In the spring of 1985 The New York Review published Françoise Cachin’s hostile review of T.J. Clark’s Painting and Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers. Cachin, the founding director of the Musée d’Orsay, who in 1983 had been responsible for the exhibition at the Grand Palais and the Metropolitan Museum of Art commemorating the centenary of Manet’s death, took exception to Clark’s central chapter on Manet’s Olympia (1863), which he had described as “the founding monument of modern art.”¹ She belittled his discussion of the painting’s engagement with sexuality and class in Second Empire Paris and caricatured his interpretation of Manet’s courtesan by claiming that he thought Olympia was a sexual proletarian lacking a phallus.² In his acid rebuttal, Clark dismissed Cachin—a granddaughter of the neo-Impressionist painter Paul Signac—as the standard-bearer of the bourgeoisie, a “cultural apparatchik”
working for “a State machine…which never stops vomiting retrospectives,” and someone who dispensed “picturesque summaries picked up on the Paris cocktail circuit.”

By the time a second edition of *Painting and Modern Life* appeared in 1999, art-historical discourse was beginning to shift from a preoccupation with class and sex to a focus on race. In his introduction to the new edition, Clark acknowledged a primary omission in his interpretation of Manet’s painting, quoting an unnamed friend who told him, “For God’s sake! You’ve written about the white woman on the bed for fifty pages and more, and hardly mentioned the black woman alongside her!” In a pioneering and polemical essay, “A Tale of Three Women: Seeing in the Dark, Seeing Double, at Least, with Manet,” published the same year, the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock gave the most comprehensive account to date of the black servant attending the courtesan in the painting. She analyzed *Olympia* as disrupting an Orientalist tradition rooted in slavery and colonialism, which exoticized primarily female African and North African subjects, and represented them as compliant and submissive. Pollock also attempted to unearth more about the black model, Laure, whose identity had been known since 1931, when Manet’s biographer, Adolphe Tabarant, first discovered her name and address in a small notebook that the artist had used in 1860–1862.

This notebook was acquired in 1974 by the Pierpont Morgan Library (as it was then known), along with over five hundred letters and documents from Tabarant’s archive relating to Manet and the Impressionists. From it we learn that Manet met the two models who would pose for *Olympia* at around the same time in 1861. “Laure, très belle négresse,” lived at 11, rue Vintimille, in Paris’s 9th arrondissement. Recent research shows that her modest apartment was part of an industrial complex of four shops and forty-eight small dwellings, whose residents included a wine merchant, dressmakers, and a hairdresser. Laure’s biography starts and stops there. We do not know her surname, her age, her place of birth, or her profession; she may have worked as a shop assistant or a nanny.

Only very recently have historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting paid much attention to models as collaborators of avant-garde artists and in some ways participants in the creation of modern art. Frequently from modest social origins, marginal and unrecorded, models—as opposed to sitters and members of an artist’s family or social circle—have generally left little trace beyond anecdotal references in the occasional memoir. In 2018, for example, the literary historian Claude Schopp discovered by chance that the model who posed in 1866 for Gustave Courbet’s still-startling *The Origin of the World*, painted for the Ottoman-Egyptian diplomat and collector Halil Şerif Pasha, better known as Khalil Bey, was Constance Adolphine Quéniaux (1832–1908), a ballerina who had retired in 1859 as a deuxième danseuse at the Opéra and by 1865 had become one of Khalil Bey’s mistresses.
The representation of the black model in Manet’s *Olympia*, the presence of black female models in French art and photography from Manet to Matisse, and the response to such representations in the work of certain modern and contemporary artists were the subjects of “Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today,” an ambitious and satisfying exhibition curated by Denise Murrell at Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery. It included two of the three canvases by Manet for which Laure modeled—*Children in the Tuileries Gardens* (1861–1862) and *Portrait of Laure* (circa 1862)—but not *Olympia*, which was represented by two of Manet’s etchings of the image done in 1867. Murrell also assembled more than one hundred other loans: paintings by Delacroix, Manet, Bazille, and Eakins; drawings by Baudelaire; photographs by Nadar, Potteau, and Van Vechten; sculpture by Cordier and Carpeaux; and paintings, cut-outs, drawings, and lithographs by Matisse. Among the highlights of the final section were Romare Bearden’s *Patchwork Quilt* (1970) and Mickalene Thomas’s *Din, une très belle négresse #1* (2012).

