His paired busts in the Natural History Museum were frequently displayed next to ethnographic photographs and phrenology collections, made with the seeming intent to document the “ideal” look of each group.²⁸ Contrary to the monogenist roots of the Natural History Museum, Cordier belonged to a more polygenist organization and believed in portraying the inherent beauty in all races, once espousing that “Beauty is not the attribute of a privileged race,” and stated that he wished to convey “to the world of art the idea of the ubiquity of beauty.”²⁹ And true to that mission, Enkess’ features are lovingly rendered, down to the texture of her short locks. However, the piece is not without its flaws, and one can still see the influence of Orientalism in the work. Enkess’ expression is sensual, gazing out from lowered lids, her lips slightly parted. Additionally, while Enkess and Said Abdallah were French residents, neither are portrayed in French dress, placing them both in the realm of the exotic foreigner. Garbed in only a thin white cloth, Enkess is even denied the trappings of any kind of traditional cultural wear given to her counterpart or to Cordier’s other sculptures of Eastern or non-white women. Her cloth is wrapped tightly around her torso, highlighting the lines of her body, setting her up as a symbol rather than a person, divorced from a distinct culture or a connection with the living breathing present. She is denied a name, even an exotified one in the vein of her counterpart. Instead the title of Venus calls to mind a type of beautiful and sexual woman, frequently portrayed in centuries of European artistic tradition, often generalized and idealized. This goes hand in hand

²⁶ "Facing the Other: Charles Cordier (1827-1905), Ethnographic Sculptor," Musée D'Orsay, February 07, 2008, Accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-museums/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/article/facing-the-other-charles-cordier-1827-1905-ethnographic-sculptor-4515.html>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Larson, "The Artist as Ethnographer," 718.

²⁹ Ibid., 716.

with the colonization of the people Cordier represented in his work, as stated by Barbara Larson (2005), "When People are in a State of abjection they can be inscribed with romantic nobility or 'beauty' which obfuscates aspects of imperial control"³⁰. So, without even necessarily displaying the already oversexualized black female buttocks of Baartman, Cordier still places his model within that space of the colonial male gaze, both as an aesthetic beauty to be admired but also as an object to be possessed.

By the time *African Venus*, debuted, France had undergone another major political shift as President Louis-Napoleon organized a coup and had himself crowned Emperor Napoleon III of the Second French Empire in 1852. During his reign, Paris was the center of European culture on the continent, and under the new Emperor's patronage underwent a major redesign as people from all over flocked to the city.³¹ While artistically conservative, favoring Academic painters like Alexandre Cabanel and Franz Xaver Winterhalter, the Emperor remained sensitive to public opinion, and after the 1863 Paris Salon rejected two-thirds of its applicants, the Emperor allowed the rejected artists to showcase their work elsewhere in the Palace of Industry.³² This event, known as the Salon des Refuses, showcased a variety of avant-garde artists, among whom were Edouard Manet and Camille Pissarro, two painters critical to the movement later known as Impressionism. Rejecting the poised, smooth conformity of form that dominated the art of the Neoclassicals and Academics, the Impressionists instead found inspiration in the colors and dynamism of Delacroix, as well as the asymmetrical, vivid compositions of transitory everyday subjects found in the Japanese ukiyo-e prints that flooded Europe following the country's

³⁰ Ibid., 718.

³¹ Margaret Samu, "Impressionism: Art and Modernity," In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm.

