Black Masks, Raced Skin, and the Flawed Archive: Examining Identity in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait

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At times, this thesis brought about more questions than answers, but as this experience draws to a close, I am energized to continue to search for conclusions and draw new ones, feeling excited to continue to look at works of art and ask “why?”.
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**Introduction:**

Based in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, collector Jeremy Simien acquires Western works of art depicting Creole people with a special focus on people of African descent. While people of color—both as subjects and artists—have largely been pushed to the margins of museum collections, or in some cases excluded entirely, collectors like Simien seek to rectify these inequities by making them the focal point of their personal collections. With this mission as a guiding collecting principal, these somewhat niche collections end up holding works that, while often cast out from the realm of art traditionally valued by markets and canon-establishing museums, carry deeply significant messages about race and gender. These works (specifically paintings in this context) become objects of cultural introspection, offering a critical index of the environment in which they were created. By probing the unexplored depths of these paintings, we can

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1 The meaning of the term Creole fluctuates based on geographic origin and historical period, though it most generally references people born in colonial territories or the Americas rather than Europe or Africa. In Louisiana specifically, the term has carried several varied understandings throughout history and is most widely understood as describing people of mixed European, African, and Native American ancestry. After Louisiana became an American state in 1812, the French identified as Creole to distinguish themselves from the Americans—hence the formation of the distinctive Vieux Carre (French Quarter) and the American Sector. However, the term later referred to those born in Louisiana, applying to natives of both French and American descent. Because the definition of Creole never required “purity” of racial ancestry, many free people of color also identified as Creole due to either native birth or French-colonial ancestry. See: Virginia R Dominguez, “Social Classification in Creole Louisiana,” *American Ethnologist* 4, no. 4 (1977): 589–602.


2 See: “Where are the people who happen to look like me?” Kehinde Wiley on visiting the Huntington as a child. *Kehinde Wiley: A Portrait of a Young Gentleman – Artist Reception, The Huntington* (YouTube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAl6TyL3zRM.


3 Portraiture especially exists as a mirror of society, with the artist, sitter, and final product all enmeshed in the value system of that society. See: Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.
understand the ripples of their influences at the time of their making as well as their reverberating impacts for contemporary viewers.

Paintings like the ones in Jeremy Simien’s collection have been historically deprioritized in institutional art collections due to several factors. Conventionally valued art’s longstanding history of subjugation in visual representations of people of color is compounded by an incomplete and often prejudicial archive of materials often created and safeguarded by the oppressor.\(^4\) Beyond visual tropes of the “Exotic Other,” and the infantilized Black attendant, notions of the inferiority of people of color are also insidiously woven into archival material, resulting in the failure for many people of color to be accurately portrayed, dignified with a name, or acknowledged at all.\(^5\) For portraits especially, if the painting lacks the identification of the artist or sitters—as paintings with figures of color so often do—it may be deemed unworthy of further inquiry or even of holding a place in an institutional collection.

Simien uncovered how this process can unfold firsthand when researching another of his acquisitions, an 1837 New Orleans portrait of three white figures now identified as the Frey children and a recently restored Black figure now identified as an enslaved teenage house servant named Bélizaire. When the painting entered the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art in 1972, only the three white children remained visible in the composition, though the outline of a fourth figure, covered over in a layer of paint, still appeared legibly on the canvas. In the over 30 years the painting remained in the


\(^5\) Further explanations of these tropes are forthcoming in analysis. For more on the “Exotic Other” see: James Smalls, “Slavery Is a Woman: Race, Gender, and Visuality in Marie Benoist’s Portrait D’une Négresse (1800),” Nineteenth-century art worldwide 3, no. 1 (2004).
museum’s care, it was never cleaned, repaired, or displayed. The fourth figure remained obscured by paint and no one sought to discover his identity or learn his story.

In 2005, the New Orleans Museum of Art deaccessioned the portrait, removing it from the collection to sell and make way for new acquisitions. According to a recent article in the *Times Picayune*, the museum’s deputy director of curatorial affairs, Lisa Rotondo-McCord, reasoned that the painting, “was in poor condition, the identities of the artist and subjects were unknown, and there was no one on staff to try to track down such information.”

At some point after it left the museum’s hands, the painting was privately restored to reveal the fourth figure. Later, when Simien acquired the restored portrait, he worked with local historian Katy Shannon to identify the Frey children and the teenage boy as the enslaved house servant Bélizaire. Bolstered by these newly uncovered details, the impacts of this unique composition and the accompanying story of this object mark it as an important work of art that elicits historical discourse and cultural introspection.

For many other portraits featuring people of color, the identities of the artists and sitters remain unknown, and the flawed archive can make these facts difficult or even impossible to learn. One such portrait, Simien’s ca. 1720 French painting of two closely acquainted women, one white, the other a person of color (Fig. 1), bears neither the names of the sitters nor the artist. Without the key facts of the object’s history, utilizing traditional art historical methods for analysis proves difficult. Consequently, when working with a Western archive that so often fails to name these sitters of color and uphold their histories, one must ask different questions and raise different concerns to generate scholarly discourse.

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Posed against a nondescript brown backdrop, two women softly smile for their portrait. The foremost figure dons a brilliant cobalt taffeta dress adorned with gold embellishments and a frilly lace ruff. The bright hue of her dress emphasizes the woman’s alabaster white skin, with the shade of her lace collar mimicking the white color of her hair. She wears a little blue hat with a small pinkish red bow. The folds of the bow resemble the soft pillows of her red lips, accentuated by a pronounced cupids bow and a pink flush upon her cheeks. The shape of her long straight nose, wide almond eyes, and rounded eyebrows create an elegant countenance that appears softly regal and at once familiar.

Perhaps this familiarity stems from the visage of the second woman in the composition, standing just behind and slightly above the white woman. This woman’s distinctive facial features directly echo those of the woman in the foreground. However, the mimetic nature of her eyes and smile stops at the shape alone. Dark espresso locks frame the tan canvas of this woman’s face. Though they wear similar expressions, with the woman of color’s brown eyes meeting the viewers gaze with the same unbroken intensity of the glassy blue eyes of the woman just in front of her, the woman of color’s cheeks and lips lack the sanguine rosy blush tones that rush to the white woman’s face. The woman of color dresses in red and black, contrasting with the blue and white fabrics of her counterpart. A turban-like headdress rests atop her head, accented with a small boutonnière of blooms and a white taffeta bow. Her shoulders and face appear wider and less dainty as she stands more firmly in place. Her weightiness anchors her to the ground while the more delicate frame of the figure below her rises weightlessly. The darker-featured woman’s background positioning precludes the viewer from seeing the shape of her body, while the tightly cinched waist of the white woman, emphasized by the dramatic sweeping fabric of her fluttering
sleeves, appears as a focal point of the composition. With her arms extended to show off her hourglass shape, she clutches a small black mask in her right hand.

Together, the three faces form a decisive diagonal line, showcasing the differences—some strong and some subtle—of each face. Though the three contrasting faces beckon for a viewer to spot divergences, a sense of kinship amongst the two female figures also fills the composition. They may perhaps even be sisters of slightly differing parentage. The artist does not render one with significantly more autonomy than the other, but rather paints both with dignified elegance and steadfast outward gazes. However, the similarities in their countenances and the quality of their courtly attire make the nuanced variance in their representations even more palpable.

The black mask itself, inanimate yet teeming with implications, drives these differences home. Modeled after a venetian mask, the onyx-colored item lacks any earnest facial features, appearing simply a shell of color. This black second skin, when held to the face, creates a disguise showing nothing more than a dark hue. What most differentiates the woman in the top right of the composition from the white woman in the center is not a dramatic contrast in her facial features, or the value of her sartorial trappings, but the color of her skin. More specifically, the color her skin is not. The artist’s careful rendering of the white woman’s translucent skin, rife with blush, and her slight frame contrast with the opacity of the woman of color’s olive skin, devoid of bashfulness, and her sturdier frame, underscoring the white woman’s fairness and fragility. Though the woman of color’s exact ethnic and racial background cannot be determined, the black mask the white woman clutches suggests, perhaps, that the woman of color was born from African and European parentage. Or perhaps the mask suggests the sitter of color’s existence in the world is the result of some sort of deviant act. Masks, particularly the style of the one seen here, carry a long history of implications, harkening to the opulence of Jacobian Masques, the bacchanalia of
masquerades and, most salaciously, the dangerous potential for libidinal and forbidden desires to be acted upon under the shield of disguise in Early Modern Europe and its colonies.  

This portrait exists within a larger tradition of double portraits, and the more niche concept of sororal portraits, or portraits of sisters on the cusp of marriage. It also engages with the iconography of Black attendant portraiture—paintings featuring white sitters with physically smaller Black figures painted in the margins or in an act of service, rendered as objectified and Othered stipulations of the sitter’s wealth rather than living breathing human beings. The degree to which this portrait can be considered in relation to Black attendant portraits remains in question. Rather, the exact relation and power structure between these two women remains unclear. Two comparable compositions featuring two female sitters of different racial backgrounds painted with an atypical or ambiguous power dynamic include David Martin’s intriguing circa 1778 Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (Fig. 2) and Steven Slaughter’s lesser known 1750 portrait now called Two Women Gathering Fruit (Fig. 3). Utilizing the scholarship surrounding the Dido portrait and adjacent works facilitates deeper analysis of the 1720 Simien Collection painting (for which no direct scholarship exists).

While this thesis will mine the flawed archive for possible leads on both the artist and the sitters, the goal here is not necessarily to answer the question of “who?”, but rather “why?”. Why are the women posed together with affinity if the artist visually highlights their differences? How does this portrait depart from the tradition of Black attendant portraiture and can it even be considered alongside it at all? What message is the artist trying to relay by creating a diagonal line of faces in three varied hues? And finally, what makes other works from this time worthy of being held at museums and critically studied while this one remains privately held and shrouded in mystery?

The first section of this paper utilizes formal visual analysis, historical context, and related portraits to attempt to name the artist of the painting and speculate on the identity of the sitters, demonstrating the limits of this approach when working with an incomplete and biased archive. The second section places the work in the context of sororal portraits, Black attendant portraits, and Martin’s Dido and Slaughter’s Women Gathering Fruit, examining how the Simien Collection Dual Portrait’s resistance to categorization precipitates a larger discussion on colorism, femininity, and subjecthood. The third section explores the mask as both a symbol for the theatricality and fluidity of identity in Early Modern European society and as a tool for self-fashioning upon the advent of the racialization of skin color. This section further situates the Simien Collection Dual Portrait within the political, economic, and social environment of Regency Era France, ultimately positing the composition as a statement on the hierarchy of race and an assertion of an ideal French identity. The closing section discusses combating ongoing inequities in the archive and museums through interventions by contemporary artists, intentional collecting, and fresh and unconventional research approaches, showcasing how the field of art history must seek out new
tools, methods, and ways of looking in order to fully study works that have been excluded from the canon of traditionally surveyed and valued art.

**A Note on Naming and Terminology:**

While Simien himself identifies the work as a double portrait, the ambiguous dynamic between the two figures inspires multiple interpretations. Instead, I offer the title Simien Collection *Dual Portrait* as an identification that further encapsulates the nuances of this painting. By definition, dual means consisting of two parts, elements, or aspects and this portrait certainly renders two specific faces. Dual also conjures notions of duality, opposition, and contrast—foundational themes at the center of this work. This title also focuses on Simien as the current caretaker of the work, harkening to the larger biography of this object and the story held within its frame.

The verbiage used in discussing this portrait is clunky. When two sitters in a portrait do not have names, we have to find different identifiers. This is especially difficult when both sitters are women. Pronouns no longer offer distinction, but rather confusion. Relationship falls next, and while the two women could potentially be described as kin like cousins or sisters, a lack of historical record of their identities makes this impossible to define. The next choice of descriptor might try to utilize the power dynamic, for example, lady and page boy—a common art historical title acting as a coded misnomer for “master and slave.” Assertions of the power dynamic in this portrait remain tenuous and resistant to defined roles. The next possible modifier for differentiation could be race; however, the racial and ethnic background of the woman in red cannot be

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10 Jeremy Simien in discussion with Rebecca Villalpando, April 18 2022.
expressly stated as it is not explicitly defined. In truth, we only know that the artist intends for her to be viewed as not white because of her direct juxtaposition with the woman in the blue dress, painstakingly rendered with decisive fairness. Thus, the dynamics in this portrait defy any sort of placement in any art historical box. Without their names, a difference in gender, or clear relationship dynamic, the sitters are reduced to figure one and figure two—and even then, who gets top billing? Thus, my analysis of the two female sitters employs the clunky descriptors: white woman and woman of color.

Even the academic writing surrounding this portrait thwarts traditional art historical practices as the painting cannot be identified by a definitive title or by the name of the artist or the sitters. Because of this, as I have pointed out, any exciting scholarly discourse about this object must probe beyond these basic facts. As outlined in the following section, employing a traditional research approach that begins with an initial search for an answer to “who?” offers context and potential identities of the artists and the sitters, but meaningful analysis ultimately must move beyond these questions.
Section 1:

The Limits of Identification

Naming a Potential Artist

Jeremy Simien acquired the dual portrait from Frederic Sportis Antiques, a dealer located in the Paris arts district, in November 2020. Though the details of the work available proved sparse, Simien was intrigued by the unique composition and the apparent quality of the piece, which maintained the integrity of the original work and lacked any significant inpainting. A bit of sleuthing through historical accounts and decisive close looking gives way to several theories about who the artist of the unknown dual portrait might be, shedding further light on possible identities of the sitters. Upon initial inspection, the central white woman in the composition of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait (Fig. 1) bears a striking resemblance in pose, dress, expression, and general technique to the more widely known Portrait of La Comtesse de Bersac (Fig. 4) created by artist Jean Baptiste Santerre around 1700. Santerre’s portrait depicts a white woman dressed in an elegant blue dress with details on the sleeves and at the waist that almost exactly mirror those on the dress of the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait. She extends both arms, presenting a little black mask in her right hand. The uncanny compositional similarities between Santerre’s Comtesse and the unknown white sitter render the 1720 portrait as a near copy of Santerre’s work. With these similarities in mind, Santerre becomes a possible lead as the creator of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait. Santerre lived in France from 1651 to 1717 and joined the Académie Royale in

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11 Jeremy Simien in discussion with Rebecca Villalpando, April 18 2022.
1704, creating numerous works for the court of Louis XIV. Santerre also founded a drawing academy for young ladies at Versailles, some of whom also served as his models. Despite his success, Santerre was said to have been a rather eccentric character who ultimately abandoned portrait painting later in life citing the, “extreme irritation caused him by stupid remarks on the likenesses.” He reportedly declared, “he would not henceforward paint anything but fancy heads, and that he would only copy from his models such features as pleased him.”

This approach seemingly inspired later French Rococo painters, specifically Fragonard’s “tête de fantasie” or fantasy head paintings characterized as “bust-length representations of anonymous or idealized models.” While the practice of creating a likeness through copying from existing works to create an idealized image might make Santerre a prime candidate as the artist of the ca. 1720 Simien Collection Dual Portrait, clearly copied from his ca. 1700 Portrait of the Comtesse de Bersac, closer comparison shows that despite mirrored dress and pose, the painting style used to render both figures appears markedly different. The Santerre work renders textures and surfaces in more exacting detail and utilizes a more dramatic juxtaposition of illumination and shadow, with the shiny surfaces of the onyx mask and the woman’s silk gown suffused with reflective light.

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14 Kingsley, 156-157.
By comparison, in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, the artist, though including perhaps more decorative detail, lacks the realism of texture and three-dimensionality of Santerre’s piece, with the figures instead appearing in a more uniform, flat light. The artist of the ca. 1720 dual portrait creates countenances that, while clearly influenced by the rounded and elegant lines utilized by Santerre, appear more spherical and less narrow, with larger more pronounced features like wider eyes and plumper lips. While the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait turns to meet the viewer’s gaze in a pose similar to Santerre’s Comtesse, both women in the dual composition appear in a semi-profile position, emphasizing the clear shapes of their noses, lips, and cheeks. Santerre’s Comtesse faces viewers head on, with her smaller symmetrical features echoed in the mask she holds. Painterly technique divergence aside, timelines also pose an obstacle for positing Santerre as the artist of the dual portrait. Santerre passed away in 1717 and this portrait was supposedly created in 1720. While the dates for all of these works are loose, the other timeline calling Santerre’s potential authorship into question is the movement of his artistic oeuvre and his decision to abandon portraits in favor of fantasy “fancy heads” with features that pleased him. The women in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait appear to share decisive kinship, rendered with a sense of realism in their expression and relation to each other that does not read as a fantastical amalgamations of ideal features. Thus, even if the painting was created before Santerre’s death in 1717, the clear individualized personhood of both sitters posits the painting as a portrait, something Santerre moved away from in his later years. A later interview with Jeremy Simien also revealed that Santerre’s painting became a rather common image in the era after it was printed widely as a lithograph, further underscoring the reach of his
influence and also divorcing copies of this composition from Santerre as the definite author.\textsuperscript{16}

While Fragonard was clearly influenced by Santerre’s artistic approach in his 1769 Fantasy Figures, closer contemporaries of Santerre also utilized this mix and match method during the Regency period, perhaps as an aesthetic choice similarly to Fragonard, or as a more practical method for producing a large output of portraits to meet an ever-growing demand. One such artist who enjoyed success in Regency France, Rosalba Carriera, famously included several masks in her portraiture, with her ca.1720 Portrait of a Woman with Mask (Fig. 5) offering a quintessential example. When Carriera traveled from Venice to Paris in March of 1720, she stayed at the hotel of Pierre Crozat and rubbed elbows with artists like Jean-Antoine Watteau while enjoying the patronage of the Regent himself Philippe II, Duke of Orléans and his wife Francoise-Marie de Bourbon.\textsuperscript{17} Members of the French Academy unanimously admitted her into their ranks in October of 1720.\textsuperscript{18} Of Rosalba Carriera’s success in the French court and accelerated recognition by her peers, scholar Angela Oberer writes, “Carriera’s arrival in Paris coincided with a period of high demand for painting, which was undoubtably connected to the Duke of Orleans’s personal tastes…. Carriera’s work in particular seems to have suited the taste of the Regency court and appears to have filled a vacuum in French art that occurred during that period.”\textsuperscript{19} This Regency period marked the time after Louis XIV’s death and before Louis XV’s succession to the throne when Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, served as Regent.

\textsuperscript{16} Jeremy Simien in discussion with Rebecca Villalpando, April 18 2022.
\textsuperscript{17} Angela Oberer, *The Life and Work of Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757) : the Queen of Pastel* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 135 & 139.
\textsuperscript{18} Oberer, 149.
\textsuperscript{19} Oberer, 153.
for the young Dauphin. An abundance of portraiture of the court and specifically of Philippe II, his wife Francoise-Marie de Bourbon, and their seven children (six girls), saturated much of the art scene during this time. In a similar approach as Santerre, but probably more so to keep up with the fervent demand during her tenure in Paris, Carriera also chose, “single elements or entire figures from another artwork to create her own invention,” perhaps mining from her own previous works and the works of her predecessors and contemporaries. While Carriera’s utilization of this approach and the ubiquity of her work during the Regency Era make her a possible artist of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, Carriera worked almost exclusively in pastel. The dual portrait is an oil painting.