Murrell’s point of departure was her insight that there are two focal points in *Olympia*: the Auguste courtesan on the bed and the black servant who seeks permission to announce her patron’s arrival. In her discussion of prostitution in the catalog for “Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse,” the Musée d’Orsay’s version of the exhibition, Isolde Pludermacher makes the astute observation that Manet placed his figures in the interior of a courtesan’s *hôtel particulier*—and not a brothel—with the black servant as yet another sign of the luxury lavished on the kept woman. Her unfashionable, ill-fitting dress might be a cast-off, handed down from a previous employer or acquired from a secondhand clothes dealer. Manet thereby signals her place as a member of the urban proletariat—Murrell refers to both figures in *Olympia* as sex-workers—but Laure’s madras headdress and coral earrings are equally markers of her Antillean roots.

Manet based his composition on a variety of old-master sources, notably Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), which he had copied in the winter of 1857, although none of the Salon critics alluded to this obvious quotation in their universally hostile reception of the picture in the summer of 1865. This was not merely, as Clark suggested, because it betrayed “a disregard of good modelling.” Rather, Manet disrupted the conventions of traditional chiaroscuro in favor of coloristic modeling that systematically suppressed half-tones, by far the most radical innovation in modernist painting of the 1860s. Style, as much as subject matter, was a primary cause of the outpouring of invective that so distressed the artist. As Manet wrote to Charles Baudelaire early in May 1865, “How I wish you were here…insults rain down upon me like hailstones.”

In the background of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* are two diminutive female attendants who serve a purely accessory function, a trope that Manet reprised in 1866 in the portrait of his friend the critic and poet Zacharie Astruc. Not so in *Olympia*. As demonstrated more than
thirty years ago, Laure’s presence in this composition was initially even more commanding. X-rays of the painting—on which Manet may have worked intermittently over many months in 1863 (and perhaps beyond)—indicate that she was first shown carrying a smaller bouquet of flowers in a pose that revealed more of her upper body and dress, the folds of which extended to the left, disappearing behind the center of Olympia’s thigh. In the final painting, all of this was hidden by the enlarged bouquet and its outlandish wrapping. Initially, Laure’s head and shoulders were also framed by a more dynamic opening in the green curtain behind her, which brought greater attention to her face and its adornments.11

Manet had first employed Laure’s services in 1861 as the model for a black nursemaid who attends the seated white girl at the far right in the small, unfinished *Children in the Tuileries Gardens*. There she is shown in a pink dress and white lace collar—not unlike the loose garment she wears in *Olympia*—with the patterned madras headscarf and hooped gold earrings associated with women from the Antilles. The colored headscarf was a marker of black colonial identity. E.L. Joseph’s novel *Warner Arundell: The Adventures of a Creole*, published in London in 1838, described the repressive treatment in the French colony of Cayenne of free women of color, who were not allowed to wear shoes or bonnets:

> Owing to these laws...[they] invented the dress which, in their colonies, is called ‘à la Capresse.’ This consists of a rich and valuable Madras kerchief, tastefully tied round their heads, in lieu of the forbidden cap or bonnet. The strongly contrasted colours of the Madras well harmonise with their dark complexion and brilliant eyes.12

Manet’s second painting of Laure, probably done in 1862—a head study rather than a portrait—was also likely unfinished. It remained, unframed, in Manet’s possession and, after his death, was listed in June 1883 in the inventory of his studio with other “painted studies” as “Head of a Negress,” valued at 100 francs. Laure is shown wearing a more elaborate madras headscarf, double pearl earrings, and a necklace of gems encased in silver links. Murrell notes that Manet’s presentation of the black model, despite the sensuality of Laure’s bare shoulders, is a harbinger of her portrayal in *Olympia*: respectful and restrained, above all when compared to the prevailing racist conventions of Orientalist painting and journalistic caricature.

