Introduction: figuring blackness in Europe

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In the midst of a dark thunderstorm, a replica of the infamous French ship *La Méduse* pitches over violent waves in Yinka Shonibare’s 2008 photograph *La Méduse* (Figure 1.1). Billowing sails fashioned from “African”-style batik fabrics propel the ship over the angry ocean. The composed photo features Shonibare’s mixed media sculpture of the ill-fated vessel that wrecked off the coast of Senegal in 1816. Not unlike the ships that implemented the slave trade and facilitated colonial incursions into Africa from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, *La Méduse* set sail to Senegal with a retinue of French administrators and colonists sent to reestablish French control in the region. Shonibare, a British/Nigerian contemporary artist, presents a multi-level engagement with the history behind both the incident and its most famous visual incarnation—Théodore Géricault’s epic painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1918) (Figure 3.1). Shonibare sets his sights on European colonialism vis-à-vis the grand narratives of nineteenth-century history painting. As Albert Alhadeff discusses in this volume, Gericault’s *Raft* focuses on the human tragedy in which survivors, including black sailors, were set adrift at sea facing death and cannibalism. Shonibare, however, presents the intact vessel before the wreck as it struggles with nature’s fury. His use of batik fabric sails evokes a certain African-ness that is undermined by the fact that the fabrics are actually Dutch exports, not African in origin. His use of Dutch fabrics as incongruous elements in historical reanimation is a leitmotif that characterizes his entire oeuvre. Shonibare’s hyper-realist version of the vessel in tumultuous seas prefigures not only the shipwreck, but also the cataclysmic upheaval of the entire colonial project. Without depicting one African body, the artist suggests the horror of the slave trade, the dynamics of the European presence in Africa, and complexities of the African presence in European art.

Shonibare’s contemporary take on the history of nineteenth-century art and its relationship to the racial dynamics of the black Atlantic brings into relief the ironies, mythologies, and complex relationships between Europe and Africa under the colonial system. Artists like Shonibare who seek to reframe ideas
of race and representation through a reconsideration of historic works of art have been particularly attracted to nineteenth-century European art because of the prevalence of black bodies and the variety of modes in which they were represented. Not the over-simplified and unabashedly racist caricatures often found in American visual culture of the same period, blacks in nineteenth-century European art were frequently depicted as exotic, beautiful, romantic, and alluring. They were likely to be pictured individualistically as opposed to rendered as types. Yet as compelling as these images might be, below the surface are often undercurrents of objectification, a celebration of servitude, and hierarchical attitudes about race and culture that result in a tension that David Bindman has called “a two-edged sword.”

The black body was a fascinating source of visual inspiration for European artists over the long nineteenth century. From political print culture, academic history painting and portraiture, to Orientalist genre and ethnographic imagery, advertising, and photography, the black figure was a familiar sight in the nineteenth-century visual panoply. These representations were reminders of conquest, romanticized meditations on the exoticism and eroticism of
dark-skinned peoples and distant lands, caricatures, and objects of beauty that used blackness—at times literally—as an aesthetic tool or novelty. But seeing and understanding blacks in nineteenth-century Europe was not limited to the index of the image. Black people, although marginalized, were part of an increasingly international population in Europe. Even though the lived experiences of blacks in Europe during this period are difficult to reconstruct, black people were visible on the streets of major European cities. Black men and women from Africa, the Caribbean, and even North America worked in domestic service, as laborers and seamen, among other professions. Black musicians, dancers, artist’s models and other entertainers were also commonplace. Their presence as free people of color in Europe was a sure sign of the nascent emergence of modern black identities, even in the face of colonial slavery and its legacies, empire, and an entrenched European sense of power and authority over all others.

Blacks and Blackness in European Art of the Long Nineteenth Century presents new scholarship in which the authors seek not only to decode and contextualize select images of unidentified black figures, but, when possible, to engage with the narratives of actual black lives that the images reflect. In addition to anonymous or invented black people configured in art as constructions of European notions of blackness, this volume features a variety of known black people: an artist, a Shakespearean actor, a circus performer, and some minstrels and models. They remind us that blacks were not simply tropes, but individuals whose historical presence is critical to understanding the images that portray them. What beliefs did this imagery reinforce, and what did it resist or challenge? On what combinations of empiricism and fantasy were these images modeled? What long-standing art-historical traditions do they embody and what new modes did they establish?