Instead, based on my research, I offer a Pierre Gobert as a more likely candidate for the artist who created this 1720 dual portrait. Gobert, one of the most omnipresent painters of the Regency Era has also been described as the French artist “most unfairly plunged into oblivion.” Born in 1662, Gobert created a prolific body of work, and upon acceptance into the Academy in 1701, became a court portraitist for Louis XIV and later the Regent Philippe II and the young Louis XV. He first exhibited works at the salon in 1704 and later in 1737, before ultimately disappearing from public record. Despite the ubiquity of his paintings in the French courts, he lacked the celebrity of his contemporaries. In 1903, in an effort to flesh out the life and work of Gobert, a

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20 Oberer, 157.

contributor to the *Reunion Societies des Beaux-Arts* quoted a previous scholar musing, “Who knows Pierre Gobert? Very few people indeed. He was, however, one of the busiest people of his time; his work is widely represented at the museum of Versailles, and his name is still that of an unknown person.”23 This lack of distinction has resulted in alternating attribution for some works, with paintings like the *Femme en costume de fantaisie tenant un masque* (Fig. 6), housed at the Louvre, previously attributed to Santerre and others before being identified as the work of Gobert.24

Gobert’s paintings for the French court include a *Portrait of Marie Adélaïde de Savoie*, Duchesse de Bourgogne, and mother of the future King Louis XV (Fig. 7). He also created portraits of Françoise-Marie de Bourbon, duchess of Orléans, and wife of the Regent Philippe II, and their many daughters.25 Still, despite his frequent patronage, specifically by the Regent’s family, and his extensive collection at Versailles, Gobert has failed to gain the recognition enjoyed by his peers. Coupled with exercises in close looking, Gobert’s lack of lasting recognition and his sheer volume of work make him a prime candidate as the creator of the mysterious 1720 dual portrait.

When viewed in succession, the varying visages of Marie Adélaïde de Savoie (Fig. 7), Louise-Adélaïde de Bourbon-Conti (Fig. 8), and the Regent’s daughters Marie Louise Élisabeth d'Orléans, Duchess of Berry (Fig. 10), Charlotte Aglae d'Orleans (Fig. 12 & 13), and Luiza Adelaida (Louise Adelaide) d’Orleans (Fig. 14), all bear a striking resemblance to each other—and to the countenance of the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait. Though each figure has an individualized appearance and

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25 See: Fig.9, Fig. 10, Fig. 11, Fig. 12, Fig. 13, Fig. 14.
markers of her own specific identity, the hand of the artist remains evident, with each face carrying mimetic idealized features. Each of the sitters in these selected portraits appears in three-quarter or bust length, with a compelling gaze back at the viewer. Each rendered in an ever so slight profile, the women’s gracefully rounded eyebrows begin an arched line that creates the delicate and straight bridge of their noses. The artist emphasizes the shape of their large, wide, slightly almond shaped eyes by utilizing the semi-profile to accentuate each of their brow-bones or supraorbital ridges, aiding in the three-dimensionality and contour of their elegant faces. Soft, pillowy red lips accent each of their faces. Rather than the sometimes more common small and heart shaped mouths seen in contemporaneous portraits, Gobert paints more elongated lips that curve up into a smile at the corners and include a pronounced cupids bow at the center. Each face also flushes with varying degree of blush upon the cheeks, and features a highlighted, sometimes dimpled chin.

While the similarities in these faces could be due in part to familial relation, with many of these sitters being sisters or intermarried distant relatives, the similarities in rendering also point to the signature style of the artist, and a utilization of the mix-and-match approach employed by Santerre, Carriera, and others. While the style creates incredible similarities across portraits of different sitters, Gobert individualizes the women in different ways. For example, in their portraits, the Duchess of Berry (Fig. 10) and Mademoiselle de La Roche-Sur-Yon (Fig. 8), wear formal courtly dresses, matching the attire of the unnamed white sitter in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait. In the portraits of Marie Adélaïde de Savoie (Fig. 7), mother of Louis XV, and the Regent’s daughters Charlotte Aglae d'Orleans (Fig. 12 & 13), and Louise Adelaide d’Orleans (Fig.
14), the sitters wear clothing harkening to the allegorical pastoral costumes later
popularized in paintings by artists like Jean-Marc Nattier. Though the dresses vary from
ethereal loose draperies to more structured renditions, each appears adorned with flowers
and encircled with lush swaths of shiny taffeta fabric. While the hues of their hair vary,
all of the sitters wear their tresses in gathered heaps of curls atop their heads with two
wisps of curled bangs framing their faces. Though she wears a small hat, the artist also
paints the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait with her hair styled in this
manner, complete the two bangs curling on either side of her forehead.

Gobert’s Portrait of Marie Louise Élisabeth d’Orléans, Duchess of Berry (Fig. 10) differs sli-
ghtly in style. Though she still wears elegant courtly attire, the artist paints
her hair entirely swept up and out of her face, focusing the viewer’s attention to her most
defining feature: the dramatic hue of blush pooling in her cheeks. Primary accounts of the
Duchess of Berry, eldest daughter of the Duchess and Duke of Orleans Françoise-Marie
de Bourbon and Regent Philippe II, recount her many lovers, excessive drinking, love for
masked balls, and generally deviant behavior. The blush here connotes a certain
libidinal energy, offering a coded reference to the Duchess’ promiscuous reputation.
Though Gobert creates similar portraits from a more homogenous pool of features, he
includes certain visual cues for individualization like the Duchess of Berry’s expressive
blush. Masks account for another one of these visual cues.

26 Louis-Pierre Anquetil, Memoirs of the Court of France, During the Reign of Lewis XIV. and the Regency
of the Duke of Orleans: By M. Anquetil, Regular Canon Of The Congregation Of France, &c. Translated
In her portrait, Louise-Adélaïde de Bourbon-Conti dite Mademoiselle de La Roche-Sur-Yon (Fig. 8) clutches a small black mask in one hand as she gestures outward with the other. In another portrait of Marie Louise Élisabeth d'Orléans, Duchess of Berry (Fig. 11), Gobert paints the Duchess in full length, standing in a courtly interior and wearing a rich costume-like gown with chinoiserie fabric and an elaborate plumed headdress and holding a black mask. Another Gobert portrait of Francoise-Marie de Bourbon, Duchess of Orleans (Fig. 9), shows her seated in an elaborately brocaded frock, removing a glove as the other appears on a table beside her with a small black mask atop. Masks connote a resurgence of cultural activities like theatre and masked balls during this period. They carry potential to symbolize more superficial notions of decadence and dalliance, more inflammatory implications of deviance and sexuality, and more indirectly, insinuations about race and identity. They appear often in the portraiture of Gobert, though the intention of the symbol in each composition remains ambiguous.

In addition, Gobert also has a record of painting sororal portraits. Gobert’s *Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie and Louise Françoise de Bourbon* (Fig. 15), includes the two sisters, the legitimised daughters of Louis XIV and the Marquise de Montespan, identified by their pre-marriage titles, indicating this as a possible sororal portrait, depicting young women as marriageable or as brides.²⁷ In this portrait the future Duchess of Orleans and Duchess of Bourbon, pose lovingly together, even though primary accounts record their contentious relationship marked by jealousy.²⁸ Gobert

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renders the two in his signature style with elegant faces featuring rounded almond eyes, rosy cheeks, and plump lips turned up in a light smile at the corner. Filled with kinship and connection, the two hold hands as the figure on the left places her hand upon her sister’s shoulder—two desirable brides, poised for marriage. While Gobert’s composition emphasizes familiarity and equality, he differentiates the two sisters through subtle distinctions in their face shapes, and more overtly, the color of their hair and the style and hue of their gowns. The painting is imbued with a sororal energy that simultaneously reflects familial kinship and also similarities and differences in physical features—a unique tension also present in the composition of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait. Like Gobert’s Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie and Louise Françoise de Bourbon (Fig. 15), the two sitters in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, carry a certain—possibly familial—fondness, and their physical appearances are simultaneously marked by similarities and differences. However, the composition of the sororal portrait of Francoise Marie and Louise Francoise de Bourbon suggests an incontestable equality among the two sitters absent from the sitters in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, whose exact power dynamic remains indeterminate.

Nevertheless, when placed within the larger context of Gobert’s overarching oeuvre, considered alongside his propensity to include masks, and compared to another of his sororal compositions, Pierre Gobert emerges as a possible artist to which the Simien Collection Dual Portrait can be attributed. Bolstered by the fact that his prolific body of work often fails to be recognized or is even attributed to other painters, critical formal analysis reveals unmistakable stylistic connections between Gobert’s attributed works
and the Simien Collection Dual Portrait.\textsuperscript{29} Gobert, having eluded most serious scholarly interest, becomes a prime candidate for creator of this captivating, unique, and frankly atypical work. Had another big-name court painter created this work during the French Regency Era, it would have likely garnered more attention and been considered within the larger body of traditionally valued works from the time.

A recent conversation with Jeremy Simien corroborates this potential identification, with Simien sharing the original text of the listing of this work on the dealer’s website which translates to, “This charming canvas is the work of a painter close to Pierre Gobert (1662-1744). It can also be compared to the portraits of Jean Baptiste Santerre (1651-1717).”\textsuperscript{30} The listing gives us the name of the potential artist—which I did not discover until late into my research. Perhaps this should have been the first detail to share. But while the dealer tells us the information, visual analysis shows the evidence that leads to this conclusion. This roundabout journey ultimately paints a more complete picture. With the potential identity of the artist established, the identity of the sitters arises as the next logical question in a traditional scholarly investigation.

**Searching for the Sitters’ Identity**

Given her uncanny resemblance to the Gobert’s depictions of several of the Regent’s daughters, with specific facial echoes in the nose, eyes and mouth of the portrait of Louise Adelaide (Fig. 14), the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait could potentially be identified as one of the six Orleans sisters. Still, as noted in the analysis of Gobert’s work, he approached portrait making with a mix-and-match method

\textsuperscript{29} Translated, Reunion Societies Des Beaux-Arts, 1903. Page 98.
\textsuperscript{30} Listing description on dealer’s website, provided in dossier of documents from Simien re: 1720 dual portrait.
that accounts for abundant similarities across canvases, with certain facial features
echoed in each face. Thus, despite striking resemblance, the familial similarities present
in the unknown white woman’s countenance cannot objectively place her as another
daughter of the Regent Philippe II and Francoise-Marie Duchess of Orleans. However, a
later portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier could offer some clues.

The 1733 painting, known in the Wallace collection as Mademoiselle de
Clermont, Princess of the Blood, as a Sultana, Served by some Slaves (Fig. 17), features
Marie Anne de Bourbon, also known as Mademoiselle de Clermont, costumed in
Turquerie dress, or clothing influenced by a Turkish-inspired, imagined exotic Orient.31
Mademoiselle de Clermont was the daughter of Louise-Francoise de Bourbon (sister of
the Duchess of Orleans, Francoise-Marie de Bourbon). The sisters were the legitimized
daughters of Louis XIV. Thus, by birth, Mademoiselle de Clermont held several ties to
Louis XIV, Louis XV, and the Regency Era court. Here, Nattier paints Mademoiselle de
Clermont as a Sultana being attended to by a large harem of presumably enslaved people
of color. Bolstered by the 'Oriental' setting, the artist reveals the sitter’s lower legs and
knees, an otherwise unacceptable element.32

As detailed by scholar Jennifer Palmer, Mademoiselle de Clermont’s erotic
portrait as a sultana positions Clermont as both the dominant main subject of the painting
and also a woman susceptible to the masculine gaze, fixed by both the gaze of her

31 Madeleine Delpierre, Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century (New Haven, CT: Yale University
32 “Collection Highlights - Mademoiselle De Clermont En Sultane,” Wallace Collection Online -
Mademoiselle de Clermont en sultane, accessed October 16, 2021,
https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collectio
n&objectId=65390&viewType=detailView.
attendants within the painting and the outside voyeurs viewing the work on the canvas. Palmer’s writings on the topic accurately acknowledge these visual phenomena, but fail to vanquish certain power inequities from the analysis as she often describes “slaves” as objects without qualifying the statements as a mediated understanding. Of the Mademoiselle de Clermont, Palmer writes, “She is both European, stunningly white, the monumental focus of the scene, and also Oriental, appropriating the moniker of sultana, surrounded by the sumptuous trappings of the east.” While the people of color in the composition, with their varying hues of black and brown skin, bring the woman’s whiteness into higher relief as a defining characteristic, the simultaneous portrayal of her sexuality also carries the potential to pierce the sphere of righteous femininity. The work carries complicated gender and power dynamics, considering that Mademoiselle de Clermont commissioned this portrait herself. While the composition highlights Clermont’s sexuality, she still commands the portrait as its subject, working as an active agent and not merely an object for the heterosexual male gaze even though she makes herself available to it. Here, Mademoiselle de Clermont places herself in slippery conditions that engage with deviance and Otherness, but she ultimately utilizes this proximity to fashion herself as desirably white and in control of her own sexuality. This dynamic composition can offer a few clues about the mysterious Simien Collection Dual Portrait for several reasons.

First, as mentioned, the subject of the painting, Mademoiselle de Clermont was a member of the larger royal family. Her mother Louise-Francoise de Bourbon and aunt

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Francoise-Marie de Bourbon, captured in sororal portraits (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16), carried on a contentious relationship marked by jealousy specifically as it related to arranging the marriages of their daughters. Mademoiselle de Clermont was the first cousin of the Regent’s daughters seen in many of Gobert’s portraits. Familial connection and Gobert’s mimetic style account for some confusion in identifying certain sitters. In fact, much to the probable dismay of their rival mothers, Gobert’s Portrait of Charlotte de Algae (Fig. 12) has also been identified as a portrait of Marie Anne de Bourbon, Mademoiselle de Clermont. While a version of the portrait at the State Museum of Foreign Art of Latvia at Riga has been convincingly identified as Charlotte de Algae, the version held by the United Kingdom’s Royal Collection Trust was first recorded in possession at St James’s Palace in 1819 where it is described as ‘Duchess of Bourbon’ and annotated in pencil with an inscription reading ‘Mlle de Clarmont’, with the identification later repeated at Hampton Court in 1861. The Royal Trust now identifies their version as Charlotte de Algae, but this lasting confusion of the two points to a noted resemblance in depictions of the first cousins. It is worth noting that, while the facial structure of the white woman in Simien Collection Dual Portrait most closely mirrors Louise Adelaide (Fig. 14), a side-by-side comparison of the unknown white woman and Gobert’s Portrait of Charlotte de Algae (Fig. 12), shows a comparable fairness between the two sitters, each with gauzy, white-powdered hair and porcelain skin. Thus, the white woman in the Simien Collection


Dual Portrait could potentially be identified as daughters of the Regent Louise Adelaide or Charlotte de Algae, or their cousin Marie Anne de Bourbon, Mademoiselle de Clermont, who bore resemblance to Charlotte de Algae.

Nattier’s painting of Mademoiselle de Clermont bolsters these theories. While the painting features several people of color painted within the conventions of Black attendant portraiture—gazing lovingly in service and visibly smaller, with their ebony skin emphasizing the whiteness of the principal female sitter—the second most prominent figure in the composition, the lighter-skinned woman wearing a turban-like headdress and holding a swath of cloth, carries a degree of autonomy distinguishing her from her peers. While the others gaze toward Mademoiselle de Clermont, with the artist taking care to distinctively render the reflective whites of their eyes to emphasize their line of sight back to the white woman at the center, the lighter-skinned woman of color gazes outwards. Though her forward look does not necessarily match that of the noblewoman—whose intense and unbroken stare appears almost defiant—their similarly angled but differently intentioned gazes certainly link the figures. Palmer describes this figure as a strong figural counterpoint to Mademoiselle de Clermont, noting how their compositional pairing actually serves to highlight their differences.37 A superficial comparison of this lighter-skinned attendant figure and the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait shows similarities in both women’s café-u-lait skin tones, dark features, and the style of their headwear. Could this attendant figure be the same woman of color portrayed in the mysterious dual portrait? Could this posit the white female sitter in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait as Marie Anne de Bourbon, cousin of the

daughters of the Regent? Maybe. But the more interesting line of questioning rests in interpreting the differences in the interplay between this lighter-skinned woman of color and the white woman in Nattier’s painting versus the Simien Collection Dual Portrait.

In Nattier’s painting, Palmer notes how the juxtaposition of the white woman’s pearly skin, the honey tones of the highlighted woman of color’s skin, and the dark ebony hues of the remaining attendants’ skin suggest, “a hierarchical continuum of race.” I argue that the artist of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait visually concretizes this continuum, creating a literal diagonal line of three faces, one white, one tan, one black. However, each artist’s intentions in visualizing these continuums remain open to interpretation. A continuum is defined as a sequence of adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, although the extremes are quite distinct. One must query whether the artists intend to utilize their compositional continuums to highlight similarities or define differences. Nattier’s painting seems rooted in the latter.

While Mademoiselle de Clermont acts as a sexual agent, actively choosing to lift the fabric of her skirt and reveal her bare legs, the bare breast of her visual counterpart falls, seemingly unbeknownst to her, from her unbuttoned bodice as she displays a length of fabric for the “sultana.” While the white woman makes the choice to be sensually available, the woman of color appears unknowingly sexually objectified. Thus, while Nattier stresses Mademoiselle de Clermont and her main attendant’s visual similarity based on their lighter skin tones by rendering both women with a direct gaze back to the viewers, he ultimately utilizes their shared qualities to display divergent sexual agency,

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emphasizing a hierarchical distinction based on racial background. Nattier’s use of a racial continuum ultimately stresses difference.

The Simien Collection Dual Portrait works with more subtlety. Both women appear fully clothed in rich, formal finery. The women’s faces each take up an equal amount of space in the composition; however, their positioning does not suggest equality. Though the woman of color appears at the highest point in the composition, she still stands behind the white woman, precluding the viewer from fully seeing her form. Unlike the Nattier work, the portrait carries no whisper of sensuality or sexuality, only dignity and refinement. Instead, the artist roots the divergences of the two sitters not in notions of respectability, but rather in articulations of femininity. Virtuous blush colors the white woman’s cheeks, with her lace-adorned, gold-embellished bust and tightly cinched waist appearing as the compositional center of the portrait. The woman of color appears weightier in the space, with her olive skin lacking rosiness. While some aspects of the composition such as the direct gaze of both sitters and their shared formal attire suggest equality among the sitters, and even perhaps a sororal bond, the artist’s decisive choice to render the women with different degrees of femininity and to place the woman of color just behind the white woman ultimately announces the white woman as the desirably ideal figure in the composition. While the Simien Collection Dual Portrait explores more of the similarities within a racial continuum, it still utilizes the three faces to emphasize the subtlety of difference.