In 1862 Manet also worked on the portrait of Baudelaire’s “savage mistress,” Jeanne Duval. The half-paralyzed model, who had suffered a stroke in April 1859, reclines in her extravagant crinoline on a divan below the windows of Manet’s studio. Duval (who also went by the names Lemaire and Prosper) was likely born in Nantes around 1815–1820 to a black prostitute and a white father, and had performed in vaudevilles under the stage name
Berthe in 1838 and 1839. She had been the photographer Félix Nadar’s lover before meeting Baudelaire in 1842 and beginning a long, tumultuous, and codependent relationship with him that lasted until his death in August 1867.\textsuperscript{13} When admitted to the maison Dubois, a municipal clinic in the Faubourg-Saint-Denis, on April 3, 1859, Jeanne had apparently given her place of birth as Saint-Domingue.\textsuperscript{14} Although Baudelaire had long ceased to cohabit with her, after her stroke he became her primary means of financial support. His final mention of Jeanne is in a letter to his financial guardian, the notary Narcisse Ancelle, sent from Brussels in May 1864, in which he asks Ancelle to remit 50 francs to Jeanne Prosper, now living at 17, rue Sauffroy, in the Batignolles. “I believe that poor Jeanne is going blind.”\textsuperscript{15}

Manet’s portrait of Jeanne, assigned to 1862, would date from the beginning of his friendship with the \textit{poète maudit}. Baudelaire first visited Manet’s studio between April and September 1862, and by January 1863 was comfortable enough to ask him for a loan of 1,000 francs. Manet’s depiction of Baudelaire’s companion is unsparing, raw, and direct. Unmediated strokes of blue, white, and gray describe the folds of Jeanne’s enormous skirt; pungent blacks convey her heavy eyebrows and dark, unseeing eyes. But Manet’s portrait is not without sympathy, and transcends the racism embedded in the reminiscence of Jeanne twenty years later by the poet Théodore de Banville: “A very tall colored girl who held her artless and superb head high, with its violently crinkled tresses; one whose regal bearing, with a certain feral grace, had something of the divine and bestial about it.”

Tabarant speculated that Baudelaire was the intermediary for Manet’s introduction to Laure. This is unlikely, but is endorsed by Murrell in part because it supports her case for the “multiethnic mix of Manet’s close social and artistic circles” and, even more, “his routine encounters with women of color.” The sympathy with which Manet presented the black attendant in \textit{Olympia} does not allow us to infer anything about his progressive republican sensibilities or his attitudes toward people of color in the 1860s. The only evidence for Manet’s reaction to slavery comes from letters he wrote as a sixteen-year-old, when he traveled to Rio de Janeiro for two months in 1849 in preparation for a career in the navy. (Brazil had a population of two million people of African descent, most of them enslaved; slavery was not abolished there until 1888.) “In this country, all the negroes are slaves,” he wrote to his cousin soon after disembarking. “All these wretched people appear overwhelmed; the power that the whites have over them is extraordinary. The Negroes wear trousers, and sometimes have cloth smocks, but as slaves they are not allowed shoes.” To the same cousin he later confided, “In Rio all the Negroes are slaves and the slave trade flourishes here.”\textsuperscript{16}

Of the future Impressionists in Manet’s orbit in the 1860s, only Frédéric Bazille sought the services of a black female model. A kneeling servant, attending to her mistress’s
slipper, appears in *The Toilet* (1870), an updating of the Orientalist theme of the Odalisque in her harem. Intended for the Salon of 1870, this ambitious figure painting was rejected by the jury, to Bazille’s great disappointment. It is likely that the same black woman modeled for two genre paintings Bazille did in the spring of that year. In one, a young woman from the Antilles arranges flowers in a vase; in the other, she offers peonies for sale from her basket of freshly cut blooms.

Murrell remarks upon the directness and humanity in these pictures, which she considers more progressive and more admirable than Bazille’s rejected Salon painting. There may be an affinity in sensibility between Manet and Bazille in their refusal to engage in ethnographic and racialist stereotyping, but Bazille’s flower-seller can hardly be claimed as an homage to Laure. More pertinent is Murrell’s insight that the young black model who posed for Bazille in 1869–1870 had already done so for Thomas Eakins. In Eakins’s *Female Model* (1867–1869), not only is she wearing the same madras headscarf, but also her coral earring is identical to those worn by the flower-seller in Bazille’s painting. This reminds us that artists such as Eakins, who studied in Paris with masters resolutely opposed to the experimentation of Manet and his “school,” could also contribute to a more enlightened depiction of black models. Even so, it is hard to accept Hugh Honour’s sympathetic reading of this painting, in which he claimed that the “gentle, sadly resigned expression” of Eakins’s figure “suggests sensitivity to the predicament of blacks in the United States.”¹⁷

