MARIE-GUILLEMINÉ BENOIST’S PORTRAIT OF A BLACK WOMAN (1800) AS TÊTE D’ÉXPRESSION

By
Nicole Martin

Submitted to the
Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
of American University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts

In
Art History

Chair:

Juliet Bellow, Ph.D.

Jordan Amirkhani, Ph.D.

Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

August 14, 2020

Date

2020

American University

Washington, D.C. 20016
MARIE-GUILLEMINÉ BENOIST’S *PORTRAIT OF A BLACK WOMAN* (1800) AS TÊTE D’ÉXPRESSIÓN

By

Nicole Martin

ABSTRACT

Is Marie-Guillemine Benoist’s *Portrait of a Black Woman* (1800) an affirmational portrait of an individual? Or is it a vehicle for a racially-charged stereotype? I argue that the painting is suspended between these possibilities, largely because Benoist was trying to represent a newly acknowledged category of person: the Black female citizen. The painting’s ambiguities—its strange combination of physical specificity with generalization or typology—stem from the lack of precedents for the depiction of a free, equal Black woman. This brings me to my second contention: that Benoist turned to the genre of the *tête d’expression* (“expressive head”) as a way to represent her sitter. Developed by painter and theorist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), the *tête d’expression* is a sub-genre related to history painting. Straddling portraiture and history painting, the *tête d’expression* was a crucial tool for artists to practice depicting a range of different facial expressions. The genre was also, at this time, particularly associated with women artists, who used it to demonstrate their mastery of human physiognomy and anatomy, and to display their skill without appearing overly ambitious or indecorous. I argue that by changing the identification of this painting from a “portrait” to a “tête d’expression,” we can better understand the tensions between allegory and specificity in *Portrait of a Black Woman*. In turn, this furthers our understanding of Benoist’s ambitions and inventiveness as a female artist.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of valued mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. First and foremost, I want to extend my sincerest thanks to Dr. Juliet Bellow. I am appreciative of her invaluable insight and endless encouragement throughout my time in the Art History program at AU. I would also like to thank Dr. Jordan Amirkhani for pushing me to reflect on my voice and to ask difficult questions. Additional thanks to Dr. Joanne Allen and Dr. Andrea Pearson for their insights during the many stages of this project. My cohort and peers deserve special thanks for their friendship and letting me think out loud about all things related to my research. Thank you to Elizabeth Brandeberry for her feedback and support in the writing process. Finally, I thank Monica Bowen and Chris June for their support in my earliest days of pursuing art history at Seattle University.

I am thankful for my loving family and their unconditional support throughout my education. I look forward to the day we can visit the Musée du Louvre to see Benoist’s painting. I am grateful for my community of friends near and far, for life with them in Sacramento, Seattle, Mammoth Lakes, and Washington D.C. has put me on this path. Thank you!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. ii  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................... iii  
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ...................................................................................... v  
   INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................... 1  
   CHAPTER 1 BETWEEN A TYPE AND AN INDIVIDUAL: PORTRAYING BLACK PERSONHOOD ................................................................. 13  
   CHAPTER 2 THE FEMALE ARTIST AND THE TÊTE D’EXPRESSİON ............ 28  
   CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................ 38  
   ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................................. 39  
BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................... 41
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Portrait of a Black Woman*, 1800. Oil on canvas……. 42
Figure 2: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, *Self-Portrait*, 1786. Oil on canvas……………………. 42
Figure 3: Jacques-Louis David, *Belisarius Begging for Alms*, 1781. Oil on canvas………… 42
Figure 4: Pierre Mignard, Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, 1682. Oil on canvas... 42
Figure 5: Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont, Princess of the Blood, as a Sultana, Served by some Slaves*, 1733. Oil on canvas…………………………………………………………… 42
Figure 6: Antoine-Jean Duclos after Charles Monnet, *La Fontaine de la Regeneration sur les debris de la Bastille, le 10 avril 1793*, after 1794. Etching on laid paper…………………………. 42
Figure 7: Antoine Carré after Claude-Louis Desrais, *Fraternity*, ca. 1794. Stipple engraving… 42
Figure 8: Anonymous, *Louis XVI Wearing a Phrygian Cap*, eighteenth century. Color print…. 42
Figure 9: Simon-Louis Boizot, *Moi libre aussi (woman)*, 1792. Stipple engraving……………. 42
Figure 10: Simon-Louis Boizot, *Moi libre aussi (man)*, 1792. Stipple engraving……………. 42
Figure 11: Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, *Portrait of Jean Baptiste Belley (1747-1805), Deputy of Santo Domingo at the French Convention*, 1797. Oil on canvas………………… 42
Figure 12: Charles Le Brun, *Studies of Human Eyes and Eyebrows*, no date. Pencil on paper... 42
Figure 13: Charles Le Brun, *The Battle of Arbella*, 1669. Oil on canvas……………………. 42
Figure 14: Jacques-Louis David, *La Douleur*, 1773. Pencil on paper………………………. 42
Figure 15: Charles Le Brun, *Tristesse et abatement de coeur*, 1698. Pencil on paper………. 42
Figure 16: Angélique Mongez, *Astyanax taken from his Mother*, 1802. Oil on canvas……… 42
Figure 17: Adélaïde Labille-Guierd, *Head of a Young Woman (Delightful Surprise)*, 1779. Pastel on blue paper………………………………………………………………………………. 42
Figure 18: The Carters, “Apes**t” in *Everything is Love*, 2018. Video still…………………… 42
Figure 19: Ferren Gipson, Recreation of *Portrait of a Black Woman* by Marie-Guillemine (1800), 2020. Instagram post…………………………………………………………………… 43
Figure 20: Peter Brathwaite, Recreation of *Adolf Ludvig Gustav Albert Couschi* by Gustaf Lundberg (1775), 2020. Instagram post………………………………………………………………………………… 43
INTRODUCTION

Marie-Guillelmine Benoist’s *Portrait of a Black Woman* (1800; fig. 1) debuted to the French public at the Paris Salon in 1800.\(^1\) The painting depicts a semi-nude Black woman who is believed to have worked as a servant for the artist’s brother-in-law.\(^2\) Though the sitter may have been close to Benoist and her family, her name was omitted from the exhibition *livret*, or catalogue. The painting was listed as *Portrait d’une nègresse*, a title that, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff notes, “replaces the individual name of the sitter with a racializing type-category,” even as it declares the work to be a portrait, that is, a picture of a specific individual.\(^3\) This confusing terminology may have been partly responsible for critics’ responses to the painting, which were largely negative and laden with prejudicial, racist sentiments. Jean-Baptiste Boutard scorned the white, female artist for choosing to paint a Black, female sitter, asking rhetorically, “Whom can one trust in life after such horror! It is a white and pretty hand which has created this blackness (*noirceur*).”\(^4\) Charles Thévin described the sitter as “a sublime blurred *tache* (stain),”

---

\(^1\) To avoid racist language, I refer to the painting as *Portrait of a Black Woman*. There are a number of different spellings used for Benoist’s hyphenated first name, with no documentary evidence to support any of the variations. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby spells it “Guillelmine,” while James Smalls and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff opt for “Guilhelmine,” and Gen Doy uses “Guillemine.” I have chosen to employ the latter spelling.


characterizing her complexion as unclean. Despite these unfavorable reviews, many of which expressed shock at the sitter’s perceived ugliness, Benoist kept the painting in her studio until her death in 1826, after which the painting was purchased by the French government and entered into the collection of the Musée du Luxembourg.

What was it that prompted such virulent responses to Benoist’s painting? The painting portrays a single, partially nude Black woman seated against a blank beige background. The woman gazes directly out towards the viewer, while her seated body is angled toward the left. She wears a white headwrap and delicate circular earrings. The sitter’s left hand catches her white robe as it appears to fall from her shoulder, exposing her right breast. Her right arm drapes across her body and her hand delicately touches the red ribbon that encircles her waist. She is seated in a chair covered by blue fabric, with only a slight suggestion of the chair’s details under her right arm. An ambiguous light source draws attention to particular parts of the model’s body: the right side of her face, her right shoulder, her collarbone, and her décolletage. On the right side of her face, the light illuminates her uneven hairline, hinting at the hair tucked under her white headwrap. As this description suggests, nothing other than the sitter’s race could have caused consternation for critics such as Boutard and Thévin.