While one could surmise that the women portrayed in Nattier’s painting, Mademoiselle de Clermont and her lighter-skinned attendant, are the same women in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, the artists utilize gendered visual cues to make related
but different hierarchical statements about race. Both paintings engage with what scholar Anne Lafont identifies as, “a sort of obsession among Europeans for keeping this Other—the black man, woman, or child—so close, at the borders of oneself,” but the artists manipulate this proximity to articulate different ideas.\(^{40}\) Nattier’s painting suggests a fundamental difference in the way that white women and women of color exert control over their sexuality, implicating divergences in their power and respectability, and placing the two women on opposing sides of the spectrum even though they bear similar skin tones and gaze in the same direction. The Simien Collection Dual Portrait places the women in adjacent positions in the racial continuum, utilizing their similarities to highlight divergent femininity. Though the woman of color in the Nattier composition remains powerless over the consumption of her body by the male gaze, the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait is not positioned as a feminine figure necessarily desired by the male gaze. While identifying the white woman as Mademoiselle de Clermont based on Nattier’s painting feels like an attractive solution, the strong differences in the artists messages cannot be ignored. While the Simien Collection Dual Portrait could possibly feature Mademoiselle de Clermont, or her cousin Charlotte de Algae, Nattier’s painting cannot determine that as a fact. Exact identity aside, the white woman in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait can almost certainly be identified as a member of the Regency Era court—perhaps a daughter of the Regent, a distant relative, a Duchess, or a lady-in-waiting.

Due in part to difficulties finding a comparable \textit{portrait} of the woman of color and difficulties finding extant archival documents noting the specific presence of named

people of color in the Regency Era court, my conjectures about the identity of the sitters have thus far exclusively been rooted in identifying the white woman and how a person of color might be identified in relation to her. In reality, the identity of the woman of color is the more likely lynchpin to identifying both. Ultimately, without concrete archival records, utilizing traditional methods to identify the possible artist and sitters leads to inconclusive results. While finding these names might lead to further historical context, identification does not necessarily tell us how this painting functions as a portrait and further, as a statement. Analysis quickly shifts from identifying who, and begins to probe the dynamics of the work, considering the nuances of the composition, the choices of the artist, and the intention of the painting as a whole. Without definitive answers, the line of questioning instinctively pivots from asking who, to pondering why.
Section 2:

Subjects and Attendants: Exploring Portrait Tropes and Rare ‘Pearls’

The Potential of Portraits

When it comes to studies of race and gender in the 18th century, portraits offer a concrete material example of these intersections in a form that also indicates social norms, aesthetic preferences, and political and ideological leanings. In his volume dedicated to understanding the intricacies of portraiture, scholar Richard Brilliant writes, “Portraits exist as the interface between art and social life and the pressure to conform to social norms enters into their composition because both the artist and the subject are enmeshed in the value system of their society.” Thus, portraits become an artistic form mediated by artist, subject, commissioner, viewer, and environment, intrinsically linked to notions of self-fashioning, creating, being, and experiencing. Defining portraiture helps illuminate the psychological and philosophical potential of this form.

By definition, portraiture produces a recognizable image designed to capture the physical—and perhaps personality—traits of a specific individual. However, many portraits operate in tension with this most basic purpose, due perhaps mainly to their unbreakable link to their environment of creation. While producing a “likeness” might be the goal of the portrait as a medium, in practice, a portrait becomes a mediated image. In the introduction to her expansive book on portraiture, scholar Marcia Pointon surmises, “questions of likeness are linked to questions of purpose since the purpose of a portrait generally determines the extent to which likeness is a relevant matter.”

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articulates how the purpose of a portrait, meaning the messages that it aims to relay, informs how accurately an artist produces a real likeness of an individual. Pointon offers an updated definition, writing, “I take forward the idea of portraiture as a tool that makes possible the registering of an identity in relation to the social.” Like Brilliant, Pointon also understands the medium as a mediated form, enmeshed in the value system of the society from which the sitter, artist, patron, and viewer come.

Portraits also pose several dilemmas for sitters, makers, and viewers. Pointon notes that, “The fact that (almost) everyone is born with the same constituent parts of the face—nose, eyes, mouth—and yet no two people look alike is a conundrum at the heart of what it is to be human.” As such, portraiture, the practice of painting specific people, focuses at once on the commonality of embodied human experience, and the utter individuality of each person, two ideas fundamentally in tension with each other. Furthermore, in Early Modern portrayals of people of color, portraits bring forth a discussion of how sitters of color can be legibly viewed within a composition, and whether the sitters’ historical existence is upheld in the adjacent archival material—two factors shaped by social conditions that often sought their subjugation or erasure, working in tandem (and tension) with each other.

When considering compositions featuring Black women, art historian Jennifer Germann incisively reflects that “Portraits offer one way to trace the presence of historical Black women, though it is notable that portraits can make them visible or erase them depending on how these images are read.” Artists’ employment of specific visual

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44 Pointon, 13.
45 Pointon, 10.
cues of subjugation can result in the struggle for viewers to really see or experience a figure of color in a portrait, a phenomena compounded by violence and erasure in the archives. Germann cites the work of Linda Colley who describes the, “phenomenon of ‘documentary reticence,’ a practice of erasing aspects of the life history of women and men of color due to perceptions about race.” Germann and peers note how ‘documentary reticence’ materializes in the erasure of people of color from portraits both literally and figuratively, with some figures ending up obscured behind “restorative” coats of paint, and others disremembered as nameless “pages” or enslaved attendants despite records pointing to their existence as specific named individuals. Though within the bounds of a frame, historical portraits explore notions of being and experiencing that extend far beyond the canvas.

The following section asks questions of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait (Fig. 1) beyond “who?,” rather exploring why this portrait exists and how it makes its subjects visible (or not). This section situates the Simien Collection Dual Portrait in the context of the explicitly defined the parameters of “Black attendant portraiture” and the conventions of sororal portraits. The Simien Collection Dual Portrait’s resistance to categorization precipitates a larger discussion on colorism, femininity, and subjecthood. Determining how the Simien Collection Dual Portrait both falls into the iconographic conventions of Black attendant portraiture and also decisively deviates from this trope sheds light on

how viewers may or may not perceive people of color as visible and viable subjects in portraits that also include white sitters. More simply, this section considers what makes a Black person seeable or seen as a subject, or unseen as a nameless attendant. Utilizing comparative visual analysis of two related portraits—David Martin’s 1778 *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray* (Fig. 2) and Stephen Slaughter’s 1750 *Portrait of two Women Gathering Fruit* (Fig. 3)—this section seeks to discern the specific purpose of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, elucidating how the work aims to visually clarify the social position of the person of color. As Pointon asserts, portraiture exists as a tool for registering an identity in relation to the social. Comparing both sitters in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait to each other, and further comparing this portrait to Martin and Slaughter’s works, helps to understand the sitter’s social identities, ultimately determining the extent to which reproducing their exact likeness is relevant to the goals of the portrait.

I raise all these points to ultimately argue that the artist of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait clearly articulates distinctions of race and femininity in this painting, and prioritizes demarcating these distinctions over producing exact likeness, with the woman of color functioning to accentuate the virtuous white womanhood of the sitter in the Blue dress. Though rendered as a visible person and viable subject, unlike the many Black attendant figures in other Early Modern European paintings, the woman of color’s presence in this portrait does not function in a manner wholly dissimilar.

**Defining “Black attendant portraiture”**

Defining the parameters of what I refer to as “Black attendant portraiture” serves as an important yardstick for the forthcoming comparative analysis. Importantly, when I
use this term, I am speaking of the iconographic trope, and do not mean to reduce the humanity of the people painted in this way. Though they are sometimes imagined, typological figures, when they are actually painted from “bodily-specific” people, these attendant figures still exist as living breathing persons despite having been rendered in a manner that reduces them to objects. 49 Black attendant portraiture features white sitters with physically smaller, sometimes orientally-costumed, Black servants rendered as objectified and Othered stipulations of the sitter’s wealth rather than human beings. In Early Modern European iterations of this trope, the exact status of these Black attendant figures remains contested as various European societies wrestled with the religious and ideological implications of domestic slavery despite active participation in international imperial pursuits and the transatlantic slave trade. As a result, words like “attendant,” “servant,” and “page,” emerge as common descriptors that skirt explicitly defining whether these individuals were formally enslaved. Scholar Allison Blakely notes, “The acceptance of the practice of slavery was not new to any of the European societies. Varying degrees of slavery had been practiced in Europe…from the period of the Roman Empire until the Middle Ages.” 50 However, Blakely clarifies that, “What is significant about the modern slave trade…. is that the slaves were all Black and nearly all the masters were white.” 51 The advent of slavery based on demarcation of skin-color, coupled with the growing pseudo-scientific racialization of skin-color, paints Early

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51 Ibid.
Modern Black ‘servants’ as inherently inferior to their white counterparts. As scholar Peter Erickson asserts, “Decontextualized use of the words “page” and “attendant” to describe Black servants in European paintings creates euphemisms that ignore and avoid the underlying structure of servitude and subjection on which the aesthetic motif is built.” Erickson emphatically argues, “Though differently organized, Early Modern Black servant-hood in Europe is a form of slavery.” Regardless of the semantics of exact status, the specific iconographies of Black attendant portraiture render Black attendant figures as implicitly indentured to the named white sitters of these compositions.

In these portraits, the Black attendant figure often shrinks to the lowest point in the composition or stands in the shadowy margins. Artists paint their skin in exaggerated dark pigments to contrast with the porcelain tones of the named white sitters, with this dramatic juxtaposition becoming a fundamental element of this iconography. Kim F. Hall writes, “The ‘black skin’ of both male and female attendants becomes a key signifier in such portraits: associated with wealth and luxury, it is the necessary element for the fetishization of white skin, the ‘white mask’ of aristocratic identity.” Artists defined and empowered the elite wealthy white sitters through this color contrast with the racialized Other, with these portraits constituting “a visual record of white woman's construction and affirmation of self through the racial and cultural Other.”

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52 The phenomena of the racialization of skin color will be discussed at length in a later section of this thesis.
55 Kim F. Hall, “‘An Object in the Midst of Other Objects’: Race, Gender, Material Culture,” 211.
opposition is key to the trope, artists craft the Black attendant as a racialized Other through additional signals beyond difference in skin tone.

Pictured gazing lovingly in service, these figures rarely appear in a stagnant fixed position. Rather, they spring into motion, offering perhaps a tray of fruit and flowers or holding a parasol to shield a white woman from the sun.\(^{57}\) Scholar Angela Rosenthal notes how the lively and dynamic movement of the Black attendant figure contrasts with the stoic, stonelike quality of the statuesque white women in these portraits. Independent of the Black attendant figure, this genre of portraiture renders white women simultaneously still and statuesque while also markedly alive as pools of sanguine blush rush to their cheeks, underscoring their bashful femininity.\(^{58}\) Beyond the juxtaposition with the Black attendant, artists animated feminine virtue through making blush, the liquid liveliness of feminine emotion, visible yet contained within the growingly translucent white feminine skin.

Pearls also make frequent appearances in Black attendant portraiture, with artists often rendering Black attendant figures wearing pearls mostly to contrast with the dark hues of their skin. In some instances, artists place large pearl earrings upon the Black person’s earlobes to mimic the dehumanizing way they sometimes render their eyes—excessively large, with the whites bulging out in a non-naturalistic, caricature-like manner. However, the pearls also underscore the abundant, cultured wealth funding these

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\(^{57}\) For further reading on the repeated image of the parasol held for another, see: Benjamin Schmidt, “Collecting Global Icons: The Case of the Exotic Parasol,” in Collecting Across Cultures (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) 31-57. “…it develops into an icon for tropical indolence, implied servitude (it must be borne by a lackey), extravagant luxury, and so on. By dint of these images and objects, the parasol comes to signify, in essence, global exoticism.” (47).

elaborate canvases, and allude, perhaps, to the networks of trade that built that wealth and the exotic “rarities” these international trade routes brought back into Europe—including exotic parasols, shells, rare flora and fauna, and enslaved African children.59

The trope of the Black attendant has a longstanding history in canonical western art, with Henry Louis Gates and David Bindman writing extensively about this occurrence in their multiple volumes of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. The third volume notes, “in European art, the motif of the Black page became the most constant image of the presence of domestic servants or slaves of African Origin,” later identifying the first appearance of the Black page figure in Titian’s seminal ca. 1520 portrait of Laura Dianti (Fig. 18).60 Though Gates and Bindman posit Dianti as the first courtly white lady to pose with accoutrements of wealth that include a small Black child, the trope repeats again and again. Two quintessential examples include Anthony van Dyck’s 1634 *Portrait of Princess Henrietta of Lorraine* (Fig. 19) and Pierre Mignard’s 1682 *Portrait of Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth* (Fig. 20). In these portraits, the voluminous bodies of the stately named white sitters dwarf the small frames of the Black attendants. Both attendants engage in acts of service, offering goods to the white sitters who place their hands upon the Black figures’ shoulders. Pearls also appear in both compositions to varying degrees, with Princess Henrietta wearing a pearl necklace and earrings and the Black attendant figure in the Duchess of Portsmouth’s portrait wearing a string of pearls while holding in one hand a nautilus shell filled with pearls, and in the other a piece of

59 See Kim F. Hall, “‘An Object in the Midst of Other Objects’: Race, Gender, Material Culture,” 212. “Black people were brought to England not only as slaves with the absolute objectification of that state but also as curiosities who represented the riches that could be obtained by European travelers, traders, and collectors in the Atlantic enterprise.”

coral, announcing the jewels as signifiers of wealth and vital maritime trade. Most overtly, in both portraits, the ebony skin of the attendant figures serves as a pictorial device emphasizing the whiteness of the principal sitter, providing compositional contrast rather than a realistic rendering. Again, Pointon’s assertion that the purpose of a portrait determines how accurately the artist produces a likeness comes to the forefront as the purpose here is not to portray an attendant, but to portray a white woman, made even more white in the presence of a Black servant.

Gates and Bindman cite contemporaneous explanations of this color contrast effect, including a 1678 text by Samuel van Hoogstraten that reads, “The eye finds it also a pleasure sometimes to add a moor to a maiden” and a later 1706 engraving inscribed with the message “…. And even the blackness of the Moor Draws luster from her whiteness.” Gates and Bindman cite contemporaneous explanations of this color contrast effect, including a 1678 text by Samuel van Hoogstraten that reads, “The eye finds it also a pleasure sometimes to add a moor to a maiden” and a later 1706 engraving inscribed with the message “…. And even the blackness of the Moor Draws luster from her whiteness.”  These mirroring quotes assert how paintings like van Dyck’s and Mignard’s utilize blackness to ascribe value to whiteness, and how, in turn, that value could be viewed reflexively, giving worth or “luster,” to the diminutive attendant figure. This notion of value extended far beyond the 17th and 18th centuries, with later artists like the pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rosetti, writing in an 1865 letter to patron George Rae about the importance of including a Black figure in his work *The Beloved*, “I mean the color of my picture to be like jewels, and the jet would be invaluable.” Like the glut of pearls offered to the Duchess of Portsmouth in Mignard’s painting (Fig. 18), the small Black child adorns the portrait as another jewel, a piece of *jet* to contrast the pearlescent sheen of the white woman’s luminously pale skin. And yet the “jet” somehow radiates

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with an effulgent glow. Like black neon, the figure carries a suffusive light, bestowed perhaps as the white woman places her hand maternally—or rather, masterfully—upon the child’s shoulder.

Though the artist crystallizes the white woman’s apparent wealth and virtue through her juxtaposition with the infantilized Black attendant, the small child’s proximity to whiteness reciprocally ascribes value to the Black figure. Through the main sitter’s close but commanding touch, and the figure’s immortalization in paint, the artist and sitter classify the figure as not just a number in an archival shipping log, or a cog in an imperial labor machine, but rather as a special domestic servant. Still, this aesthetic reciprocity remains decisively uneven, as the Black attendant remains objectified and Othered, painted as an image of, “servile devotion to the lady’s white loveliness, rather than as a literal image of the realities of society.” The “light” the white woman seemingly bestows on the figure through her proximity and patronizing touch serves to further underscore subservience and obedience, and even perhaps an eerie expectation of gratitude in return.

Emphasis on infantilizing docile-ness takes center stage as this trope proliferates portraiture from 18th-century Europe, with several Black attendants appearing in the portraits of Regency Era France. For example, Pierre Gobert’s prolific body of portraits created with his signature mix-and-match approach include several iterations of a Black attendant figure. As seen in a series of ca.1700 Gobert’s portraits identified as varying noblewomen (Fig. 19, 20, & 21), Gobert paints each white figure as a near copy, with highly similar pastoral clothing and mirroring gestures and poses. However, the artist

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63 Henry Louis Gates and David Bindman, “The European Scene,” 228.
interchanges a small cherub holding a black mask to his face seen in the painting identified as *Portrait of Marie Anne de Bourbon* (Fig. 21) with a small Black child in the paintings identified as *Portrait of Louise Bernardine de Durfort, Duchess of Duras* (Fig. 22) and *Portrait de Marie-Françoise de Bourbon, Mademoiselle de Blois* (Fig. 23). Though replacing the cherub with a small Black page accounts for little change in the overall composition of the latter two portraits, Gobert makes a decisive alteration in the positioning of the main white female sitter’s hand in both paintings. As each sitter places her hand upon the top of the young page’s head, the gesture reads far less maternal, as it may have been understood in the case of the pastoral cherub, and rather like a master rewarding obedience. While the white cherub, an imagined fantastical being, gazes autonomously outward, facing the viewer head on, the nondescript Black pages both turn to gaze up at the white women. Devoid of individuality or personhood, they account for another mix-and-match compositional element deployed by Gobert and contemporaries to underscore wealth and “white loveliness” and affirm the universal subservience of the Black attendant figure.

Notions of servile devotion also appear at the forefront of a Regency Era sororal portrait of sisters *Françoise-Marie de Bourbon dite Mademoiselle de Blois et Louise-Françoise de Bourbon dite Mademoiselle de Nantes* by Phillippe Vigeron (Fig. 16). Similar to another portrait of the sisters by Pierre Gobert discussed in an earlier section of this thesis (Fig. 15), this painting also reads as a sororal portrait, depicting two young women as close kin, poised to become ideal brides.64 Vigeron emphasizes the familial similarities of the pair. Though they do not link arms as in Gobert’s painting, the

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composition suggests closeness as both reach to the Black attendant at the center of the painting, with one sister plucking a piece of fruit from the attendant’s tray and the other resting her heavy arm on the attendant’s slight shoulder. Despite primary accounts of the duo’s contentious relationship, Vigeron, like Gobert, poses the two as blissful brides, surrounded by the trappings of wealth. Though Vigeron positions the small Black page at the center of the composition, suggesting perhaps a greater sense of recognition of the figure’s personhood by the artist, Vigeron instead doubles down on the most infantilizing and dehumanizing aspects of the trope.

Tiny, with almost impossibly ebony skin, the child works in service of the two white sisters poised for marriage, presenting a bounty of blooms to one, while turning to face another. A large white pearl pierces the child’s ear, mimicking the bulging whites of the figure’s eyes. The notion of obedience and docile loyalty concretizes as the viewer follows the attendant’s gaze, realizing they are not looking at one of the white sisters, but rather their compositional echo—the small dog the woman clutches in her arms. Both the child and the canine, painted in a similar hue, with large eyes and mirroring expressions, uphold the sisters’ virtuous white femininity while being portrayed as mirroring subhuman accoutrements of wealth. Here, the iconographic traits of the Black attendant trope work in tandem with the traits of sororal portraits to underscore righteous wealthy whiteness and feminine virtue. Situating the Simien Collection Dual Portrait within the context of Black attendant portraiture and sororal portraits, as well as similar double

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portraits, helps to uncover the intentions of the artist and what messages they aim to relay about the social position of the person of color in the portrait.