The black model was a marginal subject for the Impressionists. Camille Pissarro, who was born in the Danish colony of Saint Thomas (in the present-day US Virgin Islands) and educated at a Moravian school there—and who in his early twenties spent two years as an apprentice painter in Venezuela before settling in Paris in 1855—produced very few images of black people. His most developed work on this theme is a Rembrandtesque etching of 1867 that shows his mother’s maid in a pensive mood, her face in shadow, but wearing the familiar Antillean madras headscarf and hoop earrings.¹⁸ That same year, Cézanne painted a rough, vibrant study of Scipio, a model at the Académie Suisse named after the slave in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. At the inaugural Impressionist exhibition of 1874, he showed *A Modern Olympia* (1873–1874), part homage to, part parody of Manet’s Salon
painting, in which a balletic black servant strips the covers off her naked mistress, to the delight of the fully dressed bourgeois client.

Degas—whose maternal grandfather was born in Saint-Domingue, fled the island after the slave uprising in 1791, and eventually emigrated to Louisiana—admired, but did not record, the “Negroes in old clothes…rosy white children in black arms” whom he saw during his three-month stay in New Orleans between November 1872 and February 1873. In *Children on a Doorstop (New Orleans)* (1872) he included a black nanny in profile at lower left, hovering protectively over three of her four young charges. One has to look hard to find her. Seven years later, in a much more forthright canvas, Degas painted the twenty-one-year-old mixed-race Prussian acrobat Olga Albertina Brown, performing at the Cirque Fernando in Paris as “Miss Lala, la Vénus noire.” Her act’s showstopper involved being suspended upside down in mid-air from a trapeze while grasping a metal chain between her teeth to which a cannon was attached (it would fire during the performance). In contrast to the gaudy lithographs promoting the troupe, in his preparatory pastels and final painting Degas portrayed Olga ascending to the rafters in seraphic grace, her frizzy hair the principal marker of her African heritage.

At the Musée d’Orsay, Murrell’s exhibition was the inspiration for a more ambitious interdisciplinary survey of the black model—male and female—in French painting, sculpture, and photography from neoclassicism to Matisse, addressing the place of black and mixed-race artists, writers, musicians, and performers in French culture over more than 150 years. Concentrating primarily on the long nineteenth century and Matisse, “Le Modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse” assembled some 330 items, in many media, with concluding sections devoted to the influence of African-American culture in Paris after World War I, the Négritude movement, the Surrealists and anti-colonialism, and modern and contemporary responses to Manet’s *Olympia*.

This astonishing and moving presentation—no less than its accompanying catalog, with contributions from prominent writers on art, history, and race—was in many ways a realization of a project undertaken more than half a century ago by the Houston philanthropists Dominique and John de Menil: the creation of an archive of the image of the black in Western art from the medieval period onward, with a series of accompanying publications intended for both specialists and the general public. Today, this archive of around 30,000 images is housed at the Warburg Institute in London and Harvard’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research. Under the joint editorship of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the art historian David Bindman, the original five volumes in the series *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, published between 1976 and 1985, have been revised, updated, and reprinted. Eleven books have appeared since 2010, most recently *The Image of the Black in African and Asian Art*, published in 2017.
Upon entering the Musée d’Orsay’s exhibition—which is now at Guadeloupe’s Mémorial ACTe, a museum dedicated to the history of the slave trade—the visitor was confronted by the decree abolishing slavery in the French colonies, proclaimed by the National Convention on February 4, 1794. It was revoked by Napoleon in May 1802, and only in April 1848 did the Second Republic emancipate enslaved people throughout the French colonies. Hanging by itself on a wall nearby was Marie-Guillelmine Benoist’s celebrated neoclassical portrait of a black servant, exhibited at the Salon of 1800 as Portrait d’une *négresse*, which was described by Hugh Honour as “perhaps the most beautiful portrait of a black woman ever painted.”21 The sitter’s identity as Madeleine, one of two domestics who accompanied Benoist’s sister and brother-in-law on their return from Guadeloupe to France in 1798, was discovered only in 2018.22 Benoist—who had studied with Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Jacques-Louis David—draped her sitter in the colors of the new republic, replacing the young woman’s Antillean headdress with linen of the purest white. This intimate and sensitive portrayal of a black servant was nonetheless the work of an artist of royalist sympathies whose family’s wealth and position were dependent on the slave-owning colonial economy.