In *Portrait of a Black Woman*, Benoist grappled with two interlocking problems: how to represent her sitter’s identity and how to establish her own authority as a female artist. To address the first problem, it must be noted that this painting was created at a time when

---


conceptions and representations of Black personhood were being reshaped by events related to the French Revolution of 1789-1804. Benoist completed the work between the Emancipation Decree of 1794, which abolished slavery in France’s colonies, and the reinstatement of slavery in 1802 by First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte. This eight-year window, during which formerly enslaved persons were decreed to be citizens, necessitated a reconsideration of Black personhood in French society, and therefore catalyzed dramatic changes in French visual culture. Benoist and other artists began to grant Black individuals greater specificity in visual representations. Yet this development presented a challenge, for there was no set of established visual conventions to represent Black people as autonomous subjects. Benoist’s painting, rife with tensions and complexities, testifies to this lacuna.

Benoist’s second problem involved her need to establish her skill and ingenuity as an artist while navigating the gender ideologies of the Revolutionary era. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen aimed for democratic equality, in direct opposition to the monarchic Ancien Régime. However, the rights conferred in this document pertained to white men’s public and civic autonomy: women’s role in public discourse and in politics were debated fiercely throughout the Revolutionary era.7 This was also true within the microcosm of the French art world. A handful of artists, including Benoist, advanced their careers by enrolling in ateliers created for the express purpose of training women, and by exhibiting their work at the Paris Salon. As Laura Auricchio explains, such advancements in their professional careers meant

---

7 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, French philosopher and member of the Jacobin Club, discouraged women from taking part in political discourse and specifically advocated for their “embrace of the private realm.” In opposition to Rousseau, Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, promoted women’s right to vote, arguing such privilege would alleviate social inequalities. These two thinkers illustrate the conflicting attitudes towards women’s autonomy surrounding social and political liberties. For more on the discourse of women’s roles in the Revolutionary era, see Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 215.
acquiring public acclaim without flouting the social expectations placed upon elite white women.8 Benoist’s ability to successfully navigate such limitations sheds light on her approach to *Portrait of a Black Woman*, an ambitious painting destined for the Salon.

Over the past ten years, scholars have begun to address the complex questions raised by Benoist’s painting as part of a broader effort to confront the legacies of racial and gendered hierarchies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European art. In the process, art historians have attempted to determine more about the identity of Benoist’s sitter, whose name is speculated to be Madeleine.9 Benoist’s sitter was likely enslaved and forced from the archipelago of Guadeloupe, then a French colony, to work for the artist’s brother-in-law and his family in France.10 While minimal documentation exists to clarify her citizenship status after the Emancipation Decree of 1794, she was likely registered to French authorities as a servant or attendant upon her arrival in France.11 Specifically, it is unknown if she was employed of her own accord, or enslaved by the artist’s family. These unanswered questions about the sitter’s biography have thwarted scholars’ attempts to reach definite conclusions about the racial and gendered hierarchies embedded within the painting.

---


10 Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s *Portrait d’une négresse* (1800).”

11 Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s *Portrait d’une négresse* (1800).” Bringing enslaved peoples onto the French mainland had been illegal since the Middle ages. At the time Benoist completed the painting, enslaved peoples from the French colonies who arrived in France were registered to French authorities. This meant that they were no longer enslaved when in France, but instead became servants or attendants in compliance with French legislation.
The existing interpretations of this painting fall into one of two interpretive “camps.” The first argues that the work reduces the Black female sitter to a generalized type, in accord with racial stereotypes of the period. For example, James Smalls claims that Benoist represented the sitter as an allegory of liberty to protest the subjugation of women in revolutionary society. By appropriating the image of a Black woman to point out the revolutionaries’ failure to meet their own ideals, Smalls argues, Benoist was blind to her own racial privilege. Because Benoist resisted granting the sitter equal standing to the painter, Smalls considers the work a “political failure.” 12 Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby takes a slightly different approach, situating Benoist’s painting within the context of French neoclassical ideals and aesthetics: she asserts that Benoist’s depiction perpetuated racial hierarchies that took whiteness as an absolute standard of beauty. 13 By measuring beauty in sole relation to a white ideal, Benoist refused to grant the sitter her own specificity and individuality. 14 Finally, Cécile Bishop extends the conclusions of both Grigsby and Smalls. She considers “blackness” and its relationship to a Black person’s subjectivity or objecthood in French portraiture. In this genre, subjectivity was exclusively granted to white subjects. 15 As these texts collectively suggest, the portrait reveals a level of uncertainty on Benoist’s part: they emphasize her struggle with the aesthetic conventions for depicting “blackness” and their implications for the sitter’s identity.

12 Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une négresse (1800).”
14 Grigsby, Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France, 60.
The other “camp” interprets the painting in a more positive light, claiming that it constitutes a celebratory portrayal of racial equality and a revised canon of beauty in accord with post-emancipation society. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, for example, argues that Benoist combined neoclassical visual ideals with the motif of the “Black Venus,” a generalized Black woman associated with “seductive beauty and beastly monstrosity.”16 She celebrates Benoist’s formal choices, asserting that the artist invented the “new” Black, French citizen in portraiture.17 For Denise Murrell, Benoist’s painting functions to elevate the sitter by representing her through French neoclassical aesthetics. Benoist establishes the sitter as a revolutionary modern figure, with “her stylish French clothing signifying the anticipated new role of freed slaves from the territories within French society.”18 Both scholars acknowledge the arguments posed by the scholars cited above—namely, that the sitter is portrayed as an allegorical figure rather than a specific individual. Nonetheless, Schmidt-Linsenhoff and Murrell argue for Benoist’s artistic innovation, specifically in her choice to depict a Black woman in a positive and modern light.

Put simply, scholars seem to feel the need to label Benoist’s painting as either a positive or negative image—an affirmational portrait of an individual, or a racially-charged stereotype. I argue that the painting is suspended between these possibilities, largely because Benoist was trying to represent a newly acknowledged category of personhood: the Black female citizen. The painting’s ambiguities—its strange combination of physical specificity with generalization or typology—stem from the lack of precedents for the depiction of a free, equal Black woman. This brings me to my second contention: that Benoist turned to the genre of the tête d’expression

16 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 331.
17 Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 325.
18 Murrell, Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today, 40.
(“expressive head”) as a way to explore the problems endemic to representing Black personhood and, simultaneously, to demonstrate her own skill and ambition as a history painter without overstepping the gendered bounds of decorum. The genre of the tête d’expression was, at that time, particularly associated with women artists, who used it to demonstrate their mastery of human physiognomy and anatomy. This genre lacked the specificity of portraiture, as it was geared toward the creation of idealized figures in history paintings. In search of a visual language equipped to represent an autonomous Black woman, Benoist reinvented the sub-genre of the tête d’expression, thus establishing her own ingenuity as an artist.

A consideration of Portrait of a Black Woman requires that we place it in the context of broader historical and socio-political developments of the period, including France’s participation in the system of slavery and its attendant racial ideologies. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, roughly twenty-one million people were displaced from West Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean to “labor in the sugar, cotton, coffee, and tobacco fields of Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America.” The trans-Atlantic slave trade helped establish plantation colonies that would ultimately prove profitable for the French commercial and slave markets. These markets would flourish in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the socio-political and civic autonomy of France’s white subjects was under scrutiny in both the colonies and the mainland.