Preserving Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay

David Martin’s 1778 *Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay* (Fig. 2) has generated much intrigue within scholarly circles and beyond, piquing the interest of art historians, inspiring contemporary reimaginations of the work, and even spawning a feature film. While the highly fragmented archive retains only bits of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay’s story, Martin’s painting itself has played a vital role in preserving her existence in history. Interest around the unconventional work, featuring an energetic, enticing composition has in turn, prompted interest in Miss Dido Elizabeth Belle, who punctuates the portrait with her somewhat mischievous gaze and self-referential pose. In the absence of Martin’s portrait, it can be hypothesized that the sparse details of Dido’s life as recounted in archival material would have been glossed over, and her existence lost to history. As previously noted, Jennifer Germann contends that “portraits offer one way to trace the presence of historical Black women,” and Dido’s preservation in paint certainly preserves her existence in history.

Martin’s double portrait features Dido and her cousin in a lush garden setting. Lady Elizabeth appears possibly seated in an elegant and structured pink gown with a corseted white lace detail on the bodice. Dainty florals adorn the crown of her head as she gazes back at the viewer with a reserved smile and friendly eyes. Her cheeks flush with a light rush of blush and her lips bloom a bold rosy red. She clutches in one hand an open

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66 See: Germann, Dido film, contemporary art work by Mikela Henry Lowe reimagining Dido.

book, connoting a sense of both leisure and learnedness, as she reaches the other to grasp the elbow of her cousin. Walking beside Lady Elizabeth, Dido cranes her long neck out and turns to meet the viewers gaze with a cheeky smile. She wears a flowing white satin frock that drapes more casually than her cousin’s formal dress. Though less pronounced against the café-au-lait tone of her skin, a small flush of rosiness also colors her cheeks as she places one finger to the corner of her mouth. Martin renders both women with a soft glowing radiance and arresting unbroken gazes, commanding the attention of the viewer and announcing the cousins as blushing and beautiful—and possibly brides. However, defining this portrait as a sororal painting announcing the close kin’s availability for marriage remains complicated, as this composition, which highlights the contrasting tones of Dido’s dark skin with Elizabeth’s creamy white complexion, also engages with the iconographic traditions of Black attendant portraiture.

In truth, art history’s contemporary knowledge of Dido’s real historical presence and elevated but complicated social position, as documented by fragmented diary entries and letters, informs and even changes the viewing of this work, even if certain repeated visual tropes tell a different story. In fact, the effects of earlier failings to uphold the historical record of Dido prove how both certain iconographic clues and later assumptions about race work to thwart the recognition of people of color like Dido and influence their identification as subjects. Linda Colley’s idea of documentary reticence, again comes to the forefront as both visual references to Black attendant iconography and the continued racist downgrading of people of color regardless of fact wield the ability to critically change the reception of this work. The way double portraits of sitters with ostensibly different racial backgrounds engage with sororal and Black attendant tropes,
coupled with the way the sitters’ existences are remembered—or forgotten—in the archive, influences the ways viewers experience these works and identify their subjects.

Records remember Dido, the daughter of Sir John Lindsay, a British naval officer, and Maria Bell, a woman enslaved in the West Indies, as a resident at Kenwood House. Raised by her great uncle William Murray, Lord of Mansfield, and educated alongside her cousin Elizabeth, primary accounts of Dido remain scant. Dido, the natural daughter of an aristocrat, purportedly born on English soil and baptized in London in 1766, lived under the tutelage of Lord Mansfield at Kenwood House, and completed studies alongside her cousin Lady Elizabeth. While her mixed racial background as typified by her phenotypical appearance brought issues of her ‘status’ into conversation, any question of her freedom, which was conferred upon her birth and baptism in the mother country and bolstered by her upbringing, was fully put to rest in Lord Mansfield’s will. Mansfield affirmed Dido’s status as a free woman, and further, allotted her £100 per year, after the death of his wife, subsequently adding a further payment of £200 ‘to set out with’, plus £300 in a later codicil, making an overall total of some £900. Though Dido never bore the shackles of enslavement, Mansfield’s will legally corroborated her status, silencing any questions, and acting with foresight so that, after his eventual death, there would be no possibility of society regarding her as enslaved, or history remembering her as such. Though this detail accounts for perhaps a small line item in the Lord’s expansive estate,

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Mansfield took care to ensure Dido endured as a free woman of status with an intentional sum of wealth for her to set forth and build her own familial legacy.

Jennifer Germann’s extensive explorations of both Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay the person and the David Martin painting reveal how documentary reticence did, in fact, change how the work was understood at different times in history. While the original work now resides at Scone Palace in Scotland, the portrait was documented at Kenwood House—where its subjects resided—at several points in history. A 1796 inventory at Kenwood House, identified the portrait’s subjects as Lady E Finch-Hatton and Mrs. Davinier. In this instance, the use of Dido and Elizabeth’s married names suggests that the painting might have been contemporaneously understood as a sororal portrait of two future brides. Paintings identified as sororal portraits, or portraits of sisters on the cusp of marriage, typically only feature pairs of white female kin. Like Gobert’s portrait of the future Duchess of Orleans and Duchess of Bourbon, identified by their pre-marriage titles as they jovially link arms (Fig. 15), these portraits utilize several visual cues to underscore beauty, familial connection, marriageability, and whiteness. The Gobert portrait underscores whiteness through the rendering of a bold swath of blush coloring each sister’s cheeks. As Rosenthal asserts, without the contrast of a Black page figure in the composition, “whiteness could no longer be framed as a natural hierarchy visible through contrast. Instead, whiteness required an autonomous, explicit visual mode.”

Blush acted as useful tool to convey this. Artists also articulated whiteness through

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rendering overwhelming pallor and almost impossibly white skin. As emphasized in another sororal portrait, Francis Cotes 1767 *Portrait of Princess Louisa and Princess Caroline* (Fig. 29), the two sisters glow with an overwhelming, almost iridescent paleness as they pose amongst musical instruments with the older sister placing her hand affectionately on the back of her sister’s chair. The portrait, commissioned shortly before the younger sister Caroline's marriage to her first cousin, announces the sisters as brides to be. Unfortunately, the older sister, Princess Louisa passed away at 19 before she could be married off.73 Though the painting sadly could not will fruitful and lasting marriages into existence, it captures a moment of hopefulness of two young women poised to become wives. This painting embodies the idealized whiteness, familial closeness, and specific temporality at the core of the trope.

When Dido’s cousin Elizabeth reaches out and places her hand on Dido’s elbow, it links the pair in a sororal or sisterly way. The two women, brought up alongside each other, share a palpable closeness. As Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, recounted in his diary after visiting Lord Mansfield. “[Dido] walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having her arm within the other.”74 Martin’s portrait practically illustrates this moment as the two appear affectionally linked, nearly arm in arm, in a lush garden setting. While the 1796 identification, the women’s close kinship as displayed by Elizabeth’s touch, and their shared youthful beauty place this painting as a possible sororal portrait, the sitters lack the shared idealized whiteness that characterizes this trope. While Martin’s rendering of Dido and her cousin Elizabeth’s

divergent racial identities through their contrasting skin tone thwarts emphatic placement in the sororal trope, his engagement with other elements of Black attendant portraiture carry more potent influence to destabilize Dido’s identification.

As recounted by Germann, in 1904, an inventory at Kenwood House identified Martin’s double portrait as “A portrait of Lady Finch Hatton, eldest daughter of David 2nd Earl of Mansfield, by his first wife, and mother of the 10th Earl of Winchelsea and Nottingham, seated in a garden with an open book and negress attendant.” Though this composition clearly features two subjects, marked by their clear personhood and unbroken gazes back to the viewer, this later inventory, influenced by the legible difference in the two figure’s races and lacking—or perhaps intentionally forgetting—the knowledge of Dido’s real social position, effectively erases Dido’s individualized identity and recasts her as an unknown “negress” attendant.

While records such as Lord Mansfield’s will retain the true facts of Dido’s historical presence and social position, the painting nevertheless engages with the trope of Black Attendant portraiture, as confirmed by Dido’s later identification as “negress attendant.” Visually, Dido cements her position as a subject in the portrait through both her direct gaze back at the viewer and also her self-referential pose. She stands alongside her cousin, decidedly not in active attendance to her, but rather pointing to herself as the person to whom she attends. Still, aside from her enticing gaze and beguiling pose, Dido’s portrait follows many of the Black attendant conventions.

First, she appears in motion, with the artist articulating her forward momentum as her blue wrap trails her, waving in the wind. Her counterpart stands still and stagnant,

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serenely smiling for her portrait with a book in hand. Dido springs forth, carrying a bountiful cornucopia of fruit. Though she stops short of actively offering a morsel to her white cousin, the trope of carrying an abundant tray of sustenance directly recalls the acts of service fundamental to the Black attendant portrait trope. Further, Dido wears a plumed turban style hat, reflecting the oriental turquerie costumes worn by many attendants at the time. Second to the color of her skin, the covering of her hair also firmly announces racial difference.

Dido wears pearls. Two drop pearl earrings hang from her ears, and a short strand of large pearls wraps around her neck. Though the style of Dido’s pearls directly recalls Black attendant portraits, the pearls do not mimic bulging white eyes or offset non-naturalistic dark skin. Devoid of caricature, the artist paints Dido naturalistically, underscoring her beauty. Rather, the pearls instantly present the iconography of Black attendant portraiture to a viewer, toggle with the idea of the trope as the gems dangle from Dido’s ears, and ultimately announce Dido as a departure—related but separate. Here, Dido’s pearls accentuate the luminous quality of her skin and the sumptuous rich sheen of her white silk gown. The pearls stipulate wealth, colonialism, culture, trade, and rare beauty—the very forces that brought Dido to Kenwood House and prompted the desire to immortalize her on canvas. Dido could have very easily remained in the shadowy margins of life at Kenwood House, “A Black,” who on occasion “came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens” and “[Supervised] the dairy and poultry yard,” as was written by Thomas Hutchinson.

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But it was important to the person who commissioned this portrait—most likely Lord Mansfield—to immortalize Dido beyond written accounts and capture her enchanting demeanor and rare beauty forever in paint. Dido’s pearls accentuate these resplendent features.

Dido’s cousin Lady Elizabeth also wears pearls. Again, the cultivated gems signify wealth supported by networks of imperial trade, but Lady Elizabeth’s carry a different sheen. Elizabeth’s smaller double string set lacks the luminous luster of Dido’s baubles. Against Lady Elizabeth’s glowing white skin, rendered in a tone nearly indiscernible from the white lace bodice upon her décolletage, the little gems appear almost yellow-toned. While Dido’s pearls shine bright and white against her coffee-hued craning neck, Lady Elizabeth’s skin remains the most blindingly bright alabaster tone in the entire composition, outshining Dido’s jewels. Dido and Lady Elizabeth’s mirrored accessories refract divergent messages to clarify their differing racial backgrounds.

Though the painting captures Dido’s beauty, she remains a tangent line to the sphere of elite European whiteness, touching the circle at a single point of entry that places her at Kenwood House, in Lord Mansfield’s will, and in Martin’s portrait, but failing to pierce through the pearl of virtuous whiteness. The portrait makes clear that Dido is beautiful, charming, and dynamic, but Dido is not white. Lady Elizabeth is.

Through gesturing to specific portrait types, Martin’s painting flirts with the iconography of Black attendant portraits and teases the sororal marriage trope, but ultimately exists in a liminal space, somewhere in between. As explored, sororal portraits double down on beauty, virtue, female kinship, and, through cues such as overwhelming blush or pallor, whiteness and Martin’s clear juxtaposition of the colors of Dido and
Elizabeth’s skin complicates viewer’s understanding of the work as a sororal portrait. As seen in typical Black attendant portraits, Dido appears springing into motion, carrying a basket of fruit, her hair covered with an exotic turban. By contrast, her cousin appears statuesque and still, blushing with feminine virtue. However, when Lady Elizabeth reaches out to Dido, she does not place her hand patronizingly or masterfully like the sitter in Gobert’s portrait pats her attendant’s head in a command for obedience. Rather, she reaches out connecting the two as kin. Despite appearing with several of the iconographic features of attendant portraiture, Dido’s beauty and femininity, underscored by her sororal linking to her cousin and her gamine gaze, emphasize her identity as an individualized person with a degree of autonomy that distinguishes her from an anonymous Black attendant figure. This visual articulation of Dido’s personhood can be confirmed by the historical knowledge of her privileged social position, her baptism and education, her inheritance, and the choice to preserve her likeness in a portrait. And yet, as outlined in the inventories of Kenwood House, Dido’s historical presence as a named person born into an aristocratic family remained contested and vulnerable to erasure due to the color of her skin. Ultimately, Martin’s portrait of Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay preserves Dido’s existence. However, Martin’s indeterminate allusions to portrait tropes influence how the portrait can be read, wielding the potential to simultaneously make Dido visible as a subject or unseen as nameless attendant.

**Reading Slaughter’s Women Gathering Fruit**

The questions of status explored in the portrait of Dido and the Simien Collection Dual Portrait also come to the forefront in Steven Slaughter’s ca. 1750 Portrait of Two Women Gathering Fruit (fig. 3). Housed at Connecticut’s Wadsworth Atheneum, the
museum identifies the mysterious portrait as *Young Woman and Servant*. Despite the museum’s emphatic stipulation of the power dynamic between the two women rendered in the composition, formal visual analysis pushes that identification into question.

Posed in front of a beige, vaguely pastoral backdrop, two women, one ostensibly Black, one ostensibly white, gather fruit. The white woman appears seated, wearing a rust-colored dress with a front-lace bodice, secured by a large light blue satin bow. Her exposed décolletage and long column-like neck glow snowy white as she averts her gaze and looks into the distance. Her cheeks carry a faint hint of blush and her lips perse together, rendered in a subdued hue similar to her gown. Generally, the canvas carries a muted color palate, though whether the artist chose a sepia-toned patina upon creation or the painting gained the antique tint do to aging varnish remains open to question. Regardless, the white woman’s face lacks the hyperbolic blush of her painted 18th-century counterparts, though her cheeks still retain a purposefully applied pink flush. She clutches the corners of her front apron, pulling them taught to create a makeshift cradle for the harvest. A small straw hat adorned with petite blooms rests atop her head.

Together, her apron and hat recall a pastoral aesthetic. Coupled with her task of gathering fruit, she appears somewhat peasant-like, moving far away from the tightly corseted structure of courtly attire.

Standing to the seated woman’s right, the Black sitter reaches to pick an orange from an out of frame citrus tree. Wearing a deep noir, structured gown with a gold-clasped bodice and accentuated bustle, the woman looks out directly to meet the viewer’s gaze. Contrasting with the bare porcelain chest of her counterpart, an elaborate tiered necklace with pearls and rubies accents the deep tan skin of the standing woman’s
décolletage. Rather than the peasant style white muslin petticoat worn by the seated white woman, ornate lace trims peek from the collar and sleeves of the standing woman’s gown. In addition to her elaborate necklace and matching earrings, the Black woman wears a small ornate, plumed headpiece. Still, her bountiful espresso-toned curls remain visible to the viewers. Her tightly cinched gown accentuates the feminine curves of her hourglass shape. As she picks a piece of fruit with one hand, the other rests on the shoulder of the seated white woman. Though the Black woman wears refined clothing and rich jewels, stands as the highest point in the composition, places her hand on the shoulder of the figure holding the harvest of fruit, and looks directly to the viewers with a self-assured gaze, the Wadsworth Atheneum decisively claims the Black woman as a servant, in attendance to the white woman. The museum writes,

"Despite an apparent affection between these young women, the seated figure is clearly of privileged social status while her standing companion is a servant. A number of English portraits from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depict female subjects, particularly children, in the company of a favorite non-European servant. The setting in an enclosed garden, often with ‘antique’ props such as the grotto chair, and the gesture of offering fruit are common to this category of pictures. The plumed head band worn by the servant girl is a romanticized suggestion of ethnicity which differentiates race."  

While the museum acknowledges the somewhat peculiar power dynamic between the women, it still makes a case for the master-servant power dynamic based presumably on the juxtaposition of skin tone, though they utilize phrases like “non-European” to skirt

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78 This didactic has since been removed from the Atheneum’s site.
defining their reasoning based on colorism. While visual cues such as the lavish dress and jewelry, direct gaze, and uppermost positioning in the composition suggest the woman of color in the painting to be more than just, “a favorite non-European servant,” the assumption of servitude prevails in this wall text. Though the museum rightly notes that the, “gesture of offering fruit [is] common to this category (attendant portraiture),” it fails to observe that the white woman bears the load of the harvest in her makeshift apron basket. The white woman holds the fruit.

The portrayal of the white woman in the rust-colored gown as less stately than that of the standing Black woman, adding an air of ambiguity to their power dynamic, inspires several readings. The white woman could be engaging in a most privileged upper class European pastime—playing peasant. Like Marie Antoinette at her pretend Trianon Gardens hamlet, the ultimate jest for a lady of the court might be to pretend to live like a rural woman in a world of pastoral fantasy. As 18th-century fashion scholar Aileen Ribeiro asserts, the trend proliferated as a “a rather stylized simplicity… straw hats and flowers could make passable costumes for shepherdesses. Playing at rural simplicity was an eighteenth-century pastime; fashionable ladies queued up to be painted as milkmaids, dairymaids, hay-makers and shepherdesses.”79 Perhaps the unknown white female sitter in Slaughter’s portrait desired to cast herself amongst these most-privileged ladies, who could dally as milkmaids without ever setting foot in the dairy yard. Though this might be the case, the inclusion of a richly dressed, forward-gazing Black woman in the portrait complicates this reading. Pointon’s assertion of purpose determining likeness again comes to the forefront.

Because we do not know the identities of the sitters in Slaughter’s portrait and therefore cannot compare their countenances to other depictions, how accurately Slaughter captures their true appearance remains unknown. However, comparison to the earlier typical Black attendant portraits clearly illustrates how dramatically artists altered the true likeness of the Black attendant figure to relay messages of racial inferiority, social subordinance, and indisputable servitude. When viewed side by side, as they are immortalized on canvas, Slaughter paints both figures with equal humanity. They are both full-sized and fully realized people with expressive faces and animated bodies. Slaughter renders the Black woman’s skin—though a few shades darker than Dido’s—in a naturalistic, true to life tone, especially when compared with the incredibly dark, monochromatic pigments used to render figures like the Black attendant in Vigeron’s sororal portrait (Fig. 16). Her hair texture appears naturally curly, neither sheared nor with exaggerated volume. Her facial features, painted with decisive realism, create an engaging countenance punctuated by her unbroken gaze. Though we lack knowledge of her identity, Slaughter seemingly paints the Black woman true to her actual likeness. Aside from her skin tone, the only other feature that wields the potential to cast the woman of color as the Other in this portrait is her jewel encrusted headpiece with its turquerie-style plume. The Orientalizing effect of this accessory forces viewers to consider the forces of imperialism at work that brought a Black woman into this British composition in the first place. More overtly, it clearly marks her as a different and non-white.