From the outset, then, the exhibition announced its background as race and slavery: the history of France’s relations with its sugar- and coffee-producing colonies, which by the 1780s accounted for one third of its overseas trade; the transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trade that supported these enterprises; and, following abolition, France’s involvement in the colonization of the African continent. The first section was dominated by Anne-Louis Girodet’s portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley (1747–1805), one of six deputies from Saint-Domingue elected to the National Convention in 1793. This masterpiece was painted in 1797, when Belley was serving as a member of the Council of Five Hundred, established by the Directory in October 1795.

Belley, who had been born in Senegal and transported as a slave to Saint-Domingue, had acquired his freedom and joined the French army. By the 1770s he was a landowner with his own slaves and would return to Saint-Domingue as chief of police in December 1797. Leaning against a pedestal supporting the large marble bust of the recently deceased abolitionist the abbé Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, Belley is dressed in the costume of a representative of the people to the National Convention and adopts the virile pose of a sixteenth-century Florentine statesman. As the art historian Anne Lafont has noted, there is an irony that while Belley’s contribution to the eradication of slavery was modest, “he was portrayed gloriously.”23 The same might be said of Benoist’s Madeleine, of whose biography we know nothing.

The French artist most committed to portraying the injustices and inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade was Théodore Géricault, whose *The Raft of the Medusa*, shown at the
Salon of 1819, took as its subject the aftermath of the tragedy that had befallen the royal frigate transporting the new governor of Senegal and an entourage of 150 (including twenty members of the abolitionist Société philanthropique de Cap-Vert) to the colony, which had recently been restored to French rule. The vessel had capsized off the coast of Mauritania in July 1816, and all had perished except for fifteen passengers who, consigned to a makeshift raft, survived for thirteen days adrift on the Atlantic Ocean. Géricault interviewed some of the survivors, one of whom was a black soldier tasked with throwing the dying overboard. In his heroic modern history painting, the artist depicted no fewer than three black models, most significantly the figure seen from behind, signaling to the passing ship in the far distance, “at the apex of a pyramid of misery.”

Géricault is known to have had a particular affection for the black model Joseph, whom he portrayed in many preparatory drawings and sketches. One of the most powerful, a pen-and-ink drawing, shows six individual studies: three of Joseph seen from behind, two showing him looking to the side, and one of his (disembodied) right arm and hand. Joseph had been born in Saint-Domingue around 1793 and after a brief career as an acrobat worked as “Joseph le Nègre” for painters such as Horace Vernet, Alfred de Dreux, and Abel de Pujol. He was one of three male models employed at the École des Beaux-Arts between 1832 and 1835.

In November 1836, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, director of the French Academy in Rome, in preparation for a composition of *Christ Expelling Satan from the Holy Mountain*, requested that his seventeen-year-old pupil Théodore Chassériau paint a study of Joseph for which he provided a heavily annotated drawing indicating the exact pose that the model should adopt (see illustration on page 62). Ingres had chosen not to divulge the subject of the black devil to his acolyte in Paris, and the authors of the catalog speculate that this might have been out of respect for Chassériau’s mixed-race heritage. He had been born in El Limón, Samaná, in the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, to a French father and a mother of color from the neighboring French colony of Saint-Domingue. This did not prevent the young Romantic artist from rising to fame as a painter of Orientalist subjects, specializing in exoticized depictions of the black female nude.
he issue of mixed-race identity was further examined in sections of the exhibition devoted to the relatively obscure history painter Guillaume Guillon-Lethière (1760–1832)—a prize-winning pupil of the Académie royale—and Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870), the extraordinarily prolific author of *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and possibly the most photographed French celebrity of his century. Dumas was the son of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas (1762–1806), one of three mixed-race children born to a Norman aristocrat and sugar plantation owner in Saint-Domingue and his black slave Marie-Cessette Dumas, whose name the boy was given. Thomas-Alexandre Dumas had been brought to Paris by his father in 1776, was groomed for a military career, became a general in the Republican Army, and was appointed head of cavalry on Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt in 1798.