The black body caught in the sights of the nineteenth-century European eye became a star performer in the spectacle of modernity. We have focused on the nineteenth century precisely because this period offers such revealing glimpses into the formation of modernity as it plays out along the axis of race. Paul Gilroy has explicitly linked modernity to the historical conditions that brought black people into contact with Europeans, in particular the Atlantic slave trade:

Though largely ignored by recent debates over modernity and its discontents, ... ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history. They crystallized with the revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification.²

Thus we begin at the close of the eighteenth century with the struggle to reconcile race, slavery, and liberty around the time of the 1789 French Revolution and proceed through the nineteenth century’s trajectory toward colonization and imperialism. We consider such significant but overlooked
topics as the environment for the relatively new phenomenon of the artist of color in Europe, the impact of blackness as a performative spectacle in the widening sphere of public entertainment, and the role of blackness in the construct of the exotic. We conclude in the early twentieth century with black bodies as subjects at the crossroads of artistic and commercial modernism in photography and painting. This volume by no means offers an encyclopedic narrative of modernity and race in European visual art; instead, we look at the visuality of blackness, or the various ways in which the black figure becomes part of the visual register in the nineteenth century. The discourses weave in and out of this story at critical moments that reflect how the visualization of race is part of the very fabric of modern, imperial Europe.

Trajectories of slavery

From the early Arab slave trade that brought Africans into the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula to the epic ramifications of the Atlantic slave trade, slavery in its various incarnations was a major mover of black bodies in and around modern Europe through the middle of the nineteenth century. Whether originating from Africa, North or South America, or the Caribbean, European whites largely gained what knowledge they had about blacks through slavery and colonialism. Although there are notable exceptions, blacks were never far removed from the realities of slavery and servitude. In fact, Paul Gilroy has argued that slavery is the central, defining experience for the people of the African diaspora, and that modernity and postmodernity cannot be understood without recognizing the fact and effects of slavery.

By the nineteenth century, the European engagement with Africans was defined by a complex matrix of forces that included not only slavery, abolition, paid servitude, and colonialism, but science, entertainment, and aestheticism. Personal encounters between blacks and Europeans, specifically relationships between artists and models, became more common in later decades of the nineteenth century. As the demand for exotic and ethnographic imagery grew in Europe, so did the presence of black models in European art centers such as Paris and London. Many who were brought to Europe from Africa or the Caribbean as slaves, servants, or ethnographic entertainment found their way into artists’ studios. Artists such as Théodore Géricault, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Paul Cézanne, Charles-Henri Joseph Cordier, and Edouard Manet famously used black models, creating individualized likenesses in their painting and sculpture with striking verisimilitude particularly as compared to prior traditions. In the absence of detailed accounts of the lives of black models in the nineteenth century, we can only imagine what their experiences would have been in the ateliers of some of the most important artists of their time. What we can glean from the imagery is that the artists came to the relationship armed with ideas of blackness that superseded the singular identities and histories of the individuals represented and, in spite of their
innovative approaches, more often than not, they reinforced and reinscribed shop-worn tropes of blackness. In this set of circumstances blackness could only be perceived by whites in opposition to notions of whiteness that placed whites as agents (economic, political, legal, intellectual, cultural) and blacks as objects of agency. Despite resistance or assimilation, there is virtually no situation in which Europeans and people of African descent came into contact with each other as true equals, an impossible situation when blacks were or could be property. Thus, it follows that representations of blacks as beautiful, desirable, or otherwise “benign” were inevitably bound up with the power relations inherent in the uneven circumstances under which whites were likely to encounter blacks or conceive of them; as Stuart Hall has observed, identities are “always constituted within, not outside representation.”

Further complicating the racial dynamics, a few artists of color, mainly from North America, began to appear in Europe in the nineteenth century, seeking training, patronage, and opportunities in flourishing art centers like London, Paris, and Rome—opportunities not available in America. Although their imagery was modeled on European visual traditions, the work of black or racially mixed artists offered new ways of thinking about identity and the humanity of the black artist. These chapters explore aspects of this varied landscape of representation, in which the image of the black figure is at once inflected by the legacy of slavery and subjugation, yet presented by a polyvocal cadre of artists with varied beliefs about race, divergent interests, and multiple aesthetic and ideological agendas.

**Blacks and blackness**

This collection addresses two related but distinct terms: blacks and blackness. By “blacks” we mean people of African descent, mostly sub-Saharan, and primarily encountered by nineteenth-century Europeans as part of the diasporas created by the slave trade, colonialism, and imperialism. “Blackness” is far more complicated. By this, we refer to the condition of being black as formulated by Europeans with interests at stake in notions of race. Toni Morrison’s definition of “Africanism” is useful here: “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people.” For Europeans who believed their economies to depend on plantation slavery, blackness involved a pre-disposition to servitude; justifying the slave trade was most effective when blacks could be characterized as primitive creatures, and colonialism was best supported by conceptions of blacks as undisciplined and grateful for European intervention. Scientific study codified these beliefs, attributing to them an aura of irrefutable objectivity. Blackness, therefore, is the form given to content: black people in visual art may be depicted physically with apparent accuracy, but blackness is evident, for example, in relationships
of submission to whites, as evidenced in the numerous paintings from the Renaissance onward depicting aristocratic sitters, usually women, with black servants. More problematic are issues of intertextuality—or inter-visuality in this case. The contributions to this book show various ways in which blackness is a function of representation, and how blackness functions in representation, not just within the individual image but within a set of related discourses, visual and textual. Given that images of all kinds circulate in a wide and varied context of other images, texts, and events, one set of images can affect understanding of another. For example, the profile heads of black people in French abolitionist prints or salon paintings may portray African facial forms objectively and with no obvious racist agenda, but knowing that they existed alongside very similar illustrated profiles of black people in scientific tracts intended to prove the superiority of Europeans over other races helps us to understand how the former images might be understood, regardless of their intent.