³² Juliet Wilson-Bareau, "The Salon Des Refusés of 1863: A New View," *The Burlington Magazine* 149, no. 1250 (2007): 314, www.jstor.org/stable/20074825.

reopening.³³ Having mainly hailed from middle-class backgrounds, the latter aspect of ukiyo-e prints especially fascinated the Impressionists, who found inspiration not in the idealized heroics



Figure 9. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1865

and patriotic propaganda put out by the academy, but in everyday scenes of nature and the intermixing of peoples they saw every day roaming the Parisian streets, which earned them a reputation as liberal republicans.³⁴ Manet in particular was fond of taking the works of the Great Masters of Renaissance art and transporting them into the world of modern Parisian life. The first notable example of this was 1863's *Le Dejeuner sur L'herbe*, modeled after designs by Rafael and Giorgione that shocked the Parisian public during the Salon des Refuses. The second was *Olympia*, which debuted at the Parisian Salon two years later and was modeled on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534). (fig. 9, 10) Traditionally, works depicting Venus and odalisques were framed in such a way as to invite the male viewer to gaze upon and admire the idealized female form being presented. The mythological or orientalist settings for these works offer a kind of safety in their portrayal of overt female sexuality without the virtuous and respectable mores that were popularly applied to contemporary European women. After all, a goddess



Figure 10. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538

was above petty human sensibilities, and an odalisque was prisoner of the decadent East. Manet, however, denies this safe fantasy even as he draws upon similar iconography. His *Olympia*,

³³ Amir Lowell Abou-Jaoude, "A Pure Invention: Japan, Impressionism, and the West, 1853-1906," *The History Teacher* 50, no. 1 (2016): 57-82, www.jstor.org/stable/44504454.

³⁴ Tricia Cusack, "Impressions of Leisure on the Seine: National Identity and Forgetting in the French Third Republic," In *Riverscapes and National Identities*, 97-126, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j5d8ng.8.

modeled on fellow painter Victorine Meurent, is not an idealized beauty. Her naked body is instead thin and wan, garbed only in jewelry and a single slipper atop an oriental shawl. Her pose is very relaxed, but not inviting, with one hand blocking her genitals from view. Her name and the black cat at her feet identify her as a prostitute, a designation that while still carrying erotic connotations, would also likely have been accompanied by a sense of revulsion and disgust in the contemporary viewer. Additionally, in the archetypal paintings Manet drew from, the black women who attended the odalisques were usually only there to provide an interesting visual contrast, but their utility to the painting and its focus was about as impactful as the furniture. That Laure, the woman who modeled for the servant, is not a bare-breasted slave, but dressed as a modern-day Frenchwoman, almost consumed by a voluminous white gown which itself implies a certain level of wealth, makes her an additional point of focus in the painting. She is positioned in such a way that none of her skin touches Olympia's, avoiding any direct contrast or associative comparison between them. While still largely defined by her relationship to Olympia, Manet portrays Laure as being very present in the scene, looking directly at Olympia as she offers her a bouquet of flowers, which likely came from a client. This in combination with Olympia's guarded, almost hostile gaze makes it seem as though the viewer has interrupted them. Though Olympia is a prostitute, and thus earned her wealth in sexually serving male clients, there is yet a sense of independence from men, a sense of intrusion into this female space typically thought to exist for male benefit. And thus, Manet creates this scene that plays with both the abject and the erotic, inviting sensuality and denying it at the same time.

One of Manet's friends, fellow Impressionist Frederic Bazille, dove even deeper into the racial themes touched on by Manet in *Olympia*, in his own works, *La Toilette*, and *Young*

Woman with Peonies. This is done namely through the interplay between essentialist views of



Figure 11. Gustave Courbet, *The Bathers*, 1853

race as a group of fixed, generalized characteristics, and empiricist observations of the living body to create an individuated figure.³⁵ In

true Impressionist fashion, Bazille focused on the way light and

color influenced the image of his subjects.³⁶ But unlike Manet, who

had a tendency to flatten his figures and disrupt the illusion of depth

in his works, Bazille used light and color to fully realize the

materiality of his subjects' physical forms.³⁷ Hailing from an upper middle-class Protestant

Montpellier family, Bazille was surrounded by a variety of art from a young age, especially the

works of artists like Delacroix and Courbet, through the collection of his neighbor, Alfred