Having lost the first consul’s favor, Thomas-Alexandre Dumas was also a casualty of the reintroduction of slavery in France in May 1802. In accordance with the new laws prohibiting “noirs et gens de couleur” from residing in Paris, he was exiled to Villers-Cotterêts, fifty miles north of the capital, and his widow would be denied his military pension. In the 1850s their son, Alexandre—one-quarter black—was relentlessly caricatured in drawings, lithographs, and sculptures as a thick-lipped, frizzy-haired African (occasionally of the female sex). These depictions appear intolerably racist to contemporary eyes, but were often made by friends of the author, notably Nadar, who idolized him. Dumas was hardly an activist for abolition or other black causes: *Georges*, published in 1843 and set in the island of Mauritius, is his only novel with a mixed-race hero.

Guillon-Lethière—whose eulogy Dumas would deliver in 1832—was born in Guadeloupe to a French colonial administrator and a free woman of color, sent to Paris at age fourteen to study at the Académie royale, and eventually became director of the French Academy in Rome in 1807. He was a respected and popular teacher who in the early years of the French Republic competed with Jacques-Louis David for students, as well as an ardent republican and supporter of the abolition of slavery.

In 1822 Guillon-Lethière painted the monumental allegory *The Oath of the Ancestors*, commemorating the struggle for Haiti’s independence, which he signed “Lethière, né à la Guadeloupe,” and sent clandestinely to Port-au-Prince in March 1823. (The Republic of Haiti, established in January 1804, would not be recognized by the French state until April 1825.) This heroic but ungainly canvas, inspired by Poussin and David, recorded the alliance between the Napoleonic general Alexandre Pétion, “chef des mulâtres,” and the black officer Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Toussaint Louverture’s second-in-command), who in November 1802 had joined forces to expel the French army from the island. The tools of slavery—iron neck ring and chains, three-pronged slave collar—are shown discarded in the foreground. Such instruments of imprisonment and torture would be routinely aestheticized in Orientalist painting of the second half of the century.28
Two paintings in the “Modèle noir” exhibition, both by artists of the second rank, engaged directly—and in one case, horrifically—with the politics of slavery in nineteenth-century France. Although around 1819 Géricault had been planning an ambitious composition exposing the cruelty and inhumanity of the slave trade (it did not advance beyond the stage of a preparatory drawing), there was minimal representation of such subjects at the Salon. The most explicit, Marcel-Antoine Verdier’s The Punishment of the Four Stakes in the Colonies, was rejected from the Salon of 1843, but exhibited in May of that year at the Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle. It shows a black overseer about to whip a runaway slave who has been captured, stripped bare, and pinioned to the ground, while the Creole colonist and his family, shaded from the sun, look on impassively. A chained male slave and his female companion, who approach this scene with bowed heads, are likely the next to be disciplined. A three-pronged slave collar is shown beside the prone, naked figure, whose flesh is as yet unmarked by the lash.

At the Salon of 1835 the prolific history painter François-Auguste Biard (1799–1882)—little-known today—showed the monumental Slave Trade, recording in grim detail the preparation of West African captives who await transportation in the slave ship that is docked at port. When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London five years later, the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray described Biard’s painting as “the best, most striking, most pathetic lecture against the trade that ever was delivered.” With Victor Schoelcher’s appointment as under-secretary of the navy in the first months of the Second Republic, Biard was commissioned to celebrate the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in a panoramic canvas that he exhibited at the Salon of 1849. Entitled Proclamation de la liberté des Noirs aux colonies in the Salon livret—the use of noirs rather than nègres was significant—Biard’s painting showed representatives of the enlightened republic witnessing the joyous embrace of a freed black couple, who hold their chains aloft. The elegantly attired Creole and mixed-race colonists at right react with more muted enthusiasm.

Powerful and stirring (to a degree) as it is, Biard’s depiction of grateful black slaves and upstanding white sailors reinforced prevailing attitudes of black submission and inferiority that are endemic to abolitionist imagery. As David Bindman has noted, the works selected for exhibitions such as “Le Modèle noir” must also be understood within a culture of “endlessly demeaning stereotypical images of blacks that showed them as infantile and barbaric.”