Blacks in the history of art

While nineteenth-century images of blacks are of course characterized by conditions particular to that period, they also appear as part of a tradition in European art and culture that dates back to antiquity. Images of blacks represented not only shifting understandings of race, but specific art-historical trajectories. In spite of distinct differences in the way that race, specifically blackness, was understood and fashioned over the course of Western history, representations of Africans survived epistemological shifts and consistently depicted blacks in terms of difference from Europeans. From the earliest sources in antiquity, racial differences were schematized into artistic and literary tropes that reflected and shaped the way Europeans understood Africans. Ancient writers described “monstrous” races that inhabited Ethiopia (the term often used for Africa in antiquity) and other remote locales. Those living in the mysterious lands of Africa were barbarians, outside of what the classical world considered as civilization.8 In the early Christian Greco-Roman era, ideas about blacks and blackness shifted. Gay L. Byron contends that references to Egyptians/Egypt, Ethiopians/Ethiopia, and blacks/blackness in ancient Christian literature came to symbolize the extremes within early Christianity, the most remote manifestations of Christian identity.9 On one hand, blacks symbolized immorality, sin, sexuality, and demonic behavior. On the other hand, biblical figures of the Ethiopian eunuch and Ethiopian Moses were revered as models of virtue.10 By the early modern era when the European trade in African slaves began to escalate, images of blacks increasingly appeared in secular imagery. With the exceptions of the image of the black body as an allegorical personification of the continent of Africa, and the black Magus, the black servant/slave in portraiture was the most visible trope of blackness in early modern Europe.11 Through the eighteenth century
this ubiquitous black servant encoded the power relations between blacks and whites and at the same time injected a sense of luxury and exoticism into European self-representation.

Science and Romanticism

Nineteenth-century Europe’s fascination with images of black people participates in two seemingly divergent projects that characterize the complexities of race and representation during this era. Governed by an impulse towards documentation, science, and the positivist approaches that informed most areas of study, the art of the period provided apparently objective and irrefutable information about race and blackness in particular. Concurrently, fueled by romantic notions of the purity of savage cultures, Europeans often measured their own burgeoning modernity, manifest in increasingly industrialized urban landscapes and cultural systems, against what they perceived to be more natural, simple, primitive cultures, untainted by the complexities of modern life. Much of the imagery we investigate in this volume resides in the spaces between empiricism and imagination as they were conceived and visually expressed at the time.

Although the modern conception of race as a function of physiognomy was introduced in the later seventeenth century, it was the eighteenth century that produced the notion of race as a scientific category. Due to increased contacts and relationships with a growing variety of peoples and cultures overseas, eighteenth-century Europeans began to question and investigate the nature of human variances. The widespread attempt to understand human variety during the eighteenth century was also fueled by the need to establish the European at the height of a hierarchical continuum of peoples and cultures. Africans usually populated the lowest strata of these kinds of schemes. The widely disseminated and copiously illustrated accounts of the world’s races by such prominent men of science as Johann Blumenbach, Paul Broca, Georges Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon, Petrus Camper, and Georges Cuvier, among others, provided apparently indisputable evidence of black inferiority on the continuum of savage to civilized. In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking publications, Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871), codified and substantiated the boundaries between the civilized and uncivilized world. Although these texts were not overtly racist by the standards of their time, the increasingly virulent attitudes toward race that culminated in the twentieth century were justified more by loose interpretations of the naturalist’s work than by claims made explicitly by him. However, Darwin’s acceptance of the binary of “civilized” and “uncivilized,” not to mention his theories that humans evolve from primitive to civilized states, and that contemporary Africans could, among others, could provide glimpses into the distant human past, did much to lend a disinterested, scientific credibility to notions of racial hierarchy. Although the presence of these supposedly less
sophisticated cultures only reinforced the unquestioned superiority of the West in all arenas, Europeans shared a sense of romantic adoration for what they saw as innocent, primitive races. Hence, the physiognomies, costumes, and cultures of non-Europeans became popular subjects in nineteenth-century European art and visual culture, both as projections of desires for less complicated lives and as contrasts to advancing modernity.