Perhaps the headpiece announces the Black woman as costumed as well, playing a part alongside the “shepherdess” white woman. Perhaps the painting depicts the
elaborate ruse of an elite white woman, who has cast herself as the lowly milk maid and her Black servant as her elite, Orientalized master. Perhaps. Though when considered alongside Pointon’s assertion of portraiture as a tool for the “registering of an identity in relation to the social,” the strange dynamics at play in this portrait certainly raise more questions than answers, pulling the identities of both sitters in relation to the social into great uncertainty. A portrait, by definition, produces a recognizable image designed to capture the traits of a specific individual, crystallize their social position, and establish their legacy for generations to come. Immortalizing identity through an elaborate costumed fantasy, as is perhaps the case in the Slaughter portrait, complicates the very core of the medium itself, the very purpose at the heart of portraiture. Perhaps the purpose of the composition lies in tension with that definition itself. Maybe it was created to shed light on the fluidity of identity. One can never know.

Slaughter includes one final confounding detail in his unusual portrait. Though the levels of dehumanizing portrayal vary throughout the trope of Black attendant portraiture, one element remains consistent. As seen in Vigeron’s sororal portrait (Fig. 16), Gobert’s mix-and-match attendant compositions (Fig. 22 & 23), Titian’s Laura Dianti (Fig. 18), van Dyck’s Henrietta of Lorraine (Fig. 19), and Mignard’s Duchess of Portsmouth (Fig. 20), each of these elite white women rest their hand upon the shoulder (or atop the head) of their shrinking Black attendant. At first legible as perhaps a maternal gesture, a closer look renders the hand position as insidiously patronizing, a degrading reinforcement of obedience, and a clear indicator of who holds the power. Slaughter’s portrait, which bucks so many of the iconographic traditions of Black attendant portraiture, retains this most pervasive detail. However, it is the Black woman who rests
her hand on the white woman’s shoulder. The detail might act as an indicator of kinship, suggesting a similar sororal pre-marriage portrait energy as that of Dido and Lady Elizabeth Murray. Yet somehow, as the seated white woman looks away in the distance and the Black woman stands firmly with a piercing direct gaze back, the gesture carries a bit of that same patronizing energy repeated over and over in Black attendant portraits. Still, the patronizing energy remains related, but separate. As the Black woman places her hand upon the seated white woman’s shoulder, her two index fingers wander past the hem of her neckline and lightly touch her exposed clavicle. It’s a sensitive area of the body, considered to even be an erogenous zone. As the standing woman rests two finger upon the base of the white woman’s neck, one can imagine she would feel her beating pulse as her heart pumped blood throughout her body, perhaps causing the light blush to rush to her cheeks. Whether Slaughter intended the gesture to be read as sisterly, patronizing, or even sensually suggestive remains unknown, like most details about the composition. Still, the Black woman’s unlikely gesture colors the canvas with an air of deviance and sexuality that, when compounded with its atypical composition and mysterious sitters, requires a deep reading beyond “Young Woman and Servant.”

The Wadsworth Atheneum’s characterization of this portrait as a straightforward example of Black attendant portraiture results in a failure to uphold any sort of lived experience of the Black woman, as she is reduced to an archetypical cut-out of the objectified, possibly enslaved, servant of African descent. Clouded by the title “Young Woman and Servant,” viewers might fall short of seeing a woman standing in rich finery, the highest point in the composition with an arresting gaze, placing her hand perhaps suggestively or at least atypically upon the white woman’s shoulder. More questions than
answers arise; however, an objective viewing of this portrait, unfettered by possibly misrepresentative and, at the very least, over simplified wall text, opens up a deeply compelling dialogue that places this composition in opposition to most of the iconographies of Black attendant portraiture.

**Placing The Simien Collection Dual Portrait:**

Much like the Slaughter portrait, the Simien Collection Dual Portrait (Fig. 1) stands in sharp contrast to many of the conventions outlined in the discussion of Black attendant portraiture both aesthetically and compositionally. The painting features two figures and three faces of varying hues. A white woman stands at the center wearing a sumptuous blue taffeta dress and clutching a small black mask. A woman of color stands just behind and slightly above, dressed in a red gown with black corseted detail. Comparing this portrait to Martin’s of Dido and Lady Elizabeth and Slaughter’s of the two unnamed women helps to place it both within and without the conventions of sororal portraits and Black attendant portraits. Exploring the Simien Collection Dual Portrait’s resistance to categorization precipitates a discussion of what messages the portrait aims to relay about the social position of the person of color, and, more generally, why this portrait exists.

Unlike previously mentioned quintessential Black attendant portraits that highlight a sharp juxtaposition in skin tone and key difference in body size and facial features, the hues of the skin tone of the figures in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait contrast by only a few naturalistic shades. The two figures appear as fully grown women, and their facial features mirror each other as they bear similar expressions and mimetic eyes, noses, and mouths. Though Martin’s portrait of Dido and Lady Elizabeth and
Slaughter’s portrait also each feature two life-size adult women, they highlight a more distinctive difference in skin tone and show far less similarity in bone structure. Still, in a sharp contrast to conventional Black attendant portraiture, rather than shrinking to the lowest point in the composition, all three women of color stand as the highest point of the composition in each painting—though to varying degrees. Action and inaction also mark each of these paintings. Martin’s portrait of Dido, and, to a lesser degree, Slaughter’s portrait of the woman of color, connote kinetic motion and recall the acts of service paramount to Black attendant portraiture as both woman engage with either holding or picking fruit. While the distinction of who actually holds the fruit, as outlined in the discussion of Slaughter’s portrait, or whether the Black figure actually offers the fruit, as outlined in the discussion of Martin’s portrait, remain critically important to our readings of the works, both the women of color in these portraits still appear in motion, contrasting with their stagnant white counterparts. Thus, they still exist in conversation with the Black attendant trope. In the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, the woman of color’s sturdy body stands decisively as the highest point in the composition. She does not spring to motion in service of the white woman, but rather stands as a pillar of fortitude, calm and stoic, poised for her portrait to be painted. Thus, the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait appears as a refracted reflection of the white woman, differentiated only by her olive-toned skin and slightly different bone-structure and stature. Her empty hands are not occupied by task. There is no act of service in which she partakes. She announces herself as a subject of the painting, posed to be painted, regally still.
These facts beg the question, can we even consider this painting of two women of ostensibly differing racial backgrounds, with an unclear power dynamic, within the parameters of Black Attendant portraiture? A recent interview with collector Jeremy Simien offers some answers, and also more questions. Simien noticed a bit of inpainting on the canvas around the hand of the woman of color that appears covered by the white woman’s blue dress in the included images. Driven by curiosity, Simien applied rubbing alcohol to the canvas in the area, which removed some of the inpainting that was not done with oil paint. At risk of harming the integrity of the original work, Simien stopped short of fully excavating the woman’s hand from the overpaint and instead sent it to be conserved by a professional, where it remains now as of April 2022. Still, from what Simien uncovered, he describes the woman of color’s hand as touching the blue dress.\footnote{Jeremy Simien in discussion with Rebecca Villalpando, April 18 2022} This touch is significant and carries resounding influence in how the work can be read within the conventions of sororal portraits and Black attendant portraits. If the hand is revealed to be placed on the dress in one manner, this could link the two sitters with more kinship, placing it more closely to portraits that tease sororal connection like that of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and her cousin. If the hand is revealed to be holding the dress, this could imply an act of service by the woman of color, placing it more closely to the conventions of Black attendant portraiture. Still, the desire to cover the woman’s hand implies a desire to change meaning, bringing forth the ongoing phenomena of ‘documentary reticence,’ the practice of erasing aspects of the life history people of color due to perceptions about race. Perhaps the hand placement linked the two sitters with a
kinship a later caretaker of the work desired to obstruct. The completed conservation will surely offer more definitive answers.

Nevertheless, the version of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait with the obstructed hand still does not follow many of the aforementioned conventions of Black attendant portraiture, and *seemingly* disengages with the tropes that both the Martin and Slaughter portraits still confront. However, the inclusion of the black mask articulates that ideas of race and colorism remain at play. The composition, rife with similarities in the faces of the two sitters, prompts comparison, demanding viewers to look critically at what the two sitters share, and where they stray from each other. These faces create a continuum of race, completed by the mask. What does the artist mean to accomplish by juxtaposing these three faces and these three colors? Like Dido and her cousin Lady Elizabeth, this composition announces the two figures as related, but separate. Like Dido and her cousin, the composition clarifies that though the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait’s olive skin pleases the eye, it lacks the resplendent whiteness of the sitter in the blue dress. But unlike Dido and her cousin, the composition also makes the case for divergent femininity in the face of divergent race. The woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait appears stout and sturdy while her counterpart appears soft and shapely. The white woman’s cinched waist and slight shoulders shrink before the widened stature of the woman standing just behind her. While the white woman blushes, animating her face with feminine virtue, the woman of color retains an unchanging, monotone tan hue upon her cheeks. The white woman’s blush signifies bashfulness, piety, virtue, and femininity. With the woman of color as a direct foil, all of the white woman’s desirable features come into relief, and become synonymous with whiteness.
Though decidedly different from an infantilized Black attendant, and perhaps more ambiguous than both Slaughter and Martin’s double portraits, the sturdy and opaque figure of the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait still serves to emphasize the woman in the blue dress’s white feminine virtue, and ultimately, her power. While the Simien Collection Dual Portrait resists categorization as a sororal portrait or a Black attendant portrait, it utilizes the figural closeness seen in sororal tropes to bring the two sitters’ differences into focus. These differences, underscored by the difference in the representation of their femininity, place the painting in conversation with Black attendant portraiture. Though the woman of color does not appear with the same iconographies as an unnamed Black Attendant, the portrait still utilizes her presence to fashion the white woman as a more desirable ideal, downgrading the woman of color’s social identity as she still exists in service of the white woman.

**The Phenomena of Seeing**

Jennifer Germann’s assertion that portraits can simultaneously offer proof of the presence of historical Black women but also make these women visible or erase them depending on how the works are composed and read has guided the analysis of this section, leading to critical readings on the visual and (when applicable) written language of three specific portraits.  

81 The potential for the erasure of people of color in a viewer’s experience of a work materializes in the Atheneum’s description of the Slaughter portrait as *Young Woman and Servant*. Despite her subjecthood in the composition, and at the very least, an engaging gaze and unusual sartorial trappings and positioning in the canvas, the woman of color is ultimately erased as a subject of the painting and replaced.

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with the label of servant, positing her as an accoutrement of the white woman’s wealth rather than an autonomous person. Still, the museum acknowledges her presence despite casting her as an unremarkable, nameless, Black attendant figure. Germann recounts a similar phenomena in a discussion of Joshua Reynolds’ 1761 Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Keppel adorning a Herm of Hymen (Fig. 25), though in this instance, contemporary spectators of the work fail to acknowledge the Black woman in the canvas at all.

As Germann details, Reynolds noted sittings with Lady Elizabeth, but he also recorded “two sittings with a Negro,” confirming the Black female sitter’s existence as a living breathing person, and the rendering as a bodily-specific portrayal. Viewers described the image, which features Lady Keppel in motion, laying floral garlands upon a statue of Hymen as she looks back to the figure of a Black woman holding the remaining length of garland, as “A whole length of a lady, one of her Majesty’s brides’ maids,” and, “A pretty whole length of Lady Elizabeth Keppel, in the bride-maid’s habit, sacrificing to Hymen.” These primary accounts textually erase any hint of the Black woman from the canvas despite the fact that she occupies a third of the composition. Germann surmises that the accompanying descriptions render the Black woman, whose real presence was recorded by Reynolds, as “unseeable.” Thus the failure to acknowledge the Black woman in the primary literature surrounding the painting potentially makes her presence incapable of being visually experienced.

While the Black woman in the Keppel portrait becomes an “unseeable” attendant in the archival material, the woman of color in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, for whom no known textual references exist, cannot be ignored. She cannot be erased from

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the composition because she is an integral part of it, and because without her, the balance of the three faces would be entirely thrown. Despite their existence on canvas, the realness of figures of color always remains in question as their histories are erased from the archival records. As evidenced by persistent failure to acknowledge countless unnamed Black attendants and Black figures in general, a viewer enmeshed in a value system of society that unseats the humanity and validity of Black folks fails to see these people in the paintings of artists who use a specific set of visual cues and iconographies to render them invisible. The woman of color in the Simien portrait, though still existing as a conduit to the femininity and virtue of elite whiteness, cannot be unseen. The portrait, though relaying messages about race and gender that perhaps cast the person of color as “less than,” is, objectively, still a painting of both women. Thus, though the woman of color still functions as a foil to the whiteness of the woman in the blue dress, underscoring her power, the composition remains resistant to categorization as it still demands for a viewer to experience the woman of color as a living, breathing, bodily-specific person.
Section 3: Painting Identity: Black Masks, Raced Skin, and the Pervasive “Why?”

At the outset of this thesis, when confronted with the mysterious Simien Collection Dual Portrait, I strove to ask questions beyond “who?” with the intent of focusing on why this portrait was created. With the understanding of the portrait as a mediated art form dependent on artist, sitter, patron, and environment, asking why helps determine the intentions of each of these principal players, and ultimately asserts the purpose of the composition. Still the quest for the answer to why has not been a straight line, and so far, I have pondered the more traditional questions of “who?” in my attempt to name artist and perhaps sitter. I have utilized the more traditional method of comparative analysis in my situation of the portrait amongst Black attendant portraiture, sororal portraits, and related portraits by David Martin and Steven Slaughter. These sections have certainly aided in rich visual analysis, brought key themes into focus, and helped raise deeper questions about the intentions of the composition. However, they have still skirted a definitive answer to the core question: why does this portrait exist? Perhaps this question cannot be fully answered. However, the following section focuses in on the composition’s most promising clue: the small black mask clutched by the woman in the blue dress posed in the center of the frame. With the black mask as a guiding element, the following section engages with the Early Modern European phenomena of masking and theory on the racialization of skin color to help determine how this object functions in the composition. Understanding the function of the mask in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait helps to determine the function of the portrait itself, ultimately offering a possible answer to the omnipresent “why?” of this thesis.
The Simien collection painting features a diagonal line of three countenances in varying hues: the face of the white woman in the blue dress in the center, a woman of color in a red frock and turban-like hat just behind and slightly above her, and the nondescript visage of the small black mask clutched in the white woman’s hand. I have noted this decisive line in several preceding passages of visual analysis thus far, suggesting the diagonal as an assertion of, “a hierarchical continuum of race.” Later comparative analysis queried how the two sitters could be read as subjects, asking if the woman of color could be understood within the conventions of Black attendant portraiture, if the two figures could be recognized as sororal counterparts, or if only one sitter could be truly accepted as the subject of the portrait. Perhaps the true subject of the painting is not the white woman or the woman of color, but the diagonal line itself, brought to an endpoint by the black mask. Understanding the line itself, a segment completed by the mask, as the subject of the painting offers a possible answer to the guiding question of why. Perhaps this painting exists to make clear a hierarchy of race based on skin color through a composition that appeared palatable and devoid of the moral embarrassment of the abhorrent realities of racism and enslavement. Created during a time of changing French identity in the Regency period, the painting could serve as a map key, classifying the ranks of French society and crystallizing an ideal French identity through the ultimate medium of self-fashioning: portraiture.

**Early Modern European Masking and The French Regency Era**

The general dating of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait of ca. 1720 and my conjecture of who the artist may be based on similar portraits place it within the time

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frame known as Regency Era France. This Regency period, lasting from 1715 to 1723, marked the time after Louis XIV’s death and before Louis XV’s succession to the throne when Philippe II, Duke of Orleans, served as Regent for the young Dauphin. Punctuated by the move of the court from Versailles to Paris, the Regency Era accounted for a renewed sense of grandeur and cultural affluence and a social scene reinvigorated with dalliance, decadence, and, sometimes, deviance. These characteristics of the Regency Era society marked a departure from the changing lifestyle of the court of Louis XIV. Before this Regency Era, beginning around 1674 in the latter half of his reign, King Louis XIV turned stridently toward devout Catholicism, ruling France with increasing laws of piety. In his book A Lust for Virtue, Philip Riley refers to this period as Louis XIV’s, “attack on sin.” As a result, widespread censorship occurred (especially in plays), and the crown persecuted women in particular for making themselves sexually available in areas that once fostered lively nightlife and socially accepted prostitution. Louis XIV’s rule also took increasing issue with the masquerade aesthetic that had a longstanding colorful presence in Early Modern Europe.

Masks and European masquerade traditions were derived from a long line of influences. In the early 16th century, Commedia dell’arte, “the improvised, anarchic, and often obscene genre,” developed in Italy with a special concentration in Venice. These theatrical productions featured masked players acting in outlandish plots involving disguise, swindle and seduction. Commedia dell’arte featured archetypal characters typified through specific disguises. The malicious Harlequin wore a black mask while

Pedrolino, the innocent, wore a white costume and makeup in the form of powder or flour. In classic productions, the Pedrolino character fell in love with a washerwoman (or *blanchisseuse*, which literally translates to white-maker in French) named Colombina, which translates to “little-female-dove.” Even in these earliest masked theatrical productions, the association of the dichotomy of lightness and darkness with virtue and sin that would later form the basis of the racial valences of color was present.

While the masked aesthetic found in theatrical productions like Commedia dell’arte certainly played a role in the prevalence of masks in the 16th century, masking in day-to-day life also gained popularity in France and England during this time. The 2010 discovery of what is now known as the “Daventry Mask” (Fig. 26.1), a visard-style mask encased in the stone wall of a 16th century building in Northamptonshire England provides further evidence of the wearing of visard-style masks in the late 1500s. This style of mask consisted of an outer layer of black velvet held in shape with layers of thick pressed paper and lined on the inside with silk (Fig. 26.2). Ladies of means wore such visards to shield their faces from the sun and prevent the darkening of their skin—harkening yet again to the paramount privileging of fairness and whiteness in the earliest ages of Early Modern European consciousness. While these masks included small eyeholes and an opening for the mouth, the mechanism that held the covering in place rendered the wearer effectively mute. Visard masks featured small glass beads fastened to the lining that the wearer would hold in their mouth to keep the mask securely adhered to

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their face (Fig. 26.3). While this contraption created the illusion of a second skin shielding the fair wearer from the sunlight, it also silenced her, inhibiting her from speaking out and thus casting her person in a further shroud of anonymity and mystery.

While objects like the Daventry mask provide evidence of early masking outside of theatrical productions like Commedia dell’arte, masking continued flourishing beyond the stage into the 17th and 18th centuries, extending into general day-to-day life and revelatory social events. While paintings of members of courtly societies en masque immortalized this phenomena across Europe, clues found in objects of material culture also corroborate the continued prevalence of the masked aesthetic. The V&A collection includes a remarkably preserved ca. 1690 doll known as “Lady Clapham” (Fig. 27). The doll wears perfect miniatures of London fashions of 1690 and 1700, including a mantua (gown) created from Chinese silk complete with a stiff corset, underwired cap, and high heeled shoes. The survival of such garments for life-size people remains extremely rare, so the well-preserved, though miniature, clothing of the doll provides invaluable material evidence of the fashions of the day. Aside from her stately clothing, the doll’s ensemble is completed by a most-coveted accessory—a small black visard-style mask (Fig. 28). The mask, created from cardboard, covered with silk and lined with vellum, stands as a true miniature complete with a tiny glass bead fastened to the back for “Lady Clapham” to clutch in her mouth as she wears the sun-shielding disguise (Fig. 29.1 and Fig. 29.2). The level to which masks permeated fashionable European high society materializes in

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89 Ibid.
this tiny doll figure whose pristine condition indicates its place not as a child’s toy, but rather an adult’s fancy figurine and object of status made complete by her petite mask.