20 Elizabeth McGrath and Jean Michel Massing, The Slave in European Art: from Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem, edited by Elizabeth McGrath and Jean Michel Massing (London: Warburg Institute, 2012), 254.
During the eighteenth century, the centrality of slavery to France’s economy, along with the rise of an Enlightenment discourse on equality, gave rise to a robust abolitionist movement. In 1788, Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville founded a French abolitionist group called the Société des Amis des Noirs. The group sought to eliminate the horrific treatment of enslaved persons in the colonies; importantly, though, it did not advocate for the complete end of slavery, given that the latter would require massive economic reforms for a country then in debt. Instead, they argued that enslaved persons were neither intellectually nor emotionally prepared for a complete assimilation into French society.21 Such generalizations led to the rise in representations of Black figures as helpless, timid, and in need of guidance from “superior” white figures.22 Other manifestations in favor of the abolition of slavery included Benjamin Frossard’s text, La Cause des Esclaves Noirs. Published in 1789, this history of abolition ultimately perpetuated stereotypes of Black figures as closer to nature and naive to development of the modern world.23

Thus “enlightened” political conversations on race at this time did not view Black persons as fully equal individuals, but rather tended to rely upon typological hierarchies that perpetuated white supremacy. This way of thinking also permeated scientific and philosophical discourse. Both domains witnessed efforts to systematize such categorical thinking, solidifying the investment in differentiating human beings through physical attributes such as skin color,


23 Libby, 27.
face and nose shapes, and other physiognomic characteristics. Anne Lafont argues that Enlightenment thinkers understood “race” in largely visual terms, narrowly articulated through “reliable and legible corporeal signs.” She points, for example, to François Bernier, a physician and writer who established the “partition by skin color” ideology. He placed human beings into one of five categories: 1-Whites, 2-Blacks, 3-Asian Whites, 4-Lapps, 5-Olive-Greenishes. These seemingly inherent differences, which could be perceived visually, legitimized the racial and social hierarchies that underpinned the system of slavery.

Such ideologies allowed the emerging ideals of equality that would become central to the Revolution to coexist with racist hierarchies that denied Black people equal status. In 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen affirmed the equality of French citizens—at least, in theory. But the new Republic faced a pressing problem: could these rights be extended to the populations of the French colonies? At that moment, the populations of Martinique and Saint-Domingue were roughly 600,000 to 700,000 inhabitants, only 30,000 of whom were white. In May of 1791, the French National Assembly granted civil and political equality specifically to non-white men born to liberated fathers and mothers in the colonies, and allowed emancipated men the rights to property ownership. But this law would be rescinded in September of the same year, making French citizenship difficult to obtain.

24 Libby, 21.
In 1792, fearing counter-revolutionary action on the part of its European neighbors, France declared war on Prussia and Austria. This anti-monarchic spirit ushered in the most radical phase of the Revolution, allowing the Jacobins to come to power. In Saint-Domingue during the eighteenth century, a large portion of the population consisted of free mixed-race people regarded as *gens de couleur*. Inspired in part by revolutionary ideals, this group protested their inferior treatment and lack of equal rights compared to their white counterparts. These rising tensions mobilized two slave rebellions in 1791 and 1793 in Saint-Domingue. In response to these revolts, a complete elimination of slavery and the slave trade was announced at the Convention Nationale in Paris in February of 1794. During the Convention, discussions were held “concerning the true nature of slaves; whether they were primitive or childlike, or if they were treacherous and vicious.” The emancipation decree did not simply liberate enslaved persons, but conferred French citizenship upon these free subjects. From then until the reinstatement of slavery in 1802, French civil identity was redefined by this fundamental reframing of what it meant to be a “free citizen.”

Benoist completed *Portrait of a Black Woman* during this fragile period of liberation, in the midst of a backlash against the Jacobins. Less than three months after the 1794 abolition of slavery, Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobins, was overthrown and later executed by decree of the National Convention. The Directory government, a five-member party in support of the Revolution, assumed power in October of 1795. The following November, the Jacobin club closed, and the Directory held authority until it was dismantled by the Consulate.

28 Libby, 22.

29 Libby, 37.
and Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. Referring to these circumstances, Grigsby argues that Benoist’s decision to make her debut in the Salon of 1800 with an ambitious picture of a semi-nude Black woman was a “fundamentally different intervention from what it had been in the 1790s, when opinion about abolition and blackness had been both more volatile and more varied.” Benoist’s decision to show the painting at this moment was a particularly daring one.

Clearly, then, *Portrait of a Black Woman* is a painting sensitively attuned to the political circumstances of this turbulent period—even if it does not make a clear statement about those circumstances. Unfortunately, because we know relatively little about Benoist’s life, it is difficult to supplement the picture with a more precise understanding of her politics. Nevertheless, her connection with the Jacobin-affiliated painter Jacques-Louis David may give some insight into her attitudes and motives. Benoist’s father René Leroulx-Delaville, a governmental administrator from Brittany, placed the artist and her sister under David’s tutelage in the 1780s. Her training included working in the studio (directly above David’s own atelier in the Louvre) to in-home lessons. Like all of David’s students, both male and female, she was trained across different genres, from history painting to portraiture; as part of her studies, she learned about classical and religious subjects as well as ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Around 1786, Benoist directly aligned herself with David in a self-portrait that depicted her in the process of copying David’s *Belisarius* (figs. 2-3). David’s painting, created before the Revolution, tells the story of

---

30 Grigsby, 58.


33 Vidal, 243.
Belisarius, the disgraced general of Emperor Justinian. Accused of treason, he was blinded and left to beg on the streets of Rome. Carol Duncan asserts that David’s version of this story rejected earlier noble and powerful representations of the general, thus functioning as a subtle critique of the French monarchy.34 Benoist’s decision to link herself to David and to the implicit politics of this painting thus suggests that she was sympathetic to his worldview—at least, early on in her career. More broadly, Benoist’s self-portrait demonstrates that she actively sought to associate herself publicly with her mentor, as well as with the academically prestigious genre of history painting, which she went on to practice during the early phase of the revolution. Her affiliation with David, and her desire to link her artistic practice with history painting, gives us new insights into Benoist’s approach to Portrait of a Black Woman.

In entering into the debate about Benoist’s relationship to her sitter—a relationship that could be construed as exploitative—I am conscious of the possibility that, as a white female art historian, I could recapitulate that same dynamic. My intent in exploring Benoist’s choices and motivations is not to prescribe nor define the identity of women of color at that time, nor to re-inscribe the racial hierarchies that clearly suffuse Benoist’s painting. Rather, my desire to return to this painting stems from my belief that further analysis can legitimize the rights of Black women to be seen, heard, and above all, granted the equality that they deserve and have been so long denied. Today, with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the question of Black people’s rights to political citizenship and individual autonomy still remains unresolved. My hope is that, in considering why Benoist found it so difficult to represent a Black woman as a full citizen, equal to herself, I can contribute to the current global effort to instantiate those rights.

34 Carol Duncan, “Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art.” Art History 4, no. 2 (June 1981), 195.
CHAPTER 1
BETWEEN A TYPE AND AN INDIVIDUAL: PORTRAYING BLACK PERSONHOOD

While there is much that we do not and likely can never know about Benoist’s painting, an analysis of the work must start from an acknowledgment that the decision to depict a Black woman alone was unusual in and of itself. Almost invariably, images of Black women and men at that time defined them in relation to another figure present within the frame. Typically, that figure was a white person, against whose privileged status Black identity was defined. Benoist thus made a bold choice—one that proved quite challenging, given that she had no existing models from which to work. It is the absence of such models that, I argue, created the visible conflicts within this painting. On the one hand, Benoist granted her model an unprecedented level of individuality through the specificity of her rendering: the woman in the painting clearly is meant to be seen as a real person. Yet Benoist withheld crucial information about the woman’s identity, such as her name and her status: are we meant to see her as an indentured servant, or as a “liberated” worker? The artist also mobilized racialized stereotypes in the image, and in so doing, treated the figure as a type—denying her the particularity that comes with full personhood. The work thus makes visible the threat to Benoist’s own white privilege and authority that the image of a Black *citoyenne* presented.