Increased travel for exploration and tourism affected European modes of representing blacks and blackness, giving rise to bodies of images tied equally to science and notions of exoticism. Journeys of scientific exploration often resulted in the publication of illustrated travel journals and documentary volumes that described distant peoples, cultures, landscapes, and architecture in vivid detail. Vivant Denon’s *Description de l’Égypte,* with its meticulous, elegant illustrations, set a new standard for the authority of images to define “otherness,” both ancient and modern, for European audiences. British topographical artist David Roberts produced volumes of lithographs entitled *Egypt and Nubia* that brought images of black Africans in Egypt to a wide Victorian public. In these large, richly illustrated editions, blacks and other exotic types could be viewed as parts of the scenery, just as they were in earlier travel accounts. In this respect, they stand as the continuation of a tradition of sensational accounts of rarely seen human curiosities. However, the greater empiricism typical of modern observation and styles of visual representation, along with claims to scientific objectivity lent these nineteenth-century books a degree of credibility lacking in ancient and early modern travel accounts. Artists, writers, scholars, and others regularly utilized such sources as guides for understanding and representing non-Europeans. Early in the nineteenth century these types of publications ignited the mania for the exotic, particularly Egypt. Demand for popular ethnography increased throughout the century, fueling the bourgeois taste for exotic subjects in art and literature, ethnographic entertainment, and popular travel journals that disseminated images of the darker races throughout nineteenth-century Europe.

Photography played an enormous role in the proliferation and dissemination of images of blacks in the nineteenth century. As the development of photography was a nineteenth-century phenomenon, the image of the black in photographic history grew along with the medium. All fields of visual representation were impacted by photography, including scientific documentation, travel imagery, academic art, and the diffusion of imagery through the popular media. With the advent of what was held to be an objective, neutral medium, the veracity of travel imagery seemed incontestable. For example, Maxime Ducamp’s photographs of Egypt and the Near East, taken during his trip with Gustave Flaubert, as well as Francis Frith’s photographs of the same regions, lent credence to earlier hand-illustrated documents such as those of Denon and Roberts. As photographs became important source materials for painters and sculptors, and photographers aspired to affirm the artistic value of their trade, black bodies were included in this emerging practice.
Painting, however, offered something photography could not: color. Eugène Delacroix made his mark in the French art world with his lavish use of color and expressive brushwork, deployed in the service of capturing the exotic people and locales he encountered in Algeria and Morocco. Writing in 1832, Delacroix claimed that in North Africa he had found the new Rome: “Beauty lies everywhere about one. I have Romans and Greeks on my doorstep … Rome is no longer to be found in Rome.”¹⁴ North Africa, the Holy Land and the Middle East indeed supplanted Rome as the ultimate destination for the education of the worldly European artist/traveler in search of fresh beauty and a noble, simpler past. In the wake of the Napoleonic incursion into North Africa and the colonization of Algeria by France in 1830, increasing numbers of French artists visited these lands in search of inspiration from the culture, color, and extraordinary sunlight. As a result of travel to these areas, representations of various “oriental” and exotic races abounded in Europe resulting in the phenomenon we now call Orientalism. Images of exotic blacks exponentially increased throughout Europe with the phenomenal popularity of nineteenth-century Orientalism. When exoticism and blackness, with their attendant powers of signification, are grafted on to one another the result is greater than the sum of its parts. In the nineteenth century, lust for the exotic black figure functions as a linchpin in the construct of the alluring Orient by marking the space as raced. Perhaps more than any other trend, the interest in a romanticized and fantastic Orient propelled the image of the black body to center stage in nineteenth-century art and visual culture. Gérôme’s meticulous and dazzlingly chromatic academic renditions of the exotic East, coupled with his dramatic treatments of black and white skin, fed a European appetite for an ethnographic fantasy that was grounded in dramatic racial binaries nominally disguised as oriental genre. Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking essay, “The Imaginary Orient,” however, showed how the “reality effect” of this imagery was no indicator of objectivity or accuracy, but rather, to use Edward Said’s metaphor, a stage on which Europeans could act out their fantasies.¹⁵