In “Corps noir, regard blanc,” the devastating concluding essay in the catalog of “Le Modèle noir,” the French former soccer star and activist Lilian Thuram and the historian and filmmaker Pascal Blanchard claim that during the period covered by the exhibition, the black model and the black body were systematically aestheticized, demeaned, and presented as “chastened, controlled, and, above all, tamed.” Codes of representation
normalized white domination, denied blacks individuality, and reinforced their exclusion and marginality. Since every pictorial representation is at the same time a political statement, the challenge today, they argue, is “to educate the white body to end its assumption of domination, superiority, and legitimacy.”

Dominique de Menil believed that her archive and publications could “play a role in counteracting segregation and racial prejudice.” In their introduction to Le Modèle noir, Anne Lafont and David Bindman credit exhibitions with the potential, “even more than books, to have an immediate transformative effect.” I applaud such convictions, but Thuram and Blanchard’s call to action may be more relevant. Toward the end of my visit to the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay, I overheard two young African-American women, both in their twenties, who had been absorbed in every object (and every label). One said to the other, “How can I believe all this? It’s written by white people.”

8 Claude Schopp, L’Origine du monde: Vie du modèle (Paris: Phébus, 2018), pp. 13, 15. In a letter of June 17, 1871, demonizing Courbet in the aftermath of the Commune, Alexandre Dumas fils reminisced to Georges Sand: “And one does not forget that he painted with his most delicate and sonorous brush the interior of Mlle Queniault [sic] of the Opéra for the Turk who would occasionally take refuge there.”


19 Degas and New Orleans: A French Impressionist in America (Rizzoli, 1999), edited by Gail Feigenbaum, pp. 3–17. Degas’s comments were made in a letter of November 19, 1872, to the artist James Tissot.  


24 David Bindman, “Philanthropic Conquest,” in The Image of the Black in Western Art, volume 4, part 1, p. 99. Of The Raft of the Medusa, Bindman notes that “in the whole history of Western art there is no other image that so effectively claims the rights of blacks to liberty and equality, alluding to slavery but freeing them from the stigma of inferiority implicit in straightforward abolitionist iconography.”  

25 The drawing is commonly described as showing only five motifs, with that of Joseph’s right hand misread as a continuation of the seated figure’s left thigh. See Sylvain Leveissière and Régis Michel, Géricault (Paris: Réunion des Musées, 1991), pp. 164, 384; Le Modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse, p. 84–85.  


27 For his portrait by Louis-Léopold Boilly, see Le Modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse, p. 53. Guillon-Lethière’s features and personality—and those of members of his family—were memorably captured in a series of masterful black-chalk portrait drawings by Ingres; see Gary Tinterow and Philip Conisbee, Portraits by Ingres: Image of an Epoch (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 182–187. Although Guillon-Lethière was known by contemporaries as “L’Américain” on account of his mixed-race origins, it is hard to gauge his ethnicity from any of these portraits.  

28 As, for example, in Jean-Léon Gérôme’s For Sale: Slaves in Cairo (1873; Roubaix La Piscine) and the exquisite preparatory study Head of a Female Model (1872; private collection), in Le Modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse, pp. 196–197.  

29 Image of the Black in Western Art, volume 4, part 1, pp. 103, 274. Hugh Honour noted the scarcity of people of color as subjects in paintings exhibited at the nineteenth-century Salons: only six in 1831 (from 2,138 entries), rising to ninety in 1861 (4,097 entries), and down to twenty in 1891 (3,660 entries).  

30 Frédéric Régent, “Le Châtiment des quatre picquets dans les colonies,” in Le Modèle noir: De Géricault à Matisse, pp. 100–101. A source for this painting is found in the chapter devoted to “Le Nègre,” in the final volume of the popular panorama of French types Les Français peints par eux-mêmes: Encyclopédie morale du dix-neuvième siècle (1842). There is a graphic account of “the terrible punishment inflicted on runaway slaves” (les nègres marronneurs), who “receive a prescribed number of lashes on their naked bodies by a whip seven to eight feet in length, attached to a very small handle, which is administered by a black overseer, known as the commander” (commandeur). See Les Français peints par eux-mêmes. Province (Paris: 1842), volume 3, pp. 322–333.  

31 David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., preface to Image of the Black in Western Art, volume 4, part 1, p. xii.  

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