To fully understand the conflicting ideas circulating within this painting, we must put it in context: this chapter discusses both its participation in, and its rejection of, existing conventions for representing Black persons. It begins with a brief overview of *Ancien Régime* portraits in which anonymous Black figures functioned as accessories to elite white sitters. It then traces changes to the representation of Black people in Revolutionary-era prints, with particular attention to key iconographic motifs that Benoist employs, namely the bared breast and
the Phrygian cap or headwrap. Her use of these Revolutionary symbols suggests that Benoist shared the egalitarian ideals of her mentor, David; however, in the context of the portrait, they also serve to render Benoist’s Black model into an allegory or type, thus denying her fully equal status. Finally, the chapter puts Benoist’s painting in conversation with the work of her contemporary Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, also a former student of David’s. By examining Benoist’s Portrait of a Black Woman in relation to Girodet’s Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies (1797), we may illuminate the difficulties that both artists faced in their attempts to reformulate the portrait genre—previously, a tool of white supremacy—to accommodate Black personhood.

**Accessories and Hierarchies: Ancien Régime Portraiture**

Benoist resisted one particularly pernicious racist trope in eighteenth-century portraiture by choosing not to include any white figures in the painting. Portraits that included Black figures, often commissioned by members of European nobility, invariably rendered the white sitters as the largest and centermost figures in the compositions. Relegated to the margins of the scene, enslaved Black persons or servants accompanied these prestigious figures. Portraits of this kind helped to maintain and even strengthened established racist social hierarchies by elevating the status of white sitters.

To illuminate these conventions, we may examine Pierre Mignard’s Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth (1682; fig. 4) and Jean-Marc Nattier’s Mademoiselle de Clermont, Princess of the Blood, as a Sultana, Served by some Slaves (1733; fig. 5), in which enslaved Africans serve as “fashionable” accessories for aristocratic European women. The presence of Black figures signified the wealth and prestige of the white sitter, thus amplifying the sitter’s
authority; as a result, the Black figure him or herself is denied individual specificity, and an autonomous identity. According to Lafont, “the pictorial success of introducing a Black figure acting as an essential foil to the white figure…echoed hierarchies of individuals in the racialized, that is, Black and white, society of the Ancien Régime.” For Lafont, the Black figure is an “agreeable artifice” that articulates the personhood of the white female figure by treating the Black figure as a mere accessory.

In French portraitist Mignard’s Duchess of Portsmouth, for example, the anonymous Black page functions as a status symbol for the French mistress of Charles II, King of England. Beginning in 1671, Louise de Kéroualle maintained a relationship with Charles II for fifteen years, during which time she contributed to diplomatic strategy and negotiations between France and England. The painting depicts Kéroualle seated on a red cushion in front of a balcony, wearing elegant gold and blue clothing. Her commanding gaze and steady posture mimic the stability of the classical column in the background. Standing at the Duchess’s side, the seemingly younger, physically smaller Black servant reinforces the sitter’s compositional centrality and the symbolism of her demeanor. As a child, the Black page is physically dominated by the adult woman. This dominance is further emphasized by the placement of Kéroualle’s right arm around her page’s shoulders in a seeming gesture of protection. The physical differentiation between the figures is exaggerated by the stark contrasts in whiteness and blackness of skin tones.

35 Lafont, 98.
36 According to the painting’s description at the National Portrait Gallery in London, the servant remains unidentified and was possibly a fictional figure. “NPG 497; Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth,” National Portrait Gallery, https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw05102/Louise-de-Kroualle-Duchess-of-Portsmouth.
37 Lafont, 91.
gowns feature low necklines, using the page’s dark complexion as a foil for the extreme whiteness and “ideal perfection” of Kéroualle’s skin. The servant presents Kéroualle with coral and a shell overflowing with pearls. Even the pearl necklace worn by the Black servant, then a rarity in Europe, associates her with “exotic” objects, and further serves the underscore the sitter’s wealth and status. In every way, then, the painting subordinates the Black figure to the Duchess of Portsmouth.

Similarly, in Nattier’s 1733 portrait of Mademoiselle de Clermont, the presence of anonymous Black attendants affirms the moral and racial superiority of the white aristocratic sitter. As the granddaughter of Louis XIV and the cousin of Louis XV, Mademoiselle de Clermont held the reputation of a “royal insider.” In the portrait, Mademoiselle de Clermont, plays the fictive role of a “Sultana,” the wife or concubine of a Sultan. The painting depicts her in an imaginary harem filled with exotic signifiers, including her attendants, all of varying non-white complexions. The group of servants help her remove her crimson court robe and shoes in preparation for a bath. In the background, a young male servant peeks around the corner to catch a glimpse of Mademoiselle de Clermont undressing. Another servant’s bare breast is exposed as she handles the Sultana’s discarded garments. As in Mignard’s painting, the servants gaze adoringly at their mistress, and their subservience elevates the white sitter.

39 Bindman, Ape to Apollo Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century, 39.

40 David Bindman, Introduction to The Black Figure in the European Imaginary, edited by Adrienne L. Childs and Susan Houghton Libby (Winter Park, Florida: The Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Rollins College, 2017), 12.

41 Jennifer L. Palmer, “The Princess Served by Slaves: Making Race Visible through Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century France,” Gender & History 26, no. 2 (2014), 252. Mademoiselle de Clermont was the granddaughter of Louis XIV as well as the cousin of Louis XV. Her full name was Anne-Marie de Bourbon.

Clermont is the central figure, dominating the space with her physically larger stature, while her smaller, younger servants are placed at the margins of the scene. Once again, these differences in placement and scale are underscored by differences in skin tone. As Jennifer Palmer notes, the portrait exemplifies the visual hierarchies that allowed aristocratic women, by “comparing themselves favorably to people of color…[to] emphasize[e] their dominance and authority over racialized and exoticized others.” Such efforts were, Palmer adds, necessitated by the patriarchal social and political order of mid-eighteenth century Europe: subjugated by men, white women turned to the arena of race in order to assert their superiority. While Mademoiselle de Clermont wielded significant authority—she was born into the highest aristocratic position a woman could attain in this period—this status ultimately relied on the power and standing of her male relations. The presence of non-white servants in her portrait thus allowed Mademoiselle de Clermont to assert herself as a powerful figure.

These sorts of power dynamics are absent from Benoist’s *Portrait of a Black Woman*. As the only subject in the painting, the sitter is defined only in relation to herself. This is, as Bindman explains, typical of the period: “the portrait with [an] accompanying black servant disappeared almost everywhere in Europe after 1800.” The decline of this sub-genre of portraiture potentially speaks to the rejection of aristocratic norms and behaviors during the Revolutionary era. Benoist’s decision not to explicitly define her sitter in relation to a white masterful attitude of a male sitter, but could suggest that a female sitter possessed a civility or a beauty that reduced even a savage to wondering admiration.”

43 Palmer, 249.

aristocratic subject thus could be seen to align the artist with the Revolutionary ideal of equality, and opens up the potential for this Black woman to be granted a degree of personhood and individuality.

Allegories for Liberation: Revolutionary Prints

The abolitionist movement and the 1789 Revolution initiated a dramatic shift in the way Black figures were represented in French visual culture, especially in Revolutionary prints. Political caricatures rapidly and cheaply communicated information and opinions to a wide readership. Revolutionary prints often compared the plight of white subjects oppressed by the monarchy to that of enslaved Black persons. However, like the aristocratic portraits discussed above, these prints treated Black figures as generalized or allegorical types rather than actual, specific individuals. Benoist’s painting could be seen as adapting this convention, especially as she incorporated other popular motifs in Revolutionary-era prints, including the bared breast and the Phrygian cap. The bared breast symbolized a range of concepts, from liberty and equality to motherhood and rebirth; the Phrygian cap more directly signifies the abstract of idea of liberty. Such tropes celebrated increasing equality, or the concept of equality, for both Black and white subjects of the state. By borrowing from the language of Revolutionary prints, Benoist brought their contradictory messages about Black identity into her painting.