Bruyas.³⁸ Paintings like Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* and Courbet's *The Bathers* likely served

as inspirational prototypes in transforming predictable Orientalism into something more realistic

and compelling through the rendering of detailed non-idealized female bodies.³⁹ (fig. 11) This

was strengthened through Bazille's experience in medical school under the new approach of

vitalism, which due to new scientific and medical advances, saw the body as the product of a

multitude of unique environmental and biological factors rather than a static racial type.⁴⁰ While

in medical school, Bazille studied art under the tutelage of conservative painter Charles Gleyre,

³⁵ Rozanne McGrew Stringer, "Hybrid Zones: Representations of Race in Late Nineteenth-Century French Visual Culture," PhD diss. (University of Kansas, 2011). <http://www.mixedracestudies.org/?tag=frederic-bazille>.

³⁶ Lionello Venturi, "The Aesthetic Idea of Impressionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1941): 34-45, doi:10.2307/426742.

³⁷ Stringer, "Hybrid Zones," 146.

³⁸ "Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870). The Youth of Impressionism," Musée d'Orsay, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/archives/exhibitions-archives/article/frederic-bazille-44076.html>.

³⁹ Stringer, "Hybrid Zones," 141.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 149.

an experience that trained Bazille in both the conventions of Neo-Classical-influenced academic art and exotic Romanticism.⁴¹ Bazille would leave Gleyre's studio and his medical studies in 1864, after which he would move in with fellow Impressionist Claude Monet, with whose circle of friends Bazille would alternatively share studio space until his untimely death in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War.⁴² These varied and disparate influences would all have a strong influence on Bazille's works, but most especially on the following works finished in the last year of his life.

At first glance, *La Toilette* resembles what *Olympia* might have been if done by Delacroix. (fig. 12) In the center of the painting sits a nude white woman on a couch of furs, with only an even whiter sheet across her lap to preserve her modesty. The oriental rug behind her



Figure 12. Frederic Bazille, *La Toilette*. 1870

aids in communicating the luxuriousness of the environment, which can be read as Bazille trying to evoke the sensuality of a harem or alternatively displaying the excessive modern taste for Orientalist décor popular in French brothels and boudoirs.⁴³ The presence of the classic bare-breasted black servant kneeling to the woman's left would speak to an Orientalist reading of the painting being set in a harem, while the presence of the woman holding a Japanese kimono on the right further blurs that line between harem and brothel, as she is dressed in fashionably modern French clothing. The focus on the black model's bare, muscular back signified her position as a laborer, and her obscured face echoes that of similarly obscured black women in the backgrounds of other Orientalist paintings like *Women of Algiers*. However, Bazille subverts

⁴¹ Stringer, "Hybrid Zones," 140. Gleyre's most famous student was Jean-Léon Gérôme.

⁴²"The Youth of Impressionism."

⁴³ Stringer, "Hybrid Zones", 141.

popular Orientalist conventions by placing her in a prominent position at the foreground of the painting, which, combined with her brightly colored clothing in comparison to the other two women, makes her seem to take up significantly more space than her companions.⁴⁴ The model's skin is a particular point of interest in the painting, as the rendition of dark skin had been a persistent problem within European art circles for some time. As Bazille would have been well aware, light skin was seen as ideal in academic art because of its perceived superior ability to portray a variety of tones across both light and shadow. Dark skin, in contrast, was seen as opaque, monotonous, and unable to portray proper emotional depth.⁴⁵ This reticence to learn how to properly render darker skin tones left many black women generalized and obscured, a folly even Manet commits in his rendering of Laure for *Olympia*, who is harder to differentiate from the room's dark background.⁴⁶ In defiance of previous truisms about the rendering of dark skin, Bazille uses the planes of his model's back as a focal point to explore a variety of colors and tone, leading her figure to appear as the most detailed and lifelike of the three women. This stands in direct contrast with the woman in the middle, who is unsettlingly pale and looks almost rubbery due to the lack of detail given to her form. Additionally, the interaction between the black servant and the woman in the center is not formal or distant. The white woman's hand on the black woman's shoulder is deliberate and intimate in a way that denotes a certain level of comfort and familiarity rather than titillating homoeroticism. Rather than having an opaque, generic black woman acting as a backdrop to better display her white companion's body, Bazille depicts a more mutual arrangement. The white woman's pallid hand stands in direct contrast to the colorful expanse of the black woman's back, and the latter's hunched posture as she puts a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 135, 158.