Historiography

The first major attempt at a comprehensive investigation of the iconography of blacks in Western art was the landmark publication series by the Menil Foundation, The Image of the Black in Western Art, first published in 1974. This was Dominique de Menil’s contribution to the civil rights movement and conceived as a counterforce against the toxic racial environment in the US. It was also part of a proliferation of American scholarship during the 1960s and 1970s on the history of African-Americans, Africa, and the black diaspora that emerged from activist efforts to bring blackness out of the margins of American historical memory and to redress exclusionary practices in the academy. The Menil Foundation’s multi-volume series initiated a surge in interest in
the iconography of blacks in Western art and spawned a phase of scholarship that sought to document and contextualize images and objects featuring blacks. This volume is deeply indebted to Hugh Honour’s sweeping coverage of the nineteenth century in volume 4 of the *Image of the Black in Western Art*. Honour produced a major contribution to the history of nineteenth-century art in what David Bindman praised as possessing “sympathetic insight, breadth of learning, and intellectual rigor.” After the project lost momentum in 1996 with the death of Dominique de Menil, it was revived in 2004 by the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University and Harvard University Press. Beginning in 2010 the press released new editions of the original five volumes with full color reproductions. Under the guidance of editors David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the press has also published three new volumes to complete the project as it was originally conceived—to cover Western visual arts from antiquity through the nineteenth century. Paul H.D. Kaplan, a contributor to this volume, authored two essays for the revival of this historic book series, one in volume 3 and one in volume 4. Adrienne L. Childs, co-editor of this volume, contributed an essay to volume 5, an extension of the original project that focuses on the rise of the black artist in the twentieth century. The idealism of the Menil Foundation’s desire to redress racial ills in the West through the study of historic images has inspired some of the most significant scholarship of the last quarter century. Theories of race and representation that germinated in these publications have pushed the boundaries of art history to consider the primacy of the marginalized. The present volume has been nourished and energized by the inheritance of the *Image of the Black in Western Art* project.

Two 1990 publications made significant contributions to this field of inquiry, particularly regarding black images in American art. *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* by Guy McElroy was published in association with an exhibition of the same name at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The text brought to life the function of painting and sculpture in the processes of oppression, both subtle and overt, in American culture. Albert Boime’s 1990 text *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* combined a breadth of imagery with a socio-political point of view positioning the image of the black as operative in the power structures of racism, slavery, and colonialism. Jan Nederveen Pieterse took on the issue of blacks in popular imagery. His book *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, like *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, attempted a study of the topic from the sixteenth century through the twentieth century. His sources were primarily prints, book illustrations, and advertisements; the populist nature of the imagery, from cartoons to postcards, reveals the ubiquitous character of distorted, prejudicial racial imagery and serves to underscore similar constructs in more traditional art forms.

An increased interest in feminist theory and critical race theory in the 1980s and 1990s spawned a generation of scholars who dealt with the intersection of European culture and ideologies of blackness. Specifically regarding the nineteenth century, Jennifer DeVere Brody’s 1998 *Impossible Purities:*
Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture tackles such issues as sexuality, miscegenation, and minstrelsy in Victorian literature, as does Roxann Wheeler’s The Complexion of Race (2000). T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting examines the sexualized black female in French literature and culture from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker in Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French (1999). Sander Gilman’s pioneering Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness (1985) brought important insights into the linkages between European conceptions of deviance and the pathological, demonstrating how nineteenth-century European scientific ideas of blackness converged with medical theories of female sexuality to find expression in art and literature as the “diseases” of blackness and femaleness, both characterized by uncontrolled sexuality.

More recently, scholars across disciplines have begun to examine this area of art history through approaches inspired by postcolonial theory. A reexamination of visual representations of blacks in terms of gender and sexuality, exoticism, scientific racism, and hybridity situate images and objects as tropes in wider discourses often fraught with power relations. David Bindman’s influential Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the Eighteenth Century charts the intersections of race and aesthetics and the forms of racism that develop in the wake of scientific assertions of hierarchies of human races. Cited by many of the authors in this volume, Bindman’s work has been invaluable to the field of art history as it has clarified and documented the relationship between art and long-asserted notions of racial inferiority and superiority. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby’s 2002 Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France addresses several paintings by Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson, Théodore Géricault, Antoine-Jean Gros, and Eugène Delacroix as case studies for an examination of how politically conscious painting by ambitious artists could speak to the deep anxieties of a country facing the demise of revolution and the emergence of an imperial dictatorship. Grigsby contends that these anxieties—and the paintings that attempt to negotiate them—are deeply rooted in issues of race, however obliquely addressed. Extremities contributes to this area of study a model for understanding representations of race as unfixed and unstable, thus difficult to locate firmly, but which gain all the more power from repression and denial. In a similar vein, Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies 1700–1840 (2008) by Kay Dian Kriz examines a wide range of imagery for insights into British conceptions of race, specifically blackness and whiteness. Like Grigsby, Kriz seeks to demonstrate how images can index race, while not necessarily describing it. Charmaine A. Nelson engages the intersection of gender and race in her publication Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art. She employs a black feminist methodology to examine images of black women in Canadian, American, and European representations, offering a keen critical commentary that bridges race and gender studies. Most recently, Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal edited Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World, a major contribution to this literature that features a variety of essays focusing...
on the slave as a subject of European portraiture. They question the notion of portraiture when it applies to the black and enslaved that are denied the subjectivity required of traditional portraiture.