Revolutionary print culture, in its swift production and wide range of audience perspectives, mirrored the tumultuous and unstable socio-political landscape in France. The historian Madelyn Gutwirth explains that because the Jacobins advocated for separate sexual spheres, women broadly functioned as “an object of masculine discourse.”45 This manifested

through political prints that used generalized images of women as a way to communicate a variety of political and social ideologies. Allegorical guises or motifs, like the bared breast, more effectively fetishized the female body than liberated it.\textsuperscript{46} Though images of specific figures like Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday aimed to galvanize counter-revolutionary audiences, Revolutionary print media more often used the female body as an allegorical device to promote ideas like national identity, political liberty, and democratic equality.\textsuperscript{47} The Republic’s treatment of real women did not live up to these democratic ideals. The Petition of the \textit{Women of the Third Estate to the King} delivered January 1789 indicate women’s conflicting roles in the Revolution. The letter requested that women of the Third Estate be granted equal access to education in addition to fair treatment based on their sex and occupations.\textsuperscript{48} Gutwirth explains that women who contributed to this petition remained fearful of fully expressing their social and political grievances, for it could jeopardize their modesty.\textsuperscript{49}

The use of generic, anonymous women as allegories of abstract Revolutionary values such as liberty and equality undercut the very ideals that these prints aimed to celebrate. For example, Antoine-Jean Duclos’s etching commemorating Charles Monnet’s sculpture \textit{La Fontaine de la Regeneration sur les debris de la Bastille, le 10 avril 1793} (after 1794; fig. 6) exemplifies that way women functioned as allegories of Revolutionary events and values. In the etching, a large crowd gathers around the Fountain of Regeneration. As the statue of the goddess

\textsuperscript{46} Gutwirth, 365.


\textsuperscript{48} Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton, \textit{Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions} (US: Oxford University Press, 2012), 221.

\textsuperscript{49} Gutwirth, \textit{The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era}, 218.
Isis dispenses water from her breasts, a male figure catches her metaphorical milk in his cup.\textsuperscript{50} The allegorical sculpture honored women’s “essential” and biological role in birthing, nurturing, and raising active loyal citizens.\textsuperscript{51} This example emphasizes the way that Revolutionary propaganda relegated women to conventional family roles while largely barring them from the actual political sphere. To use allegorical, less specific female figures in these print culture meant women of various backgrounds could identify themselves in such images and thus feel called to action without being granted real political power.

Benoist adapted several motifs from these prints in \textit{Portrait of a Black Woman}. The most obvious such trope is that of the bare-breasted woman. But this motif, with its long history, could be understood in various different, sometimes conflicting, ways, especially when racial ideas come into play. Smalls interprets the bared breast in Benoist’s painting in relation to its traditional association with both emotional warmth and liberty.\textsuperscript{52} The bared breast also could allude to the classical myth of the Amazon: women who participated in both the domestic duties of womanhood and the calls to public, “masculine” action such as war.\textsuperscript{53} In the Revolutionary period, the motif of the bared breast tended most often to position women as maternal figures, whose role was to nurture the new Republic and its ideals of liberty and equality.\textsuperscript{54} In Antoine

\textsuperscript{50} Gutwirth, \textit{The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era}, 253. The image of the goddess became popular during the Revolution, as the republic aimed to redirect the monarchy’s focus on the king to the broader collective of the French population.

\textsuperscript{51} Landes, \textit{Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France}, 32.

\textsuperscript{52} Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s \textit{Portrait d’une nègresse} (1800).”

\textsuperscript{53} Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s \textit{Portrait d’une nègresse} (1800).” Such association, in conjunction with the figure of the Black Venus, was later used to advocate for the reestablishment of slavery in 1802. See Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 331.

\textsuperscript{54} Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 327.
Carré’s engraving *Fraternity* after Claude-Louis Desrais (ca. 1794; fig. 7), the allegorical figure of Fraternity with her bared breast reminded French women to protect and foster egalitarian attitudes among France’s male citizens, equality that was not extended to real women themselves. In Benoist’s painting, the bared breast can be interpreted as, on the one hand, a symbol of maternity and Republican virtue, and on the other, vulgar sexuality, at a moment when the future of slavery, emancipation, and equality was publicly debated.

The other symbolic motif in Benoist’s painting is the headwrap worn by her sitter: its form clearly evokes the Phrygian cap, a red conical hat typically worn by republicans during and after the French Revolution. The cap appeared widely in both abolitionist and Revolutionary prints during the 1780s and 90s. After 1789, for example, prints depicted King Louis XVI wearing the red cap of the Revolutionaries (fig. 8). Simultaneously, newly enfranchised Black peoples wore the cap in support of recent emancipatory events, including the slave revolts of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) in 1791. Simon-Louis Boizot’s engravings of an anonymous freed man and woman, both titles *Moi libre aussi* (“I, too, an free,” 1792; figs. 9-10), were produced to commemorate the abolition of slavery in France’s colonies. The male figure dons a red Phrygian cap, indicating his indebtedness to the ideals of the Revolution and underscoring his free, nominally equal status. The woman wears a headwrap, an accessory originating from the West Indies to mark free women of color in the colonies. Importantly, these images each portray a single, lone Black figure; as in Benoist’s painting, this autonomy

55 Landes, 102.
56 Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s *Portrait d’une nègresse* (1800)”.
itself symbolizes their freedom. However, the prints generalize their subjects—rendering them into types—representing their lips, nose, and hair in ways congruent with racialized hierarchies that dehumanized Black people.

Like Boizoit and other Revolutionary-era printmakers, Benoist granted her sitter only partial equality; she employed the motifs of the bared breast and the headwrap, but in ways that left their meanings ambiguous. Like the Revolutionary allegories described above, Benoist’s sitter remains anonymous, and is associated with the symbolic motifs that often accompanied female allegories. Benoist also rendered those motifs in ways that amplified the indeterminacy of their meanings. For example, it is unclear if she is in the act of concealing or revealing her right breast. As we do not know whether the sitter herself played an active role in determining the way that she was portrayed, the symbolism of the bared breast is all the more obscure. The sitter’s headwrap is an equally unstable signifier: it could be a loose interpretation of the Phrygian cap; it may associate the sitter with the slave revolts in Saint-Domingue; or, it could simply mark her origin in the Antilles.

The “Challenge” of Black Personhood in Painting

As Benoist struggled to devise a visual language for representing her Black female model, she must have been aware of a related venture by Girodet, the Portrait of Jean Baptiste Belley (1747-1805), Deputy of Saint-Domingue at the French Convention (fig. 11), first shown at the Exposition de l’Elysée of 1797.58 There, this large-scale portrait depicts a well-known

---

58 Though Girodet’s painting is widely considered by art historians as the quintessential anti-slavery portrait, a number of scholars disagree with this sentiment. I do not intend to uncover those particular ambiguities of the portrait, but instead aim to provide an analysis that contextualizes depicting a singular non-white French citizen at the end of the eighteenth century.
politician and military hero was listed as *Portrait de Nègre (Portrait of a Black Man)*. When the painting was accepted into the 1798 Salon, Girodet protested the use of such a generic title, insisting that Belley be named specifically in the *livret*. Clearly, Girodet aimed to treat his sitter as a specific person and a free French citizen—yet this painting is rife with many of the same contradictions that we see in Benoist’s.

Both Benoist and Girodet, as was noted earlier, studied under Jacques-Louis David, albeit in separate ateliers. Girodet trained in David’s main studio, an all-male environment. David aimed to emulate the “warrior ethos of republican Rome” in both his artistic subjects and the atelier environment. He maintained these ideals by subverting the traditional master-student relationships and establishing an open and egalitarian atmosphere for his male students. By contrast, Benoist studied in David’s all-female atelier. According to Mary Vidal, this studio functioned as a modest space for women like Benoist to receive an artistic education, while its existence also allowed David to undermine the Academy’s regulations against women artists—part of his larger rebuke to a hierarchical, monarchic institution that he call to abolish at the height of the Jacobins’ rise to power. In spite of these differences in their training, Benoist and Girodet both were exposed to David’s progressive, egalitarian politics in their formative artistic years. Additionally, they simultaneously held residencies in the Musée du Louvre when Girodet was completing the portrait of Jean Baptiste Belley, and Girodet was friends with Benoist’s


62 Vidal, 237.
brother-in-law.63 These professional and personal connections illuminate parallels between the way they approached the depiction of Black subjects.