Aside from functioning as a sun-shielding silencer, an allusion to theatrical productions, and a status-announcing fashion statement, the masked aesthetic also acted as an agent of destabilizing identity. Of the masking practice in Venice, scholar James H. Johnson writes, “Masks provided token anonymity, protecting one’s identity without denying it and permitting communication across social lines.”91 Johnson recounted that English traveler Edward Wright noted in ca. 1720 that masks gave, “an appearance of equality; at the Ridotto, the city’s famed gambling hall, where vagabonds, thieves, and prostitutes mingled freely with the more distinguished guests.”92 Though a modern viewer might rightly view including a mask in a painting as a nod to posh European upper crust society, Wright’s observation posits the mask’s ability to destabilize identity in the face of anonymity. Bolstered by continued theatrical productions like Commedia Dell’arte in Venice and Masques in the English Courts, Early Modern Europeans held masked balls and sometimes wore masks in day-to-day life.

The popularity of these Masquerades, also known at the time as mock-carnivals, in urban areas throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, was immortalized in ephemera and works like Hogarth’s 1726 engravings of Count Heidegger’s infamous “Midnight masques,” which attracted seven to eight hundred people weekly.93 Jennifer Van Horn explores the conversations surrounding these social events, noting “numerous critics decried them for the sexual license they allowed anonymous revelers, the mixing

92 Johnson, 90.
they facilitated between classes of people, and the possibility they offered participants to assume a new identity. Dressed as shepherdess and chimney sweeps, nuns and devils, or kings and Moors, masqueraders delighted in becoming Others—members of other races, other classes, other cultures, other genders.”

The masquerade’s potential to destabilize identity stoked fears about the virtue and piety of female revelers, with critics worried that the masked balls could awaken unbridled female passion.95 As recounted by Hogarth and others, women attending masquerades, able to hide behind the guise of a mask could theoretically live out their libidinal desires. The idea that elevated arousal in females materialized through elevated temperatures codified through the discussion of contraptions like female thermometers.96 In a sweeping summation of this era of masking, Johnson writes, “Masks in the eighteenth century granted an equal footing to the unequal…They provided an occasion to challenge pieties and step outside rigid codes. In its close association with the stage, the mask was an apt image for this century of spectacle.”

While accounts of masking in 17th and 18th-century France remained documented in both ephemera and painting, Louis XIV’s “attack on sin,” resulted in some restrictions on this stylish practice. Beginning in 1683, Louis XIV dealt a blow to Parisian fashion by forbidding individuals from wearing masks in public to shield their identities and their sins. Two years later he forbade masked balls at court.98 Louis XIV closely monitored masquerades held outside of the court too. As recounted in letters, the Marquis de

94 Van Horn, 9.
95 Van Horn, 18.
96 Van Horn, 19.
Dangeau complained that the masked balls given in 1685 felt more orderly and the guests better behaved than in earlier years. The guests could no longer appear en masque and expect admittance. Rather they had to identify themselves so the ushers could check their names against the guest lists. Upon the Sun King’s death and the start of Phillippe II’s rule as Regent, the rigid social constraints of the late monarch relaxed and the court took on a new vibrancy.

**Political Changes During the Regency:**

The Regent Philippe II’s transfer of the court from Versailles to the palais royal in Paris prompted the revival of “glittering opulence and pomp, as well as amusements and entertainments,” in the French court. The transition to a more urbane and sophisticated court, bolstered by relative international stability as France was no longer engaged in the wars of Louis XIV, precipitated gradual social change from a “somewhat austere life under the autocratic Sun King to an easier, more comfortable existence,” characterized as, “an era of moral liberty—some might say debauchery.” However, the pleasures and diversions of the Regency worked to mask the political, economic, and social upheavals of the time. While the Regency Era prompted a resurgence of cultural activities, like opera and theatre, and the production of a high volume of portraiture documenting the elite courtly society, it also accounted for attempts at government structural changes and economic miscues by the Regent.

In the time leading up to succession and immediately following the untimely 1712 death of the dauphin Louis duc de Bourgogne (the would-be successor to Louis XIV), several powerful aristocrats and court insiders began to devise a new system of

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99 Riley, 147.
100 Angela Oberer, *The Life and Work of Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757): the Queen of Pastel*, 137.
government that would divert the concentration of powers held by the monarch while quelling the possibility of a bourgeoisie takeover amidst instability in the changing of command.\footnote{Andrew Mansfield, “The Burgundy Circle’s Plans to Undermine Louis XIV’s ‘Absolute’ State through Polysynody and the High Nobility.” \textit{Intellectual history review} 27, no. 2 (2017): 223–245.} When planning for his succession to the throne before his unexpected death, the duc de Bourgone’s circle of insiders had already begun plotting for a decentralized and expanded governing system that would employ members of the noble aristocracy. After the death of the Dauphin, foreseeing the challenges of a new Regent’s rule, Louis XIV himself commissioned Chancellor Louis Phélypeaux comte de Pontchartrain to examine future options.\footnote{Mansfield, 228.} Pontchartrain developed a system of eight polysynodical councils that would aid the regency government, train future ministers and lessen the chaos of Louis XIV’s death by increasing the number of advisors.\footnote{Ibid.} Between Ponchartrain’s idea and the late duc de Bourgone’s circle of insiders who remained committed to the cause (including Fénélon, the duc de Beauvilliers, the duc de Chevreuse, and the duc de Saint-Simon, whose detailed memoirs of the Regence provide invaluable insights to the political climate of the time), different implementations of a polysynody-style government gained support from several key players.\footnote{See: Mansfield, Gwynne Lewis, \textit{France, 1715-1804 : Power and the People}. 1st ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson/Longman, 2005)., Saint-Simon’s memoirs} Once it became clear that Philippe II, duc de Orléans would become Regent, Burgundy Circle loyalists like Fenelon immediately began to impress the necessity of following Bourgogne’s designs upon the Duke.

While the Regent’s own genuine interests in promoting broader government remain unclear, he ultimately carried out the reorganization of government into the
Burgundy-Circle-endorsed polysynody that divvied up power amongst councils filled with noble aristocrats. Scholar Andrew Mansfield views the Regent’s decision to implement the Burgundy-style polysynody as both a means of gaining the support of the aristocratic power players, but also as a more shrewd political move to bolster his own power and thwart the threat of his rule by his enemies the duc de Maine and King Phillipe V of Spain who both asserted rightful claims to the throne.\footnote{Mansfield, “The Burgundy Circle’s Plans to Undermine Louis XIV’s ‘Absolute’ State through Polysynodality and the High Nobility” 234.} Polysynody’s use of parlements effectively voided Louis XIV’s will which had placed limitations on the Regent’s power in order to prevent Orléans from dismantling the system of absolute royal authoritarianism.\footnote{Lewis, France, 1715-1804: Power and the People, 24.} If the sickly Louis XV had died, the provisions of Louis XIV’s will could have emboldened Louis XIV’s recently legitimized son the duc of Maine or Louis XIV’s grandson, King Philip V of Spain to reject any of Orléans’s claims to the throne in favor of their own succession.\footnote{Lewis, France, 1715-1804: Power and the People, 25.} Under the direction of Orleans, polysynody’s parlements annulled Louis XIV’s will, further securing the Regent’s authority and clearing the way for his potential succession. According to Mansfield, “Rather than experimenting with the innovation of a polysynody, Orléans exploited an innovation already employed under Louis XIV’s regime, but gave it a Burgundy Circle spin. His polysynody incorporated the high nobility to essentially buy them off cheaply as he also appealed to the parlements to nullify Maine [and Phillippe V] as a threat.” By 1718, the Regent phased out of the polysynody structure by reverting to Louis XIV’s seventeenth-century sovereignty. By Mansfield’s summation, the system ended as its cumbersome network no longer served the Regent’s political needs.
Whether a political means to an end or a failed experiment in expanded government, the quick turnover of this trial run accounted for a further sense of confusion and uncertainty in the French socio-political mindset. France was processing the succession of the Regent in the face of the untimely death of the duc de Bourgogne and amidst the threat of a possibly righteous coup by the duc de Maine or Philippe V. The nation was still grappling with the debts of the Sun King’s four wars during his reign, and the late Monarch’s sudden turn to strident religiosity bordering on zealotry. The lack of stability in this transitional moment created an environment ripe for political and social changes, both welcomed and reproached. The idea of employing polysynody destabilized the notion of placing absolute centrist power in the monarch, a ruling style that some were growing weary of after Louis XIV’s reign. However, in practice, the Regent’s use of a Burgundy-Circle style polysynody served as a political means to an end to ultimately assert his dominance and fortify his power. With the changing face of the ruler thwarting traditional succession, and the attempt to change from the system of absolutism government glorified by the Sun King to a more expanded government proving ultimately unsuccessful, the socio-political stakes that shaped French Identity were pushed into flux. Still, this sense of socio-political insecurity was gilded over by the Regent’s simultaneous turn to courtly grandeur, marked by social activities like masquerade balls and fueled by renewed cultural currency like theatrical performances and opera concerts.

Accounts of the Regent’s lavish lifestyle also included details of questionable morality, at times casting his persona in a shroud of doubt and even contempt. The Regent held a reputation for his copious drinking, numerous affairs, and strong-willed
personality, with some naysayers questioning the means by which he gained his position as the Regent citing unfounded rumors that he had poisoned the would-be heirs. While rumors proved problematic for the Regent, economic ventures abroad led by the Duke’s one time close confidant John Law also accounted for a sense of distrust and even turmoil during this time. Locke, a shrewd business man, also had a reputation for drinking, gambling, and womanizing, and was regarded as “temperamentally similar,” to the Duke. In his book recounting the life of the Duke during the Regency Era, British author JH Shennan notes, “Orleans’ lively and unconventional mind inclined him to favor Law’s schemes, and as soon as he was able he gave them his full backing and the financier his personal loyalty.” Whether driven by a desire for power as suspected by Mansfield, or simply stifled by his own weakness as others recount, the Duke appears to have readily fallen under the influence of several influential people and members of the court during his reign.

Upon his succession to Regent, the Duke Orléans inherited severe fiscal problems as the result of four costly wars under Louis XIV. These debts accounted for a subdued economic climate in France at the outset of the Regency. At the same time, as early as

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109 Lewis, 27 and Shennan, 125.

110 Shennan, 125.


1682, France gained control of a vast territory in North America that would come to be known as the Louisiana colony. When Law, the charismatic—and problematic—Scottish financier, arrived in France in 1714, the country’s depressed economic environment coupled with their growing colonial holdings proved fertile ground for his monetary and economic schemes. Ultimately, the unbridled financial power bestowed upon Locke resulted in financial disaster. Law established the Banque Generale, which had the authority to issue notes, and later the Compagnie d’Occident, which held exclusive privileges to develop the expansive French north American territories in the Mississippi River valley. The company eventually monopolized the French tobacco trade and also the African slave trade. Law also took over the collection of French taxes and the minting of money. Law ultimately controlled all of France’s foreign trade and finances.

Law schemed to sell highly lucrative company’s shares in exchange for public securities that were rising in value. The situation triggered a speculative boom known as the Mississippi Bubble. In an effort to recoup the financial losses of Louis XIV, Law took advantage of the situation by printing increased amounts of paper money, which was readily accepted by the state’s creditors because it could be used to buy more shares of the Compagnie. This went on until the excessive issue of paper money stimulated galloping inflation, and both the paper money and the billets d’état began to lose value, culminating in a large crash.

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The bursting of the Mississippi Bubble, accounted for yet another miscue by the Regent and a sense of economic instability in the Regency Era, compounded by the multitude of political changes. France’s further involvement in colonial and imperial pursuits also accounted for changes in French society, as the colonial enterprises led to increasing interaction with people of color abroad, a growingly uncomfortable French entanglement with slavery, and more encounters with people of color in the French metropole than ever before.

“There are no Slaves in France”:

While a fair amount of scholarship has been written on the experiences of people of color in France and its colonies in the later half of the eighteenth century, accounts of the earliest encounters are fewer. And of the few, many are deeply steeped in racism, perpetuating stereotypes, and upholding notions of anti-Blackness.114 France’s “Freedom Principle,” or the notion that any enslaved person who set foot on French soil became free, continues to be pervasive in the French mindset, bringing France’s complicated colonial history and reluctance to admit involvement in the slave trade into focus. While implementation of this “Freedom Principle” suggests that formal slavery did not have a place in France the 16th and early 17th century, the extent to which non-white and non-European people were subjected to servitude in the mother country of France remains ambiguous.115 However, France’s colonial pursuits soon waded the country into the pools of the transatlantic slave trade. In the early 17th century, colonists in the French

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Caribbean including Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint Christophe sought to increase their landholdings and invest in the lucrative production of sugar—an endeavor for which the labor of imported indentured servants from France and native workers alone would not suffice. Soon, Louis XIV’s minister Colbert granted the Compagnie des Indes Occidentales (1664) and its successors, the Compagnie du Sénégal (1674), and the Compagnie de Guinée (1683), exclusive permission to forcibly remove people from Africa and enslave them to labor arduously in sugar cane fields in the French colonies. The practice proved a fruitful economic venture for French colonists, further embroiling France in the transatlantic slave trade.

With slavery booming in the colonies, it became necessary for the French government to set out some structure for the practice despite their reluctance to be tainted by it. In 1685, Louis XIV issued a Royal Decree called the Code Noir, severely restricting the rights of enslaved and free people of color and forming a legal basis for the continued subhuman treatment of Black people. As scholar Sue Peabody discusses, when it comes to racism and slavery, the question of “which came first” pervades much scholarship of the transatlantic slave trade. While some historians surmise that anti-black sentiment grew from the associations of Black people’s bondage to those of lighter skin, Peabody also notes the ubiquity of images preaching white superiority preceding the advent of slavery. She notes, “Cultural associations between black and white, sin and

116 Peabody, “There are no Slaves in France,” 11.
117 Ibid.
purity, savagery and civilization, all conspired to fix sub-Saharan Africans into a symbolic category in polar opposition to lighter-skinned northwest Europeans.”

Thus, the question of “which came first,” cannot be definitively answered per se, but rather, it must be understood that slavery and anti-black racism remain inextricably tied. As a document towing the line between France’s discomfort with slavery touching the motherland and a necessity to govern colonial enslaved people into submission, the Code Noir embodies the intertwinement of slavery and anti-Black sentiment, linking the two across the Atlantic, codifying slavery from the shores of Africa to the plantations of the Caribbean, and inscribing anti-Black racism in the halls of Versailles and the meadows of the French countryside. Though the Code Noir did legalize the manumission of the enslaved, it ultimately laid the groundwork for ongoing violence towards people of color and continued notions of white supremacy.

The Code Noir and the Freedom Principle worked in tandem to simultaneously regulate slavery in the colonies and uphold white supremacy in the mother country while ostensibly keeping the unsavory institution away from the French mainland. However, these policies failed to address what should happen if an enslaved person made their way from the colonies onto French soil. Peabody writes that Louis XIV’s authorization of colonial involvement in the slave trade was spurred by “the financial revenues that would cross the Atlantic, not the transportation of institution of slavery into the nation's bosom,” continuing that, “The Code Noir, subtitled ‘the policy of the islands of America,’ was

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120 Sue Peabody, “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’: Missionaries and Racial Discourse in Seventeenth-Century French Antilles,” 113.
designed to bring Catholicism to the heathen and curb the abuses of cruel masters across the sea."^{122} However, at the turn of the seventeenth century, as French colonies grew and commerce with Africa and the Caribbean expanded, Black people, both enslaved and free soon found themselves in the French mainland, forcing the Monarchy to confront the problem of their status.

Peabody recounts several instances of Louis XIV upholding the Freedom Principle including a 1691 incident when two stowaways came to France and the monarch instead required the commander of the ship to pay a fine and allowed the two enslaved people to go free.\(^{123}\) Further correspondence reveals that colonists could bring their domestic slaves with them to France, but the King’s ministers could do nothing if the enslaved people availed themselves of the Freedom Principle.\(^{124}\) While Peabody’s accounts paint a picture of a monarch who sought to keep France a land free of the stain of slavery, recent scholarship from Dr. Meredith Martin and Dr. Gillian Weiss draws a different perspective. In their new book, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV’s France*, the scholars reveal that Louis XIV actually relied heavily on enslaved people to row his galleys.\(^{125}\) Most of these enslaved people came from the Ottoman markets around the Southern Mediterranean and were forced to work in the Naval Base of Marseilles when they were not rowing the galleys.\(^{126}\) However, Martin and Weiss recount one 1680 instance of fifty four Black African slaves being inspected by the king prior to rowing a model galley on the grand canal in the Versailles grounds.\(^{127}\)

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\(^{122}\) Peabody, “*There Are No Slaves in France,*” 11.
\(^{123}\) Ibid. 12.
\(^{124}\) Ibid. 13.
\(^{126}\) Martin and Weiss, *The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV’s France*.
\(^{127}\) Martin and Weiss, 92.
new information speaks to the question of whether slavery proceeded racism or vice versa. Though not all Black Africans, it seems that by virtue of not being white, all of these enslaved individuals were regarded as inferior and “righteously” disenfranchised. Thus, perhaps it is not whether slavery proceeded racism, but that White Supremacy stands at the insidious nexus of all.

Regardless of the contested history of how Louis XIV handled the problem of slavery in the metropole—whether with pseudo benevolence or outright hypocrisy—the number of enslaved people who traveled to France continued to increase and many of these people employed the French courts to demand freedom from their masters. When the Regency Era began, a new law addressing slavery in the motherland marked this period of instability with yet another change with rippling implications. Known as the Edict of October 1716, the law set conditions in which slave owners could bring their enslaved people to France without fear of losing them once they set foot on French soil on the proviso that they intended to give them religious instruction or teach them a trade—echoing some of the sentiments put forth in the 1685 Code Noir. Further, the law required slave owners to be granted written permission to transport their enslaved people from the colonial governor, obtain permits for them, and register them in the district they resided. These requirements were strict, with the edict stipulating, "If the masters fail to observe the formalities proscribed by the preceding articles, the negroes will be free and will not be able to be reclaimed." The law also outlined enslaved people’s rights to challenge their owners in court and a basis to claim their freedom.

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129 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
Thus, slavery remained a contested and complicated practice in the French motherland. While the Edict of October 1716 on the one hand reinforced enslaved people’s status as chattel, it also opened the flood gates for more enslaved people of color to enter France than ever before. Further, the Edict put in writing that enslaved people had the right to challenge their status and even claim their freedom.