Exhibitions

European institutions have begun to pay critical attention to the history of blacks in their societies and they are mining the vast numbers of objects that represent blacks in their collections. Several important exhibitions and related publications have emerged from this trend. The 2007 bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament inspired a new wave of scholarly inquiry into the image of blacks in British art and visual culture, as well as the history of British slavery in general. *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800–1900*, edited by Jan Marsh and published in 2005, includes critical essays surrounding representations of blacks in the Victorian era that touch upon popular imagery, travel illustration, painting, sculpture, and photography. The exhibition, organized by the Manchester Art Gallery and the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, uncovered and analyzed little-known images of blacks in Britain as well as images and objects from France and America that resonated in Victorian visual culture. In 2007 the National Maritime Museum in London mounted the exhibition *Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum*. The accompanying catalog, edited by Douglas Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth, brings to light a wide array of objects and images that reveal the “appalling dynamics” of the slave system. The catalog features essays on the material and visual culture of slavery and abolition that seek to marry the considerable scholarship on British slavery and abolition with lesser-known objects such as maps, decorative arts, coins, slave artefacts, paintings, prints, and jewelry. In 2008 Die Nieuwe Kerk museum in Amsterdam organized *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, an ambitious exhibition that surveyed images of blacks by artists from the Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the present. Departing from the American and British models that aimed to expose the problematic tropes of blackness, this exhibition and accompanying scholarship focused on the beauty that Dutch artists found in blacks and consciously avoided discussion of extreme stereotypes. Although the point of view is circumscribed, the number and quality of the images that the curators unearthed are a major contribution to the understanding of race and representation in Europe.

A special issue of the journal *Visual Resources* titled “Imaging Blacks in the Long Nineteenth-Century” continued the dialogue on the specific issues of blackness in the nineteenth century by looking at American, British, and French examples. Edited by Maria P. Gindhart, the essays in the issue investigated the constructed nature of race as it was fashioned across national borders in the nineteenth century, and revealed how the representation of blackness directly impacted the construct of whiteness.
The chapters

The contributions to this volume are case studies of the encounter, imagined and real, between the European artist and the black body. We are especially pleased to offer approaches that are part of a new phase in the scholarship on images of blacks that moves beyond the mapping of generalized binaries that fail to reveal nuances, toward a focus on particularized treatments of the images and objects in terms of their relationship to the meta-discourses of racialized imagery as well as the immediate circumstances of their production and art-historical milieu. Together the studies investigate select works, both canonical and lesser-known, that are emblematic of the era’s confluence of race and representation. Presenting a diverse array of scholarly approaches and topics, they demonstrate the complexities inherent in representing race in visual material for which the description of “racist” simply does not suffice. Building on decades of pioneering research that legitimized the study of images of black people, the contributors employ critical approaches that interrogate notions of race and blackness, and they examine images of blacks that could at once confirm European racist assumptions and question them. This approach brings them into a dialogue with more recent scholarship, mentioned above, that acknowledges the instability of race as a concept as well as the significance of illuminating modes of resistance to racial stereotyping.

Because of the difficulty of resurrecting black lives in nineteenth-century Europe, it has been virtually impossible to link images of blacks to their specific models or subjects on a large scale, but four of the chapters in this volume address the presence of actual individuals and help to chronicle how their lived experiences impacted European art. We can therefore measure more accurately the extent to which tropes of blackness affected representations of real people. We can also attempt to discern how in some cases these individuals represented themselves in terms of preconceived notions of blackness. Blackness then was not a fixed idea or imposed category, but something that was at times negotiated and traded among those who assumed it and those who consumed it.

Susan H. Libby’s chapter, “The color of Frenchness: racial identity and visuality in French anti-slavery imagery, 1788–94,” examines the visual rhetoric and racial iconography of French anti-slavery imagery in the years leading up to and during the French Revolution and its linkages to European conceptions of blackness. Libby argues that in this variety of images, blackness, otherwise reviled by many Europeans, functions as a necessary precondition for liberty. Mostly book illustrations or single-leaf prints, these images deploy racial difference and blackness in particular as a means of defining French virtue, sensibility, and national identity during rapidly changing political conditions in the Caribbean colonies and on the mainland. Libby shows how depictions of the kneeling slave pleading for liberty exploit European notions of black inferiority to elicit the viewer’s sympathy, whereas a series of profile portrait-style prints of slaves announcing their freedom after the 1794 abolition rely
on an intervisual play of racial difference that situates the slaves as “mimic men” (and women) whose blackness reifies the French “invention” of liberty. Another set of images, often interpreted as anti-slavery, in fact address the struggle of free people of color in the colonies to gain equal rights with white colonists. In this case, tropes of blackness serve to represent a transition to whiteness, equated with French citizenship.