Unlike Benoist’s sitter, we know a great deal about Girodet’s. Belley was born in Senegal; as a child, he was enslaved and taken to Saint-Domingue. As the French declared war on Austria and Prussia in 1792 and shortly after declared war on Britain and Holland in 1793, they struggled to defend their mainland and colonial territories. Like many other enslaved Black men, Belley won his freedom by serving in the French military during this period. As Helen Weston explains, this practice underscored the contradiction between Revolutionary rhetoric and the system of slavery that supported the French economy: “even traders in the Indies had to acknowledge blacks as men, not animals, and therefore deserving of rights along with all qualifying males born equal and free.”64 In 1793, Belley became the first Black deputy from the territory of Saint-Domingue.65 That year proved to be a turning point, as “the end of white rule in one of France’s most productive colonies.”66 On February 4, 1794, Belley attended the National Convention in Paris, where he delivered an impassioned speech about the rights of liberty in France; that speech clearly contributed to the passage of the emancipation act that day.

Completed three years later, Girodet’s painting alludes to the enslavement of Black people in various, conflicting ways. Girodet depicts Belley in his military uniform, including the white scarf around his neck, the black coat with gold accents, the tri-color waistband, and beige

63 Grigsby, 57.
65 Grigsby, 22.
66 Weston, 86.
pants. Girodet insisted on representing Belley in his uniform for viewers to know his status as representative of the people.Both of Belley’s hands are marked with discolored and worn skin, indicating his past as an enslaved man. A landscape reminiscent of Saint-Domingue is pictured in the distant background. Girodet positions Belley leaning on a pedestal with his right elbow, his pensive gaze directed upwards. On the pedestal rests a bust of Guillaume Thomas François Raynal. A prominent French writer, Raynal advocated for the humane treatment of slaves but still supported slavery in the French colonies. Belley and Raynal both questioned the system of slavery as a violation of basic human rights, but from different perspectives.

As with Benoist’s painting, scholars have debated whether the portrait of Belley is intended to be a positive or negative portrayal. Weston argues that Girodet depicts Belley in a positive light, as heroic and dignified. She points out that Girodet rejected the conventions for portraying Black figures discussed above, such as “constructions of the subservient, grateful, or fearful black figure, placed on some inferior register vis-à-vis a central, dominating white father figure or infantilizing, aristocratic female mistress.” In her view, the juxtaposition of the sculpted bust of Raynal with the living figure of Belley indicates that the two men are equally qualified to engage in the debates on slavery. Belley’s military garb and his pose, which references Hellenistic-era sculpture, stress his civic identity and identify him with democratic ideals. By alluding to Belley’s military and political roles, finally, Girodet subverted the notion

---

67 Weston, 86.
68 Libby, 37.
69 Weston, 89.
70 Ibid., 99.
that intelligence is an exclusively white attribute. In sum, Weston believes that Girodet’s painting was a pro-abolitionist statement in which Belley embodied the ideal French citizen.

By contrast, Grigsby views the portrait as more ambiguous, representing freedom for non-white populations as unstable and contingent. She emphasizes how the newfound right to citizenship of previously enslaved persons impacted white French citizens’ self-image, connecting them uncomfortably “to their vilified and repressed other: the Black slave.” For Grigsby, Portrait of Belley ultimately fails to fully reconcile freedom with blackness, in spite of the positive aspects of his portrayal. Though Girodet chose to represent Belley in his uniform, his dark complexion, juxtaposed with the white marble bust of Raynal, evokes a greater sense of difference between the men than their views on the system of slavery. Aware of “the distance between himself and his model,” Girodet struggled to fully convey Belley’s personhood. He resorts to emphasizing Belley’s external physical features—his discolored, worn hands and tricolor waistband—unsure of how to represent the “new French citizen.” For Grigsby, the painting ultimately does not successfully advocate for an inclusive body politic.

These differences of opinion show just how complex the depiction of Black personhood was around the turn of the nineteenth century in France. Both Benoist and Girodet struggled with this problem, although many of Benoist’s choices do not map directly onto Girodet’s. Belley is not depicted on his own: the bust of Raynal vies for the viewer’s attention and affects their

71 Weston, 87.
72 Grigsby, 18.
73 Ibid., 22.
74 Ibid., 14.
75 Ibid., 49.
interpretation of Belley (whether positive or negative). Girodet chose a recognizable, well-known individual, and insisted that the Salon grant him that distinction; he also placed the sitter in a landscape evocative of Saint-Domingue, a specific place. Benoist neglected to provide basic information about the sitter’s identity, and divorced her sitter from any particular place by posing her in what seems to be the artist’s studio, or a wholly fictive space. Whereas Belley wears a uniform, the clothing worn by Benoist’s sitter tells us little about her. Finally, Benoist chose to portray a female subject, making her painting the first ever to depict an isolated, Black woman by a female artist.

As my analysis has shown, Portrait of a Black Woman both draws upon and rejects existing conventions for the portrayal of Black persons. Like Girodet’s Belley, it cannot be definitively categorized as positive or negative, pro- or anti-slavery. In choosing this subject, Benoist put herself in the position of having to invent a new set of conventions. This brings us to the issue of how Benoist’s identity as a white woman affected the making of this work. While we do not know the precise circumstances that produced it, scholars generally agree that Benoist’s model was not in a position to dictate or control the artist’s choices. What, then, do the latter tell us about Benoist’s identity and motivations?

76 The lack of descript interior setting is not unfounded in the trajectory of French portraiture. For instance, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s Portrait of Countess Golovina (c. 1797-1800) exhibits this lack of setting. However, Vigée-Lebrun offers the name of the subject, thus validating the sitter’s identity. Ultimately, the lack of both the name of the sitter and the specific association to place neglects to inform our understanding of the sitter’s identity.

77 Prior to this point in portraiture, the depiction of a single, Black woman was popular in copper prints, small sculptures, and engravings. For more on these engravings, see Schmidt-Linsenhoof, 327 and Smalls, “Race, Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une negresse (1800).”
CHAPTER 2
THE FEMALE ARTIST AND THE TÊTE D’EXPRESSİON

This chapter shifts focus from the sitter for Portrait of a Black Woman to its white female artist. Many existing interpretations of this painting take the artist’s race and gender into account, only to conclude that the work’s meaning remains unclear due to the lack of concrete information about both the white female artist’s intentions and her relationship to the Black female sitter. These interpretations hinge largely on the question of whether the work conforms to the conventions of portraiture—that is to say, whether the white female artist dignified her Black sitter by endowing her with individual specificity. My aim is to shift this conversation by relating Benoist’s painting to the genre of the tête d’expression, or “expressive head.”

Morphologically related to the portrait, the tête d’expression depicts the face and upper body of a human figure. As developed by painter and theorist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), however, the tête d’expression was related not to portraiture, but to the practice of history painting: these works were made to study the variety of facial expressions necessary to convey complex narratives. From Le Brun’s era, history painting was ranked the most prestigious in the French Academy’s hierarchy of genres, as part of the institution’s larger effort to define painting as a liberal art tied to classical humanism. I argue that by considering this painting in relation to the tête d’expression, we can better understand the tensions between allegory and specificity in Portrait of a Black Woman. This, in turn, furthers our understanding of the way Benoist positioned herself as an ambitious artist and a student of David’s.