The Regency period in France, punctuated by a resurgence of courtly glamour and opulence, masked balls and theatrical productions, and robust artistic production of courtly portraiture, certainly engaged with theatricality in several senses. Beneath the painted images of courtly elites staged for their portraits and behind the mask of dalliance and even deviance, stood an unsteady France inundated with change. The untimely death of the Duke of Bourgone diverted traditional succession, placing the Duke of Orleans, infamous for volitiveness and questionable morality, as Regent. The means by which the Regent further secured his power, employing polysnoody to gain the support of the aristocracy and to ultimately use its parlements to nullify the late Louis XIV’s will, cast his character into further suspicion and reproach. This political move also destabilized the absolutism that had ruled the French socio-political mindset for decades. Additionally, the Regent’s schemes with John Law accounted for a frenzied moment of socio-economic upheaval. Lastly, France’s colonial enterprises, in place long before the Regency, could no longer be kept an ocean away. The realities of France’s involvement with slavery came home to roost as more and more enslaved people of color came into the metropole. France’s “Freedom Principle” cast these people’s status into flux and the edict of October 1716 simultaneously reasserted their status as chattel by allowing them to be brought into the metropole and kept as enslaved by French colonists while also outlining ways to earn
freedom. The edict ultimately triggered a larger influx of people of color into the France than ever before. All of these factors combined to shake the core of French identity.

The Simien Collection Dual Portrait, created in the heart of this moment of change, serves as a unique index of the political, economic, and social mindset of the time. In a search to redefine what it meant to be French in the face of political and economic change, the painting engages with social identification by way of coloristic stratification. Through rendering three faces of different hues, the painting can serve as a map key, classifying the ranks of French society and crystallizing an ideal French identity. While every other factor of what it meant to be French was no longer certain, whiteness became an ideal that could be clung to, championed, and glorified. The French could refashion identity through portraiture, the ultimate medium of self-fashioning. I suggest this painting exists to make clear a hierarchy of race based on skin color through a palatable medium devoid of the realities of racism and enslavement. However, the utilization of the mask as the endpoint to the line segment suggests a sense of self-awareness when it comes to fashioning identity. As Johnson surmised, “Masks in the eighteenth century granted an equal footing to the unequal…They provided an occasion to challenge pieties and step outside rigid codes.” Identity remains fluid and unfixed and the mask, an item inextricably tied to the theatricality, spectacle, and gilded nature of the era, seems to nod to the farcical nature of self-fashioning in a society that could be unmasked to reveal its woes at any point.

**Racing Skin Tone**

The use of three distinctive hues to distinguish each face in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait underscores how the artist deployed *color* to relay messages about *race*.
Linking race and skin color under the pretense of science was a developing phenomena in the eighteenth century and the composition of this portrait appears enmeshed in this school of thought. As scholar Anne Lafont outlines, the construction of “race” via skin color gained traction in the Europe as, “Art, natural history, nascent anthropology, aesthetics, and colonial law converged around 1700 (1685–1745) to establish and then stabilize color as the main racial marker in the inventory of human diversity.”

David Bindman echoes this notion in his book *Ape to Apollo*, noting the advent of “the idea of race as an aspect of human variety.” Lafont cites an 1684 letter of Francois Bernier, a physician and traveler, as documentation of the conceptualization of partitioning human beings into groups based on color. Bernier writes:

“…still I have remarked that there are four or five species or races of men in particular whose difference is so remarkable that it may be properly made use of as the foundation for a new division of the earth…Under the second species I put the whole of Africa, except the coasts I have spoken of [Mediterranean ones]. What induces me to make a different species of the Africans, are,

1. Their thick lips and squab noses.

2. The blackness which is peculiar to them, and which is not caused by the sun, as many think; for if a black African pair be transported to a cold country, their children are just as black, and so are all their descendants.

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133 Lafont, “How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race,” 90

134 Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*, 7.

135 Lafont, 93.
until they come to marry with white women.”

Bernier’s observations serve as ‘evidence’ for the imaginary and scientific process underway that sought to inextricably link differences in appearance like skin color with differences in race. As Lafont writes, “Race was thus conceptualized as manifested in reliable and legible corporeal signs, revealing itself to sight independently of its bearer’s will.” Thus, skin color, an objective demarcation of pigment, could be understood as an inescapable marker of the more abstract concept of race.

While sources like Bernier’s letters provide a written basis for the racialization of skin color, scholars observe the most legible immortalization of this phenomena in the visual arts. Kim F. Hall writes that, “racial signifiers are deeply embedded in the very language of art.” The very act of painting human figures, applying pigments to the outline of a corporeal form to reflect the “reality” of life on canvas, served to racially identify people on the basis of skin color. Lafont writes, “Namely, the visual arts contributed to the division of humans into races, categories whose foundation—until modern scientific developments enabled human divisions based on genetics—was the color of skin, as primordial marker.” Thus, the 18th-century pseudo-scientific valuation of color as an indicator of race bestowed the visual arts with the unique power to make “race,” visible.

Bindman notes the role of art, and more specifically aesthetics, in the solidification of race as a new category of human variety. Bindman also discusses the simultaneous linking of morality and aesthetics at this time, with artists and art theorists

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137 Bindman, 11.
of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries marking an “implicit connection between physical beauty and virtue, and between ugliness and vice”.

At the close of the seventeenth century, Charles Lebrun, a power player in the French Royal Academy who acted as chancellor and director at various points, was at the forefront of writing a language of physiognomy, or the deduction of character through bodily appearance.

Published in 1698 (eight years after his death), Lebrun’s *le Conference sur l’expression* illustrated his idea that specific passions were thought to activate specific facial muscles and certain expressions corresponded with emotional states, and thus, recording a person’s resting countenance could deduce their inner character.

In writing a language of physiognomy, Lebrun sought to codify the anatomical and expressive qualities of the face as a new method of formal analysis. Skin color, now coming to be understood as a legible indicator of race, could be viewed as another formal characteristic—both a color and an element of physiognomy—through which inner character and morality could be prescribed. Thus, the production and academic study of visual arts, influenced by the theorists at the helm of instruction in the Academy Royal and beyond, helped bolster the moral valuation of skin color.

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138 Bindman, 46.
Stephanie Ross, “Painting the Passions: Charles LeBrun’s Conference Sur L’Expression,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 1 (1984): 26. Note: To assume that we have a set of doctrines formulated by LeBrun himself is misleading. Beside his Conference l’Expression other presentations were recorded by the secretaries of the Royal Academy. The first, Andre Felibien, was publicly reprimanded for not submitting his record to the Academy for the correction of errors. His successor, Henri Testelin, often interpolated his own opinions and objections into the records he preserved. Thus, there are no document which reliably preserve LeBrun's own doctrine. LeBrun did, howe establish an overall hegemony of artistic taste during his tenure as Chancellor of the Royal Academy.
In his book *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, Albert Boime notes the unique power wielded by visual artists to inscribe meaning through their choice of formal artistic elements, writing, “The confusion of formalistic categories with ideological biases is a singular phenomenon in the history of art.”141 In art historical formal analysis, color (namely in the division of lightness and darkness) serves as one key element imparting meaning into a work of art. Boime notes, “the famous chiaroscuro, or light and dark polarity, is intimately associated with the religious dualism of Good and Evil.”142 The color white is often associated with lightness and divinity, the color black with darkness and sin. Boime suggests that “the racial opposition of black and white derives from the color scale.”143 Kim F. Hall adds “…it is in the language of visual culture that the racial valences of the dark/light dichotomy can be seen most clearly.”144 The aesthetic values of whiteness and blackness indicated levels of morality and the advent of the racialization of color transferred these notions of morality onto the bodies of human beings. Lafont adds, “artistic production and discourse in the eighteenth century produced tools of observation and analysis that allowed human beings to be differentiated as well as implicitly classified on a moral scale, an enterprise that would later veer into explicit racism.” Artists, aware of how utilization of specific formalistic elements imparted meaning, could thus employ formal elements to relay messages about morality, using color choice to visually map out racial hierarchy, creating a basis for the justification of anti-Black sentiment. While the use of this juxtaposition of color to

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142 Boime, 2.
143 Boime, 2.
144 Hall, 213.
convey notions of racial hierarchy can be clearly seen in works like Black attendant portraiture, artists also employed other less overt symbols and visual cues to racialize skin color and ultimately give visual credence to notions of white supremacy. The mask, a ubiquitous item in Early Modern Europe, soon arose as a tangible prop that could be co-opted to serve as a racially coded symbol.

**Rendering Skin, Contrasting Color, Painting Race:**

Painting carries the unique ability to subjectively render the world to which it bears witness, and to embellish and even invent elements of each scene. The artist wields the power to manipulate composition and pose, intensify juxtaposition of light and dark, and render texture and color through their preferred choice of paint application and pigment. Each of these artistic choices carry larger implications and serve to make meaning. When considering the racialization of skin color, the power of these choices becomes especially clear. Many of the previously discussed “Black attendant portraits” demonstrate how the artist manipulates pose, scale, and expression to visually disenfranchise the Black attendant figure. However, the aspect that most identifiably differentiates the Black attendant from the white sitter is the color of their skin, rendered through pigments applied on canvas. Noting the artifice of painting is key, as the colors applied do not necessarily seek to render a figure true to life, but rather to Other them and visually differentiate their skin—now linked inextricably to their race—to a degree dramatic enough to provide, “proof of human hierarchies.”\[145\] Through utilizing a specific set of iconographic elements, quintessential Black attendant portraits, like Mignard’s *Duchess of Portsmouth* (Fig. 20) for example, overtly posit whiteness as the pinnacle of

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\[145\] Lafont, 90.
human hierarchy. However, the small attendant figures (and oft included trappings of exotica) in these portraits also link these notions of racial superiority with colonial and imperial enterprises, and, in effect, the slave trade. Thus, when posed with the conundrum of how to visually relay white superiority, untarnished by the reality slavery, the mask emerged as a powerful tool of self-fashioning. In France specifically, the society’s reluctance to betray involvement in the slave trade accounted for a more tepid engagement with the Black attendant trope than their early modern British and Dutch counterparts (though many French examples, including those discussed in this thesis, do exist). Consequently, artists deployed the mask, an omnipresent symbol of dalliance and deviance in the paintings of the regency, to disguise more reprehensible racial underpinnings. When held by a white sitter, the fashionable onyx accessory also upheld white supremacy.

Examples of masks in portraits include several aforementioned portraits of the Regency court painted by Pierre Gobert, including the ca. 1710 Portrait of Louise-Adélaïde de Bourbon-Conti dite Mademoiselle de La Roche-Sur-Yon en habit de bal (Fig. 8) and the 1714 Portrait of Marie Louise Élisabeth d'Orléans, Duchess of Berry (Fig. 11). On the one hand, these masks can be seen as another accoutrement of fashionable courtly life—yet another mix-and-match element asserting style and wealth utilized by Gobert in his prolific body of portraits. Including the mask in these two portraits invokes more overt aspects of Regency Era society through the disguise’s association with the

theatricality of court life and the deviance of masked balls. On the other hand, the masks less overtly symbolize the gilded nature of the society, outwardly brimming with a resurgence in cultural activities while internally dealing with political and economic turmoil. Most insidiously, the masks posit the sitters’ virtue through the juxtaposition of the item’s black hue with the fair white tones of the sitters’ skin. Independent of the contrasting colors of the mask and skin, Gobert also renders whiteness—and in effect, virtue—through elements like blush. Thus, the artist deploys the inherent artifice of painting, utilizing formal skills to contrast colors and render the surface of skin as a vehicle to “paint race.”

Racial Stratification in Disguise

The Simien Collection Dual Portrait offers some of the same themes expressed in the Gobert examples, though they become more complex in the face of painting two sitters in a single canvas rather than just one. The double portrait beckons for comparison between both the sitters and the mask, asking a viewer to confront the relationship between all three. Another example of a double portrait featuring a mask, the 1733 Portrait of Madame Dupille and her Daughter by court painter Charles Antoine Coypel (Fig. 30), offers a point of comparison. Though painted slightly after the Regency Era, Coypel was enmeshed in the aesthetics of the time after training under his father, who was first painter to Louis XIV. The younger Coypel himself became first painter to the Regent and ultimately to Louis XV after his 1723 coronation.147

In Coypel’s portrait, Madame Dupille and her daughter pose together in a balcony lunette, with the elder Madame Dupille placing her hand maternally upon the younger’s shoulder as the young mademoiselle clutches a small black mask in one hand and a fan in the other. Gauzy white curls frame each sitter’s face, mimicking the ethereal ruffles of lace adorning their necks. Here, Coypel intentionally arranges the mother daughter duo lovingly, rendering specific phenotypic elements in mirroring detail. Coypel clearly underscores a fond, intimate, familial connection between the two sitters, articulating a kindred bond that is only subtly hinted at in the Simien Collection Dual Portrait—the ambiguity of the later precipitating earlier discussion of sororal portraits, attendant portraits, and this portrait’s resistance to categorization as either. Additionally, the mother and daughter’s shared fair complexions and light hair bring the divergences in the appearances of the sitters in the Simien Collection portrait into higher relief. Still, both compositions utilize the rendering of skin tone and color juxtaposition by way of the mask to cast whiteness as a signal of virtue and even supremacy.

In the Coypel portrait, the small black mask held by the young Mademoiselle Dupille contrasts greatly with the alabaster tone of her petit hand and the composition’s profusion of otherwise fair traits. As she holds it with a bent arm in motion, it is unclear whether Coypel captures the duo as the girl gestures to hold the mask to her face, or at the moment of her unmasking and the reveal of her small jest. The ambiguous temporality of the portrait mirrors the ambiguity of disguise, harkening to the larger power of masks and masquerades to destabilize identity. Coypel posits the virtue of whiteness not just through the juxtaposition of color with black the mask alone, but also in the rendering of white skin. Madame Dupille’s cheeks flush bright red, rife with a
physiological reaction made more legible due to the translucency of her white skin. While blush could indicate a myriad of “passions,” it also indicated a certain self-awareness and embarrassment in the face of passion. Madame Dupille blushes as she realizes the audience bearing witness to her daughter’s moment of masking or unmasking, connoting a bashfulness and awareness of her daughter’s burgeoning sexuality and availability for marriage and thus animating her maternal female virtue through a corporeal reaction. Her blush asserts piety while the mask flirts with the idea of sexuality.

The small fan in the young girl’s other hand also points to the rush of blood and elevated internal temperature of desires, recalling Hogarth’s ideas of masquerades inciting elevated “temperatures” of female arousal. Thus, the inclusion of the fan, coupled with the bright blush of the mother’s cheeks, alludes to the innate sexuality of the masquerade, brought into the confines of the canvas by the presence of the mask. However, the mask, with its inherent references to deviance, actually acts as a vehicle underscoring the white women’s perceived virtue and piety. The black mask’s connotations of immoral behavior and the color itself’s association with sinfulness render the woman’s bashfulness, visible to the viewer due to the whiteness of her skin, as a correct, moralizing response in the proximity of licentiousness as represented by the mask. What Kim F. Hall describes as “the association of aristocratic identity with the Elizabethan cult of fairness,” situates whiteness at the center of normalcy and blackness as otherness and marginalia. The disembodied black face of a mask, when compared to the vitally blushing faces of the white sitters, forces viewers to examine notions of

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150 Hall, 222.
beauty and the other, flirtation and restraint, and whiteness and blackness. In this way, the painting relays white supremacy without any real overt closeness to embodied people of color, asserting a righteous white ideal without tainting the image with the abhorrent realities of imperialism and enslavement.

The Simien Collection Dual Portrait also relies on the implications of the black mask to make larger claims about racial hierarchies. However, the lack of clarity in the relationship between the two sitters and their divergent phenotypical appearances imbue the work with more nuanced ideas about normalcy and Otherness. The stark contrast of the white-haired, white-skinned mother daughter duo with the black mask in the Coypel portrait tells a slightly different story than the gradient of faces in the Simien Collection portrait. The Coypel portrait embodies what Kim F. Hall identifies as the European black/white binarism, “which ultimately suggests that white femininity and beauty truly exist only when posed next to blackness.”

The Coypel portrait draws a clear distinction between black and white, sin and virtue, good and bad, the standard beauty and the Other, positioning these traits on opposite ends. Rather than working with extremes, the Simien Collection Dual Portrait works with proximity, highlighting the mutability of each of these characteristics, and how susceptible they are to shifting. The portrait visualizes a most-feared reality: that the Other is not far away on the other side of the spectrum, but lurking at the borders of oneself.

The less dramatic variation of the hues of the sitters’ skin reflect a growing anxiety that the physical appearance of French identity was becoming malleable upon the advent of colonial expansion and involvement with the transatlantic slave trade. Anne

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151 Hall, 240.
Lafont notes the emergence of, “canvases created by artists who were ostensibly seizing upon the nuances of shades offered by an expanded and mobile world—in Paris as well as in Martinique or Barbados, by the forced transfer of populations and colonial interbreeding.”\textsuperscript{152} The Simien Collection Dual Portrait certainly engages with this phenomena. People of color were no longer a fantasy in the European mind, living on the opposite ends of the globe. Rather, Europe’s imperial projects bridged the gap. The stealing of foreign land and subsequent forced labor and relocation of native populations and people of African descent literally and figuratively transported people of color into Europe’s political, economic, and social world. This sudden closeness of “the Other” precipitated a need to make order in a globalized European society, for categorization, and for an establishment of a racial hierarchy.

The Simien Collection Dual Portrait envisions this tension by utilizing the faces of an ostensibly white woman, her closely aligned olive-skinned counterpart, and the disembodied black mask to create a composition locating whiteness as the central ideal while also showcasing the fluidity of identity. Unlike the mother daughter duo in the Coypel portrait, the lack of clarity in the relationship between the two sitters underscores the mutability of identity. The artist’s specific formal and compositional choices in the rendering of the woman of color make her resistant to exact categorization. The fact that this tan-skinned woman can be read (though to varying convincing degrees) as perhaps a servant or possibly a sister outlines the delicacy of identity in the face of an expanded mobile world. Still, the black mask acts as an undisputed endpoint to the racial

\textsuperscript{152} Lafont, 100.
continuum, placing the white woman as the righteous focal point of exemplary French identity.

Recognizing the unfixed and fluid nature of identity as a pervading aspect of Early Modern European consciousness contextualizes the power of the mask as a symbol for the era. In the context of masquerades and masked balls, the disguise held the ability to destabilize identity, allowing revelers to step outside of rigid social codes, live out fantasies, and act on desires under a shield of anonymity. In a socio-political sense in France, the mask symbolized a certain self-awareness that the troubled political and economic underpinnings of a seemingly glamourous and culturally affluent society simmered just below the surface. The Simien Collection Dual Portrait utilizes the mask, coupled with a confounding composition and contrasting complexions, to visualize all of these anxieties, but most principally the racial anxieties precipitated by growing globalized contact with people of color. Anne Lafont writes, “The first decade of the reign of Louis XIV, an era of centralization of institutions in the kingdom of France, witnessed the convergence of legal, political, and artistic policies that established the concept of a superior and dominant white race that was European—even French and Parisian, according to Colbert’s institutional initiatives.”153 The political upheavals of the Regency Era ultimately pushed these notions of identity into flux and masks became a useful symbol for asserting a “dominant white” French ideal in a changing French world.

Continued Use of the Mask to Support Notions White Supremacy:

Perhaps my claim of the mask standing in as a palatable proclamation of white supremacy and a symbol of anti-blackness feels reaching, or as tenuous as the mask itself.

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153 Lafont, 96.
The symbol certainly carries the capacity for multiple interpretations. As more overt proof of this conception, I offer a later British portrait by John Raphael Smith. The ca. 1794, *Portrait of an Unnamed Woman with Mask* (Fig. 31), drawn with pastel on paper features another white female sitter with mask in hand. The Yale Center for British Art describes the sitter as a young woman dressed for a masquerade, wearing a black “domino,” or voluminous hooded cape over her white dress. The white supremacy that I argue the previously discussed portraits imply, the Smith portrait spells out.