Albert Alhadeff’s chapter introduces the role of science, specifically craniology, in establishing “facts” about race and the inferiority of blacks to whites. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, scientists studying humans were unanimous in presenting evidence that the world’s races were unequal in their intelligence, capacity for civilization, or beauty (these three conditions were often explicitly linked). Alhadeff examines the implications and complications of the science of race and aesthetics as they play out in French painter Géricault’s magisterial *Raft of the Medusa* (Salon 1819). This study attempts to lay bare the artist’s entanglement with race. Foregrounding the racist implications of the new science of craniology as founded by the Dutch anatomist and physiologist Petrus Camper, this chapter traces Géricault’s “facial line” or “ligne faciale.” Africans, according to Camper’s influential posthumous publications, were characterized by a uniquely narrow and constricted skull configuration, one starkly at odds with the expansive craniums of whites. Géricault appears initially to have agreed with the racial demagoguery that finds its voice in the beseeching black figure flanked by Corréard and Savigny on the raft, where the black man’s cranial measurements certify his links with the “lower races.” However, a closer look at the preparatory sketches shows how the painter changed his mind; Alhadeff traces Géricault’s evolving racial awareness, one that reveals the painter’s struggles to overcome racial stereotypes as he first condones and then belies Camper’s *ligne faciale*.

Before the black painter from Philadelphia, Henry O. Tanner, took up residence in Paris, and before the African-American sculptress Edmonia Lewis moved to Rome, Eugène Warburg, a promising young mulatto sculptor from New Orleans, attempted to forge a career as an artist in Europe. Warburg’s fascinating experiences have been recovered by Paul H.D. Kaplan in “A mulatto sculptor from New Orleans’: Eugène Warburg in Europe 1853–59.” Kaplan’s discussion of this mixed-race American sculptor with abolitionist patronage affords us the opportunity to consider the rare instance of a person of African ancestry with the agency to represent blackness in Europe during this period in which black bodies were overwhelmingly the object of representation. Given our current conceptions of the black artist, black identity, and the kind of political consciousness embedded in the artistic process, we might be tempted to overstate Warburg’s interventions as disrupting racism. While this may in fact be true, it is difficult to prove. Instead, Kaplan presents a measured analysis of the artist’s few existing works and imagines what the possible influences were, and the circumstances specific to being a multiracial, transatlantic artist in the middle of the nineteenth century who was supported...
by abolitionist patrons. Kaplan’s study is a major contribution to the history of African-Americans in the visual arts as it begins to flesh out the presence of artists of color in what was a booming international exchange before the abolition of slavery in the US.

Transnational dialogues are similarly addressed in a portrait of the African-American Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge by British portraitist James Northcote. In the chapter “Ira Aldridge as Othello in James Northcote’s Manchester portrait” Earnestine Jenkins explores race, fame, and the “trope” of Othello as they are embedded in the Victorian portrait. Ira Aldridge is a crossroads figure, whose career as the first important Shakespearean actor of color transcends the disciplines of theater, history, literature, and art. The visual impact of a black American on the nineteenth-century Shakespearean stage was significant. His appearances as Othello influenced racial perceptions of Shakespeare’s “Dark Prince.” Aldridge was one of the first black actors to play Othello, who had traditionally been performed by whites in blackface. Although he was able to break the color barrier in that respect, he was still not allowed to perform on the London stage, so that most of his performances took place in British provincial theaters. However, it was in part due to this marginalization that he perfected his craft and made his Othello performances known throughout Europe. Furthermore, by performing in the anti-slavery centers of Manchester and Hull (the latter the birthplace of abolitionist William Wilberforce), he was able to influence public views about black people and slavery by playing white roles and by speaking to his audiences about slavery. In terms of visual representation, Jenkins suggests that Northcote’s sensitive, subdued depiction of Aldridge affected conceptions of Othello, attributing to him a greater depth and complexity than previously allowed the raging, jealous Moor. Jenkins engages art and visual studies in her analysis of Northcote’s portrait and contends that it represents both Aldridge and Othello, two racially charged, yet different subjects. The author employs a comparative approach, examining the influence of patronage, shifting racial environments, and the use of diverse artistic styles to unpack the portrait. Jenkins examines how Aldridge’s success and fame allowed for activism on behalf of black people and how in turn Northcote’s portrait, by merging the black actor and the black character, challenged popular notions of blackness.

The black female body in the imagined Orient is the subject of Adrienne L. Childs’ analysis “‘Exceeding blackness’: African women in the art of Jean-Léon Gérôme.” Childs considers the implications of the black female body that not only reifies historical tropes of blackness and exoticism in Orientalist representation, but operates in dialogical relationship to the white sexualized “Oriental” woman whom she inevitably accompanies. At the hands of Gérôme, arguably the most important academic Orientalist artist of the nineteenth century, the black woman is both a highly visible exotic body, saturated with blackness and foreign-ness, and incomprehensible except in her relation to the white sexualized female body. Her presence in countless tableaux by Gérôme and is a telltale sign of the Orient, an index of the exotic feminine sphere,
a sphere that is defined in part by blackness. Childs explores the contemporary rhetoric that focused on the various binaries between the dark servant and the white mistress, a construct that seemed to have broad appeal to audiences and critics. This study considers the multivalent implications of a figure who is female, slave, African, and exotic.