Though the tête d’expression is a sub-genre of history painting—a male-dominated practice during the mid-seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries—women artists were commonly associated with this type of image. This association is due to the institutional and
social barriers women artists faced as they developed professional careers. The practice of history painting required knowledge and fluency in the depiction of human anatomy, typically acquired through the practice of life drawing. Women were not allowed to train as students in the French Academy, in part due to the perceived impropriety of their presence in front of a nude model; however, many aspiring women artists managed to study human anatomy in this period. 78 Nevertheless, few women submitted large-scale history paintings to the annual Paris Salon or other exhibitions of the period. Their hesitance is probably due not only to the genre’s association with life drawing, but also to the likelihood that such a public display of ambition on the part of a woman would not be well received. By practicing the tête d’expression, women artists had the opportunity to demonstrate their skill in depicting facial expressions and the partial human form without threatening their reputation. In addition, the association of the tête d’expression with the media of pastels and pencil strengthened its connection to female artists. These materials, less prestigious relative to oil paint, were deemed appropriate for women, due to their portability, simple clean up, and minimal required equipment. 79

Some of David’s female students did create history paintings—including Benoist, who exhibited the classically-inspired mythological scenes Farewell of Psyche and Innocence between Vice and Virtue at the Salon of 1791. 80 Given that Benoist was known primarily as a history painter, visitors to the 1800 Salon may have associated Portrait of a Black Woman with


80 Smalls, “Slavery is a Woman: ‘Race,’ Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait d’une négresse (1800).”
the genre of the tête d’expression, in spite of the title’s invocation of portraiture (as well as the sitter’s rather stoic facial expression). Through further consideration of the tête d’expression, we may better understand both the work itself and the artist’s motivations for painting it. In order to link Benoist’s painting to the tête d’expression, my argument requires a series of contextual analyses. First, the genre of the tête d’expression must be traced back to its inception with Le Brun. Proficient in history painting and an advocate for conveying emotion in painting, Le Brun developed the concept of the passions and the expressive head. This informed future generations of French history painters, especially Benoist’s teacher David. Second, David’s proficiency in the tête d’expression and its translation to history painting deserve attention. Departing from Le Brun’s method, David conveyed emotion and narrative through the body rather than facial features, instigating what Dorothy Johnson calls an “aesthetic revolution.”81 In turn, this set the precedent for Benoist to intervene with the tête d’expression on her own terms. I consider David’s role in the relationship between women artists and history painting, specifically looking to another one of his female students: Angélique Mongez. Finally, I will discuss the popularity of the tête d’expression among female artists of the period, including Adélaïde Labille-Guiard.

Ultimately, I hope to show that, although Benoist’s painting was labeled as a “portrait” when it was exhibited at the Salon, by categorizing the work as a tête d’expression we may gain a better understanding of its complexities as well as of Benoist’s approach to her artistic career.

Charles Le Brun and the Tête d’Expression

In Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière (“Conference on General and Particular Expression”), a lecture delivered to the Académie Royale in 1688, artist and theorist Charles Le Brun argued that expression was crucial to the success of a painting. Speaking to a group of fellow artists, Le Brun claimed that expression manifests six identifiable emotions or “passions”: admiration, esteem, veneration, terror, jealousy, and anger. For Le Brun, the painter’s task was to capture the exterior expression of these passions through the actions of the human face and body. Le Brun explained that the brain functions as a mediator between the internal passions and the formations of the face. Once the brain interprets the “Impressions of the Passions,” the face expresses these internal sensations. The artist’s task, according to Le Brun, is to manipulate the eyes, eyebrows, and mouth so as to clearly convey different emotional states. Le Brun’s sketch, Studies of Human Eyes and Eyebrows (fig. 12) exemplifies his approach to the depiction of different emotions. His representation of admiration consists of leveled eyebrows, a relaxed forehead, and slightly wide eyes, whereas in the rendering of anger, the eyes are focused, the forehead is wrinkled, and eyebrows are pressed downwards. This preparatory drawing serves as reminder of the subtleties of facial expressions, informed by the passions of the soul. For Le Brun, the skillful representation of authentic emotions was key to the successful execution of complex narratives in a multi-figure history painting.

83 Gaiger, Harrison, Wood, 132.
How did Le Brun put this theory into practice? One example is *The Battle of Arbela* (1669: fig. 13). From the series “Triumphs of Alexander,” this large-scale painting depicts Alexander the Great’s conquest into the Persian empire. The scene depicts a chaotic moment during battle, with Alexander wielding his sword on horseback as King Darius III handles a bow and arrow from his throne. Bodies of soldiers and horses are sprawled across the foreground. Le Brun’s formula is particularly evident in the central figure, who flees from the violence and devastation of the battlefield: his lifted eyebrows, tense facial muscles, wide eyes, and open mouth evoke the passion of terror illustrated in Le Brun’s studies. Interestingly, Le Brun is known to have taken significant measures to accurately illustrate the passions for both humans and animals in this painting, going so far as to study Persian horses so that he could effectively represent the appropriate facial and bodily reactions of animals in battle.85

Le Brun’s theory was shaped by an array of practices, artists, and thinkers, including seventeenth century history painting, French philosopher René Descartes, and artist Nicolas Poussin. According to Jennifer Montagu, Le Brun believed a set of principles was necessary to articulate the internal passions.86 Though Montagu notes the complexity of Le Brun’s argument, she states that “its most valuable achievement was in formulating a scientific theory of expression.”87 While articulating the theory of expression, Le Brun established his own individual, unique style that addressed narrative in seventeenth century history painting. Though the lecture of the passions went unpublished during Le Brun’s lifetime, Montagu nonetheless

86 Montagu, 17.
87 Ibid., 19.
maintains that his career was regarded as an “uncontested domination of French art.” Le Brun’s theory of expression through facial features informed future generations of history painters that aimed to convey authentic emotions and captivating narratives.

David’s Intervention

In the early years of his artistic career, David trained in the French academic system and excelled in the sub-genre of the tête d’expression. While in Rome, he applied Le Brun’s theory to his studies of Italian sculptural works. These initial studies resulted in David’s belief that the tête d’expression was one of the most crucial elements in painting. One example of his proficiency in the genre is La Douleur (Sorrow, 1773; fig. 14). In this sketch, David adheres to Le Brun’s formula of facial features to convey sadness; indeed, David’s image seems directly derived from Le Brun’s Tristesse et abatement de coeur (1698; fig. 15). La Douleur ultimately received critical acclaim, winning in a 1773 academic competition for the tête d’expression. With his early artistic practice ingrained in the fundamental formula of the expressive head, David possessed the knowledge and the capabilities to make changes in the genre. In the 1780s, David articulated his signature style of corporality and drama of the body as an extension of Le Brun’s theory of the tête d’expression while subverting the aesthetic norms of history painting during the eighteenth century.

88 Montagu, 43.
89 Johnson, Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis, 38.
90 Johnson, 32.
91 Ibid., 46.
92 For a full account of David’s career, see Dorothy Johnson, Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 32.
In alignment with writer Denis Diderot (1713-1784), who advocated for the body as a tool to convey human psychology, David challenged the prevailing aesthetic norms of history painting. Johnson explains that Le Brun’s theory of the tête d’expression offered a quasi-scientific approach to the human head, specifically in terms of physiognomy. With new attention to detail on all parts of the body including features such as hands, hair, feet, and musculature, narrative was no longer exclusive to the movements of the face or the head. By shifting the narrative emphasis from physiognomy of the head to the entire body, David ultimately rejected Le Brun’s theory. Johnson argues, in fact, that the tête d’expression was no longer necessary to prepare for complex history paintings. Yet David was steeped in Le Brun’s values and formulas, and arguably built his new expressive mode upon the innovations of his predecessor—as his student Benoist would later go on to do.

The Expressive Head: A “Feminine” Pursuit?

David’s interventions into the genres of history painting and the tête d’expression proved extremely influential on subsequent generations of artists, many of whom trained in his ateliers. As was noted above, David maintained separate ateliers for training male and female students. In his male atelier, David fostered an egalitarian atmosphere, where he and his students rejected the hierarchy typical of the French Academy in favor of a collaborative learning environment. The culture of his all-female atelier proved to be less collaborative in the instructor-pupil

93 Johnson, 32.
94 Ibid., 32.
95 Johnson, 48.
relationships, but the decision to train women was progressive in and of itself. In 1787, David was criticized by Comte d’Angiviller, Louis XIV’s General Director of Buildings, for teaching women in the Louvre despite the regulation that forbade women from training there.