The mask in this portrait marks a clear departure from the vizard and moretta style face coverings seen in other portraits. Rather than appearing as a plain countenance of a different color, this mask appears as a racist exaggeration akin to blackface. The artist draws the mask in profile with the sitter in slight profile as well, juxtaposing her pale white complexion and slight bone structure with the mask’s dark hue, exaggerated brow, and large pink lips. The mask carries more specific facial anatomy than its plain black predecessors, yet the details of the widened eye holes, flared nostrils, and protruding mandible compound not into an earnest attempt at a more authentic face, but rather devolve into a terrible, racist caricature.

The artist renders the mask with a set of visual cues reminiscent of those used in the Black attendant trope, simultaneously confirming our worst suspicions about the coded potency of the mask and also the perceived subhuman status of the Black attendant. Smith divorces the exaggerated black skin, bulging white eyes, and physiognomic distortions from the human body of the attendant figure, and draws them

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154.“Slavery and Portraiture in 18th-Century Atlantic Britain,” A Lady Holding a Negro Mask | Yale Center For British Art (Yale Center for British Art), accessed January 10, 2022, https://interactive.britishart.yale.edu/slavery-and-portraiture/294/a-lady-holding-a-negro-mask.
into a disembodied handheld disguise. Thus, Smith makes clear what the trope implies: that the Black attendant in these portraits is not painted as a living breathing person, but rather an object that can be fully possessed by the white subject. As the white woman in Smith’s portrait holds the disembodied Black face to her own, she declares her understanding of Black people of possessable objects, articulating her perceived supremacy and privilege by insinuating “playing Black” as an amusing diversion. The mask here reveals the artist’s view of Blackness as a costume and a joke, especially in the face of whiteness, effectively solidifying the notion of white racial superiority. I argue that the earlier portraits featuring masks, including Gobert’s portraits of courtly ladies of the Regency Era, Coypel’s mother-daughter portrait, and the Simien Collection Dual Portrait utilize the multi-faceted nature of the mask as a symbol to make subtle insinuations of racial hierarchy, relying heavily on formalistic qualities like the application of paint to render skin and the racial valences of the dark/light dichotomy in artistic analysis. I contend that John Raphael Smith’s work, created decades later when European entanglements with enslavement were no longer nascent and uncomfortable but fully fledged and inescapable, offers proof of the intentions of the inclusion of the mask in earlier works. Rather than hinting at these conclusions through the deft rendering of subtle details, Smith boldly claims racial superiority through scribbling a racist caricature onto his pastel portrait. Here, whispers of racial superiority amplify into bombastic assertions. However, though working with varying degrees of subtlety and exaggeration, both methods ultimately spread malignant anti-black sentiment and notions of white supremacy.
Conclusion:

Addressing Visual and Archival Subjugation:

The trajectory from the earliest Black attendant portrait discussed here, Titian’s ca. 1520 Painting of Laura Dianti (Fig. 18), to the varying early 18th-century depictions of people of color in works like Vigeron’s Sororal portrait (Fig. 16) and Nattier’s Mademoiselle de Clermont as Sultana (Fig. 17), to Smith’s ca. 1794 pastel featuring a mask of a cartoonish Black face severed entirely from a corporeal host (Fig. 31), highlights the persisting inequities of Black representation in visual art. This ongoing visual subjugation is compounded by a prejudicial and incomplete archive of materials that often reduces people of color to catalogued property, remembers them via false anecdotes and racist stereotypes, or erases their presence entirely.155 In her book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, scholar Marisa Fuentes mines archival documents to reconstruct the stories of several enslaved Black women, highlighting the history of violence enacted Black people in their lived experiences, painted images, and recorded existence in the archives.156 Fuentes writes “Enslaved women appear as historical subjects through the form and content of archival documents in the manner in which they lived: spectacularly violated, objectified, disposable, hypersexualized, and silenced. The violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to the documents that count, condemn, assess, and evoke them, and we receive them in this

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156 Fuentes’ work focuses on enslaved women living in colonial Bridgetown, Barbados. While images of enslaved Black females and prescribed narratives about them fill the archives, the continued effects of white colonial power constrain and control what can really be known about these women as living breathing people.
condition.”  

The content of these archival materials and the form of visual representations work together to disenfranchise, subjugate, and erase people of color.

For many of the works discussed here featuring both white sitters and people of color, erasure is woven into the very titles of the works, which carry no acknowledgement of their potential to be viewed as bi-figural. Catalogued as portraits of a singular white sitter, the titles of these works cast the people of color as objectified and exoticized trappings of wealth and nameless attendant figures, regardless of the varying artistic choices in their portrayals. This ‘documentary reticence,’ when combined with the visual oppression and dehumanization associated with Black attendant portraiture, reinforces the notion that these figures do not warrant close looking within the analysis of these works. These longstanding art historical biases result in failures to critically analyze and reconsider works featuring people of color. This is especially evident in works that do not fall neatly into prescribed modes of representation such as David Martin’s ca. 1778 Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (Fig. 2), Stephen Slaughter’s ca. 1750 Two Women Gathering Fruit (Fig. 3), and the Simien Collection Dual Portrait (Fig. 1). Examinations of the historiography of identification of subjects in Martin’s Dido portrait and analysis of the didactic framing of Slaughter’s work in a traditional museum collection reveal how the violence of the archive and the field’s ongoing presupposition of dynamics based on the racialization of skin color can result in damaging oversimplification and history-altering

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157 Fuentes, 5.
158 For the continued refusal to see works with Black and white figures as bi-figural, See: Denise Murrell, Posing Modernity : The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 4 and 13.
oversight. All of this colors our understanding of the Simien Collection Dual Portrait, of which I asked at the outset of this thesis, “what makes other works from this time worthy of being held at museums and critically studied while this one remains privately held and shrouded in mystery?”

When posed with the ongoing history of visual subjugation and erasure of people of color, the necessity to reframe and to rectify these representations and to actively combat the inequities in the archive and museums crystallizes. Avenues of resistance include interventions by contemporary artists, intentional collecting and responsible institutional initiatives, and fresh and unconventional research approaches. Ultimately, charting these new paths showcases how the field of art history must seek out new tools, methods, and ways of looking in order to fully study works that have been excluded from the canon of traditionally surveyed and valued art.

**Interventions by Contemporary artists:**

Some contemporary artists practice resistance by engaging directly with the language of the history of art. Artists like Kehinde Wiley and Titus Kaphar reimagine and refocus iconic works and canonical tropes through painting Black sitters as the primary figures in their compositions, making their own interventions to rectify inequities in the field. Though their work is related, these two artists employ different methods to render the differing goals of their compositions.

Kehinde Wiley draws heavily on canonical works, with his most quintessential pieces working in a large scale to recast Old Master paintings with contemporary Black models in a, “stylized interrogation of the historical legacy of fine art.”

of work creates a sort of revisionist history that places Black people at the center of the narrative. His desire comes from personal experience, roaming the halls of museums like the Huntington Library and wondering aloud, “Where are the people who happen to look like me?” When he learned to paint, Wiley remembers “The sense of being able to have mastery over something. To feel as though I mattered.” Spurred by this feeling, Wiley developed what he described as an obsession with the, “incredibly ancient language which is easel painting. This obsession with the dignity of it. The bombast. The pomp and circumstance surrounding all of these portraits.” An example from Wiley’s series centering women, “Economy of Grace,” his 2012 Two Sisters (Fig. 32), features two Black women arm in arm, wearing mirroring one shoulder white gowns set against an ornate, vaguely chinoiserie-style, floral backdrop with growing vines poised to potentially subsume the figures. Wiley’s painting recalls the sororal portraits of the 18th century like Gobert’s Presumed portrait of Françoise Marie and Louise Françoise de Bourbon (Fig. 15), a quintessential sororal portrait filled with kinship as the two sisters hold hands, appearing as two desirable brides, ripe for marriage. As with Gobert’s painting, Wiley articulates a familial bond and incontestable equality between the sitters while still rendering them as individuals. Wiley poses his sitters democratically side by side, dressed in similar fashions and differentiating the two by painting different jewels and ruffles, hair styles, and even shades of eyeshadow. When speaking of his practice, Wiley recounted thinking, “Perhaps I can hack that language of dignity. Hack that language of respectability and turn that light towards people who happen to look like

161 Kehinde Wiley: A Portrait of a Young Gentleman – Artist Reception, The Huntington (YouTube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAI6TyL3zRM.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
Here, Wiley refigures this sororal trope with two Black women, placing the two as equal counterparts whose shared refinement redoubles each of the sitter’s palpable elegance. Wiley reimagines a history that paints these figures as the dignified subjects of a sororal portrait, announcing them as elite and righteous ideal brides. Our knowledge of history betrays this composition as an unfeasible fantasy of an alternate 18th-century universe. Wiley’s worldbuilding through paint envisions racial equality then and now. He surmises, “We have to recognize that there is something in the force of art and the force of creative energy… that gives us a sense of hope.”

Titus Kaphar also engages with established works in the history of art, however his paintings refocus the narrative rather than reimagine it. Kaphar moves Black figures from the periphery of paintings to the center, bringing forth a more complete history. In a selection of his works utilizing familiar Black attendant portraits, Kaphar covers, crumples, and cuts out the “primary” white sitters and reconfigures the Black sitters within the composition. Rather than being identified as singular portraits of the white sitters as has been the established norm for these types of images, Kaphar gives each original canvas an evocative title in conversation with its visual themes. While Kaphar’s practice involves acts of erasure or visual disruption, his works do not seek to erase or reimagine history but rather, to recontextualize it.

In his 2015 work Covered by Fear, Draped in Loss (Fig. 33), Kaphar alludes to Sir Anthony van Dyck’s 1623 Portrait of Marchesa Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo, (Fig. 34). While van Dyck’s work focuses on the

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164 Ibid.
165 Kehinde Wiley: A Portrait of a Young Gentleman – Artist Reception, The Huntington (YouTube, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAl6TyL3zRM.
167 Cooks and Watson, 96.
stately white figure of the Marchesa shielded from the sun by a red parasol held by a nameless Black figure, Kaphar’s work features an outline invoking the Marchesa covered entirely in intricately folded drapery. Rather, the only person visible in Kaphar’s rendition is the Black figure holding the parasol. Though Kaphar mimics van Dyck’s figure in the choice of clothing and pose, he turns his figure’s face slightly more forward, rendering a sensitive and realistic depiction of a young Black boy in the place of van Dyck’s nondescript typological attendant figure. Though Kaphar does not turn the gaze of the boy entirely away from the unseen white woman conjured through ghostly drapery, he does turn the focus of the narrative.

Kaphar takes on another recognizable Black attendant portrait, Abraham van den Tempel’s 1671 *Double Portrait of Jan van Amstel and Anne Boxhoorn* (Fig. 35) in his 2016 work *Twisted Tropes* (Fig. 36). In the original double portrait, an elite richly attired couple poses stoically as a young Black figure stands almost out of frame in the right margin, offering the woman an abundant tray of fruit. The young attendant figure shrinks before us, contrasting with the capacious bodies of the white figures, made even weightier by the sumptuous fabrics of their clothing adorned with tassels and jewels and their profusion of curled hair. The child gazes adoringly at the couple, docile and doe eyed. A 2007 catalogue entry regarding van den Tempel’s work reads, “The couple’s prosperity is underscored by the presence of a young page who offers a precious chased silver dish laden with exotic produce.” The continued referral to these Black figures as commoditized possessions, compounded by the use of words like “page” to avoid delving into the compositions’ potential entanglement with slavery, exposes how the accepted

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methods of the field reinforce biases and blind spots that expunge art historical analysis of the horrific and dehumanizing realities of forced labor and servitude. Kaphar’s *Twisted Tropes* takes the entire composition of van den Tempel’s portrait and crumples it, leaving glimpses of details like the white woman’s off the shoulder gown and the child’s platter of fruit as sparse signifiers of the source image. On the right side of this crumpled canvas, Kaphar paints a small cameo-style portrait of the once infantilized attendant figure. Here, Kaphar depicts the matured face of a young Black woman, gazing directly back at the viewer with defiance and control. He refocuses the narrative on the figure van den Tempel portrays with infantile obedience and forces the viewer to confront the realities of this embodied person’s life conditions as the forced chattel of elite whites, corpulent with money and power.

In a final example, Kaphar engages with Hyacinthe Rigaud’s ca. 1710 *Portrait of Hyacinthe-Sophie de Beschanel-Nointel, Marquise de Louville* (Fig. 37), a work that most closely aligns with the many discussed portraits of the Regency Era court by Gobert and peers. Kaphar makes incisive cuts in his allusion to Rigaud’s composition to create his 2018 *Seeing Through Time* (Fig. 38). Rigaud’s composition is a typical Black attendant portrait featuring a titular white sitter dressed in a blue taffeta frock clutching the stem of a flower in one hand while placing the other patronizingly on the shoulder of a nameless Black attendant figure posed in profile offering a basket of blooms. True to trope, Rigaud emphasizes the resplendent fairness of the sitter through rosy cheeks, a glowing exposed white chest, and the juxtaposition of the attendant figure’s dark skin against a swath of illuminated white fabric. Kaphar paints a near copy of Rigaud’s image but exchanges the more muted 18th-century palette with vibrant colors. While the attendant figure remains
In profile, the white female sitter has been erased entirely from the painting. Instead, Kaphar fills the outline of negative space where Rigaud had painted his white sitter with a meticulously painted, naturalistic frontal facing portrait of a young Black girl. Kaphar’s empathetic portrait is marked by the sitter’s emotive and captivating forward gaze. In her face, Kaphar paints a beautiful, realistic, and haunting portrayal of adolescence. Her gaze back at the viewer inspires a universal desire to protect and to honor. By using his work to refocus our gaze, Kaphar shows us that we cannot protect the people who lived under these conditions, but that we can honor them by remembering their history and telling their stories.

These contemporary interventions present new narratives to a larger audience, creating imagined alternative histories and refocusing compositions to portray fuller histories. While these creative endeavors have certainly generated buzz in the art world, bringing the racial undertones of art history into a growing global consciousness, the ability to widen and refocus our gaze lays before us in a scattered body of lesser known and sometimes hidden historical paintings featuring people of color. Collectors like Jeremy Simien have been at the frontlines of this venture.

**Intentional Collecting:**

Jeremy Simien began to seriously collect art featuring Creole people and people of color in 2013. Simien acquires disparate artworks from across the globe with the objective of piecing together a fuller narrative with more equitable representation. During my recent interview with Simien, he said of his early collecting goals, “My intentions back then were to find these pieces that people told me were impossible to find and that
‘didn’t exist’ and to share that with the world.”\textsuperscript{169} As he began to amass his collection and share it publicly with interested parties and more widely through social media, Simien recalls, “I naively believed that me showing this would trigger something and the world would say ‘ah-ha.’”\textsuperscript{170} For years, Simien has continued his work as an individual collector in the periphery of larger entities, finding, restoring, and preserving pieces from the margins of the field. The summer of 2020’s mobilization for racial justice in the wake of ongoing violence and egregious police brutality toward the Black community resulted in a quest for greater racial equity in all spheres of society—including arts and culture institutions. Simien describes this moment as, “Hanging out with a little sign slightly out of frame, and the camera repositioned on me.”\textsuperscript{171}

Today, there is a lot of particular interest in historical works featuring people of African descent, with individual collectors, galleries, and museums actively chasing after these acquisitions. Simien is, “excited but conflicted about what’s going on.”\textsuperscript{172} In building and researching his collection, Simien recalls seeking out the help of institutions, dealers and connoisseurs, who he describes as dismissive of him and his collection, and also uninterested in doing the necessary work on these pieces. “I don’t think they would be as dismissive today in light of the hyper focus on works of people of color,” he added. While the newfound interest in works depicting people of color has certainly influenced institutional initiatives and placed a larger spotlight on previously ignored or hidden works, Simien stresses the need for context to maintain the integrity of these pieces of art. In tending to his own collection, Simien works tirelessly to research the pieces he

\textsuperscript{169} Jeremy Simien in discussion with Rebecca Villalpando, April 18 2022.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
acquires and understand the circumstances in which they were created. In an interview with *Country Roads* magazine, Simien stated, “I’m trying to share our unique cultural history, trying to tell the complete story. Some of our ancestors were not on the right side of history. It’s ours to reconcile and to understand. Sometimes we have to be face to face with uncomfortable facts. Now, when considering the art world’s scramble for works featuring people of African descent, Simien notes, “People are buying these pieces, museums, institutions, collectors, as kind of a means of clout and to show who is more… ‘woke’... flexing.” The desire to possess these pieces of art does not necessarily predicate an inclination to understand them. While Simien is excited to see works like those in his collection garnering attention on the global stage, he also stresses the need for them to be responsibly identified, displayed, and researched.

Collecting these works as a means of clout without conducting the necessary work to understand their context and histories effectively recommodifies the people at the heart of these stories. These initiatives ring hollow if these works are continually displayed with oversimplified didactics, titles that do not acknowledge the works as bi-figural, and the convenient usage of ambiguous identifiers like ‘page.’ Because the archive erases so much of what can be known about these types of works, researchers must ask different questions to write a more complete history of art. We must ask “why”.

Still, the question of “who” nags at my curiosity. When I asked Simien if he had any new information on the potential identity of the two sitters in his dual portrait, he said that while he remains optimistic, he has no current leads, adding that for some of the

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portraits in his collection, “I’m [probably] never going to know their names.” Simien concluded, “We have to highlight that there’s a reason why this wasn’t preserved because it was not seen as important. And then some guy born in 1985 started picking up the pieces.” Simien cannot work alone in this pursuit. The field of art history must grow and change to seek out a more complete narrative.

**The Journey to a New Research Approach:**

This thesis constitutes my own attempt to chart a fresh and unconventional research approach. At the start, I tried to employ the tools, methods, and ways of looking that traditional studies of the field utilize. I could not see another way to approach the task at hand but with the ways I already knew. I had to test the limits of these approaches and ultimately break them. I began with a quest to identify the artists and sitters via historical context and visual analysis. Though potential answers arose, the pervasive questions that came in the absence of information actually guided me toward something bigger than this portrait. In the bounds of the frame, I found an aesthetic that positioned Blackness in opposition to Frenchness. I found a self-conscious composition wrestling with fluctuating notions of French identity in the face of political upheaval, colonial enterprises, and growing involvement with the transatlantic slave trade. In the proliferation of the mask, I saw ripples of white self-fashioning through contrast to the Black Other. I found the ugliness of white supremacy in the beauty of oil painting. And I found hope too. In the worldbuilding of Wiley and the truth-telling of Kaphar. In the growing movement for representational equity in our cultural institutions and in the ensuing calls for responsible growth. I found hope especially in the careful stewarding of these works by collectors like Jeremy Simien. As we discussed the dual portrait, Simien’s
words also reminded me to zoom out and see the work for what it is: a beautiful painting. As it pleases the eye, it also beckons its viewers to look more deeply and seek out the truth. The onus is on art historians to fix our flawed tools, our ways of looking, and our foundational knowledge, to excavate the archive, and to find the works that we do not know exist to put forth a more complete history of art. I humbly leave this intriguing, mysterious work for now, with more questions than answers, energized and ready to continue to ask “why?”.
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