The colonialist underpinnings of encounters with race toward the end of the century, with their contradictions and inconsistencies, are addressed in James Smalls’ study of black minstrelsy in France and what he terms “the visual shenanigans of race.” Smalls considers the visual and conceptual/theoretical machinations for the simultaneous display and obfuscation of blackness as one of many means to define a French modern identity. The focus is on selected visualized racial “shenanigans”—specifically, the ideas generated from the transplantation of American blackface minstrelsy into France and its reception in the late nineteenth century. Through such imagery, closely associated with mass entertainment and French popular culture, the ambiguous performativity and mimetic instrumentality of blackness was exploited as alien and yet familiar identities against which the French chose to define themselves culturally. Smalls shows how the vogue for minstrelsy in fin-de-siècle Paris connects with its visual representation to form a kind of “commodity racism,” in which blackness is played (literally) for white, urban consumption. As Smalls states, his analysis interrogates the kinds of symbolic work that images of racial performance and performativity can do in the modern French context.

The tensions and ambivalences rooted in the black and white binary inflecting the representation of black bodies in painting and sculpture pose a similar problematic in photography. Wendy Grossman’s chapter “Race and beauty in black and white: Robert Demachy and the aestheticization of blackness in Pictorialist photography” enters the discussion at the turn of the twentieth century as the Pictorialist movement aspired to elevate photography to high art status by engaging the themes and aesthetic modes of painting. Grossman investigates issues of the uses of black and white, fundamental to photography as a form of image making, as they get embedded in racial and aesthetic discourses in the photograph Contrasts by Robert Demachy.

The photograph features a young woman of color and a classical bust in a literal and figural tête-à-tête. Although Contrasts was produced in 1901 and disseminated through the first decade of the twentieth century, Grossman demonstrates that it is indebted to nineteenth-century tropes of the blackness that revel in the oppositionality of civilization and primitiveness, European-ness and African-ness, white and black. Yet the mixed-race, gender-ambiguous figure belies these binaries as she is by no means cast as the dark foil to the classical bust, but presents a complex conceptualization of beauty and artistry.

Edvard Munch’s ambivalent approach to primitivism, modernism, and nineteenth-century notions of exoticism are explored by Alison Chang in “Staging ethnicity: Edvard Munch’s images of Sultan Abdul Karim.” In 1916, Munch, best known for his angst-ridden images of the 1890s, hired
an African circus performer named “Sultan” Abdul Karim to model for him. Munch executed approximately seven canvases featuring Karim. The largest composition is Cleopatra and the Slave, a painting which shows a clothed Western woman lounging on a bed while a nude African man stands beside her, situating Karim as the primitive attendant in an Orientalist-inspired work. Chang juxtaposes this portrayal of Karim with other portraits of the model dressed in modern Western clothing. In these canvases, Karim is stripped of any associations of primitivism related or imaged to be related to his ethnicity: instead, Munch portrays his model as a contemporary Western man. Munch saw Karim as more than representing the exotic “other,” and created various combinations of the same image, complicating contemporary stereotypes about Africans. Given that Munch and his Nordic contemporaries would very likely only have encountered black people in circuses or zoos that included displays of humans, the painter’s depictions of Karim are remarkably restrained, yet his very presence in Munch’s milieu is predicated on his role as a performer. We know him only through his stage name as “Sultan” Abdul Karim, grounding him in a kind of performance of exoticism.

As Karim lends his body to the experiments of modernism, with its daring stylistic departures from tradition and its assertions of subjectivity and individuality coupled with the performativity of blackness, we find ourselves still contending with ambivalence and tension at the prospect of representing race. Despite their variety, the contributions to this volume all situate the black body as a site of conflict, where Europeans could negotiate, rationalize, interrogate, and disguise clashing European notions of beauty and ugliness, slavery and liberty, the familiar and the remote, tradition and innovation—and, of course, black and white.

Notes


3 Ibid.

4 The differences can be noted in comparing the generic treatment of the servants in William Hogarth’s Marriage à la Mode series, c. 1743, to the exacting manner in which Gérôme, Cordier, and others later fashioned blacks in individualized modes, while retaining their status as types without singular identities.


10 Ibid., 45.


13 This massive project to record the monuments, flora, fauna, and people of Egypt first appeared in 1808 in 23 volumes, 13 of them illustrated.


17 Kaplan was one of the few new contributors to Honour’s nineteenth-century volume.