⁴⁶ Stringer, "Hybrid Zones," 152.

bright green shoe on the former's foot creates a sense of much needed definition and depth to the



Figure 13. Frederic Bazille, *Young Woman with the Peonies*, 1870

white model's body. This mutual touch between the two women implies a kind of union and commensurability between them. The model to the far right, Lise Tréhot, is slightly darker than the woman in the center, and much greater detail is given to rendering the variations of her skin tone.⁴⁷ Her separated position creates another interesting subversion of roles, as she is not the target of any intimacy or companionship like she would have been in a typical Orientalist painting. Instead she occupies the space usually occupied by the black harem servant, as her mistress simply looks blankly past her as she presents the kimono in her hands, practically removed and emotionally absent from the scene. In presenting his painting this way, Bazille forces his viewer to consider their interpretations of racial roles within popular artistic conventions.

Young Woman with Peonies, originally known as *Négresse aux Pivoines*, is a set of two paintings, using the same model as the servant from *La Toilette*. The original use of the term *negresse*, in referring to the woman in the painting implies the expectation that she should be read as being servile or low status.⁴⁸ (fig. 13, 14) However Bazille calls that term into question by choosing to portray her alone, with no other figures to reinforce that status. The woman, possibly a street vendor, is dressed in a modern, off-white blouse, with her hair covered in a striped scarf in a



Figure 14. Frederic Bazille, *Young Woman with the Peonies*, 1870

⁴⁷ Lise Tréhot also modelled for Renoir's "Odalisque" that same year.

⁴⁸ Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France," 60.

similar manner to *La Toilette*. The flowers around her mirror the colors of her headscarf, brightening up the otherwise dark space of the painting. Flowers were common symbols of middle-class life and often painted by the Impressionists for their varied forms and vivid colors. The choice of peonies specifically was likely a nod to Manet, who was known to cultivate the flower and painted a series of them in the 1860s.⁴⁹ In the first painting, the woman looks not at the viewer, but at the task at hand, meticulously sorting her flowers with an intensity that brings to mind a Vermeer painting by seeming to render the viewer a simple spectator. In the second, the flowers are in a loose profusion in a basket in front of her as she offers a handful directly to the viewer. There is no emotion in her expression, and Bazille opts not to idealize nor generalize her features, allowing the lighting to not only show but also highlight her heavy eyelids and the creases in her cheeks and brow, possible signs of age that would certainly be smoothed away in a more traditional painting. Her offering of the flowers is a mundane task, liberating her black female body from the constraints of the erotic or the subjected. There is no orientalism here, no sexual availability to imply, just a woman and her flowers, and that alone is worthy of artistic attention and beauty.

The nineteenth century produced the ideal conditions for artists like Benoist, Cordier, and Bazille to explore the relationship between themselves as white French citizens and the emerging black populace around them. While none of these works are truly independent from the dominant art conventions of their time, in each, the artist's decision to center a black woman as their subject is done in a way that reflects some aspect of the shifting environment of French social and political life. As the more typical portrayals of black women in the nineteenth century still

⁴⁹ "Young Woman with Peonies," National Gallery of Art, accessed October 18, 2019, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.61356.html#overview>.

hold cultural sway in the modern world, the works of Benoist, Cordier, and Bazille become all the more important for recognizing the diversity of representation of the black female body in nineteenth century art beyond the constraints of decoration or sexualized embellishment.

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