Even those women privileged enough to train with David faced institutional and social barriers in their efforts to establish professional careers as artists. According to Margaret Oppenheimer, women were expected to be modest, which “meant avoiding forwardness, boastfulness, and all public notoriety, and being content to stay at home and tend the household.” To be a successful artist meant to be a public figure; therefore, a career as an artist represented a threat to a woman’s modesty. Given the aforementioned problem of the life class, which also posed a threat to modesty, women history painters were quite rare during this period. The career Angélique Mongez, a contemporary of Benoist’s and a fellow student of David’s, speaks to these problems. In the Salon of 1802, Mongez identified herself as a student of David and exhibited *Astyanax taken from his Mother* (1802: fig. 16). This large-scale history painting illustrates the story of Ulysses ordering his soldiers to throw Astyanax over the walls of Troy, as Andromache watches in distress. Critics largely acknowledged Mongez’s bold choice and found her debut impressive. Mongez’s painting proved that the success of history painting was attainable for women artists and no longer an exclusively male pursuit. However, this in itself

96 Vidal, 237.

97 Margaret Fields Denton, “A Woman’s Place: The Gendering of Genres in Post-Revolutionary French Painting.” *Art History* 21, no. 2 (June 1998), 220.

98 Oppenheim, Oppenheimer, “‘The Charming Spectacle of a Cadaver’: Anatomical and Life Study by Women Artists in Paris, 1775-1815.”

99 Denton, 223.
seemed to threaten the very status of history painting: one review of Mongez’s work believed that the feminization of the genre jeopardized its future and even that of the Academy.\footnote{Ibid., 227-228.}

Cases like Mongez’s were rare. More frequently, women artists found subtle ways around the barriers and implicit prohibitions on making history paintings, by working in hybrid genres such as the historiated portrait or the \textit{tête d’expression}. For Adélaide Labille-Guiard (1749-1803), the \textit{tête d’expression} became an important genre in its own right, even as it demonstrated her painterly skill through its association with history painting. Her pastel \textit{Head of a Young Woman (Delightful Surprise)} (1779; fig. 17), exhibited at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1782, illustrates the perceived suitability of the genre for female artists. The pastel work depicts a white woman leaning on a blue, satin-like pillow. Wrapped in a blue ribbon, her long, brown curls fall past her shoulders, where her bare chest is revealed. The woman’s eyes are directed upwards, with flushed cheeks and a slightly open mouth. According to Laura Auricchio, the face exhibits a moment of “sensual awakening, embodied, appropriately, in the figure of a girl on the cusp of adolescence.”\footnote{Auricchio, 22.} The \textit{tête d’expression}’s noble lineage thus allowed Labille-Guiard to create an image that otherwise might be perceived as improper for a woman artist.

A comparison of \textit{Portrait of a Black Woman} with Labille-Guiard’s pastel illuminates how Benoist borrowed and altered aspects of the \textit{tête d’expression} genre. Where Labille-Guiard chose to portray a girl on the brink of adolescence, Benoist’s sitter is older and more poised. Her image is less explicitly sensual and lighthearted; her model’s expression is grave and serious. This difference in expression is accentuated by the difference in medium: whereas Labille-Guird
worked in the “sensual,” “feminine” medium of pastel, Benoist chose the more elevated medium of oil paint. Further, Benoist’s sitter is not fully naked; only a single breast is exposed, and Benoist includes the model’s whole torso in the image, thus more fully aligning the genre of the tête d’expression with that of history painting.

Of course, the most significant distinction between these two works is their models’ race. In a culture that deemed whiteness to be the norm, the race of Labille-Guiard’s model could go unnoticed and unremarked; its subject could be the expression projected by the generic woman inside the frame. As critics’ reactions to Benoist’s painting demonstrate, her sitter’s race became the focus of (negative) attention. What reaction did Benoist expect? How did she want the painting’s mixture of specificity and generality to be read? Did she intend to elevate her sitter by both presenting her alone and by associating her with the esteemed genre of history painting? This, like so many aspects of Portrait of a Black Woman, remains a mystery. What the painting does make clear is how difficult it was in 1800 for a white female artist to make a straightforward image of an autonomous, free Black woman.
CONCLUSION

Art historians consider Marie-Guillelme Benoist’s *Portrait of a Black Woman* to be an ambiguous yet undoubtedly captivating painting produced during a socio-historical moment of uncertainty. Moreover, scholars have engaged with the work for its larger questions of racial and sexual difference. Though a full account of Benoist’s career and biography has yet to be written, I hope the work exhibited in this text contributes to future studies of the artist. Additionally, I remain hopeful that information regarding the sitter will be recovered to further grant her the necessary legacy. The aim of this thesis was not to narrowly categorize this work as a racist image or representation of equality, nor to merely label Benoist’s efforts as a success or a failure. Though Benoist’s attempt to depict a single black woman did not absolve her from participating or benefiting from racist ideology, we cannot overlook her efforts towards representing the new Black female citizen while asserting her own artistic legacy through the *tête d’expression*.

Who is granted individuality and how can this be achieved through visual means? Current popular culture is similarly concerned with these same issues of representation, identity, and autonomy in art history, as Benoist’s painting was featured in The Carter’s music video, “Apes**t” (2018; fig. 18), from their album *Everything is Love*. More recently, contemporary artists and writers like Ferren Gipson and Peter Brathwaite revisit Black portraiture through social media initiatives (figs. 19-20). By shifting our understanding of *Portrait of a Black Woman* through the *tête d’expression*, I hope to initiate new and productive conversations regarding dynamics of race and gender in French painting of the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If authority and agency could not be granted to people of color through the visual conventions during this period, it is crucial for art historians to reconsider these visual languages for the sake of expanding the canon.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Note: Due to copyright restrictions, illustrations are not reproduced in the online version of this thesis. They are available in the hard-copy version that is on file in the Visual Resources Center, Art Department, Katzen Arts Center, American University, Washington, D.C.

Figure 1: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Portrait of a Black Woman, 1800. Oil on canvas.

Figure 2: Marie-Guillemine Benoist, Self-Portrait, c. 1786. Oil on canvas.

Figure 3: Jacques-Louis David, Belisarius Begging for Alms, 1781. Oil on canvas.

Figure 4: Pierre Mignard, Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, 1682. Oil on canvas.

Figure 5: Jean-Marc Nattier, Mademoiselle de Clermont, Princess of the Blood, as a Sultana, Served by some Slaves, 1733. Oil on canvas.

Figure 6: Antoine-Jean Duclos after Charles Monnet, La Fontaine de la Regeneration sur les debris de la Bastille, le 10 avril 1793, after 1794. Etching on laid paper.

Figure 7: Antoine Carré after Claire-Louis Desrais, Fraternity, ca. 1794. Stipple engraving.

Figure 8: Anonymous, Louis XVI Wearing a Phrygian Cap, eighteenth century. Color print.

Figure 9: Simon-Louis Boizot, Moi libre aussi (woman), 1792. Stipple engraving.

Figure 10: Simon-Louis Boizot, Moi libre aussi (man), 1792. Stipple engraving.

Figure 11: Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, Portrait of Jean Baptiste Belley (1747-1805), Deputy of Santo Domingo at the French Convention, 1797. Oil on canvas.

Figure 12: Charles Le Brun, Studies of Human Eyes and Eyebrows, no date. Pencil on paper.

Figure 13: Charles Le Brun, The Battle of Arbella, 1669. Oil on canvas.

Figure 14: Jacques-Louis David, La Douleur, 1773. Pencil on paper.

Figure 15: Charles Le Brun, Tristesse et abatement de coeur, 1698. Pencil on paper.

Figure 16: Angélique Mongez, Astyanax taken from his Mother, 1802. Oil on canvas.

Figure 17: Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, Head of a Young Woman (Delightful Surprise), 1779. Pastel on blue paper.

Figure 18: The Carters, “Apes**t” in Everything is Love, 2018. Video still.
Figure 19: Ferren Gipson, Recreation of *Portrait of a Black Woman* by Marie-Guilleminé (1800), 2020. Instagram post.

Figure 20: Peter Brathwaite, Recreation of *Adolf Ludvig Gustav Albert Couschi* by Gustaf Lundberg (1775), 2020. Instagram post.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Duncan, Carol. “Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art.” *Art


