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Spectacular Blindness: Enslaved Children and African Artifacts in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Abstract

In this essay we explore the presence and display of African children and artifacts in eighteenth-century Paris via their visual, material, and textual traces. While considering how such traces can help conjure or visualize human lives and ephemeral events, we also probe a paradox we call 'spectacular blindness'. Although individuals and artifacts of African descent were conspicuously visible at the French court, they were rarely fully seen – and, in the case of enslaved children, their subjectivity and the trauma they experienced were seldom acknowledged. We argue that the pervasive visibility of these individuals paradoxically made their humanity invisible to enslavers or turned that humanity into a tool for elite white self-expression and domination. Constantly put on display, they became spectacular blind spots, and, until recently, they have also been absent from most art historical narratives. Even today, their existence and portrayal can be met with disavowal and silence.

1. *Paper Ghosts*

Scene 1: In the background of a small gouache portrait of the Comte d'Artois (1757–1836), brother-in-law of Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) and future King Charles X of France, stands a young dark-skinned man holding a horse by its reins (Figs. 1 and 2). He wears a white turban with a green feather and a striped green jacket (the color of Artois's livery) over an orange vest and breeches that match the Comte's own. These colors link him to the drawing's principal sub-

ject and integrate him into the scene, whereas his dark complexion and 'exotic' headgear contrast with the pale skin of Artois and his horse and the white classical façade of Bagatelle, the Comte's pleasure pavilion built in 1777 in the Bois de Boulogne. Above the young man's lace cravat, a few brown strokes of pigment and a single gleaming highlight suggest a metal collar, echoing the reflective surface of his enslaver's gun.

Figure 1. Jean-Baptiste-Philibert Moitte, *The Comte d'Artois as a Hunter*, c. 1777. Gouache on paper, 22.9 x 30 cm. Amiens, Musée de Picardie. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais / Agence Bulloz.

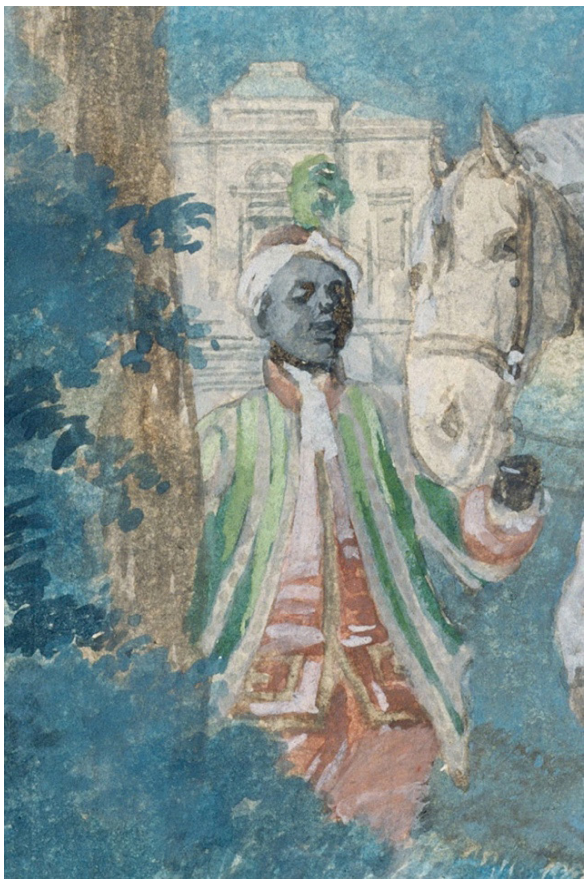

Figure 2. Detail of figure 1.

Scene 2: A 1777 handwritten expense report signed by the head of the Menus Plaisirs, the royal office for court festivities and entertainments, includes funds for a costume worn by an enslaved African page who is part of the Comte d'Artois's stables (*Écuries*). The costume included three buckskin breeches, a pair of strong suede trousers, and "*un bonnet de ~~nègre~~*" (Fig. 3) comprising a turban, a plume, and a braid. (A bonnet of the same name is illustrated among the items fabricated by a Parisian *Boursier* [purse-maker] in the *Encyclopédie*.)[1]

1 Archives Nationales de France (hereafter AN), T//231 (Maison du Comte d'Artois), 1 June 1777. Throughout this essay, we have chosen to retain the offensive word '*~~nègre~~*' when it appears in archival documents, but also to cross it out in order to acknowledge its racism and violence. During the eighteenth century, the word referred both to skin color and enslaved status, and it was used generally – though not always – to denote individuals of

Are the clothes described in the expense report the same ones worn by the young Black man in Artois's portrait? Is he the same individual to whom the report refers? Unlike the other white personnel of the Comte's stables, whose full names, occupations, and signatures are noted in surviving documents, he is only identified by the demeaning term '~~*négre*~~'.

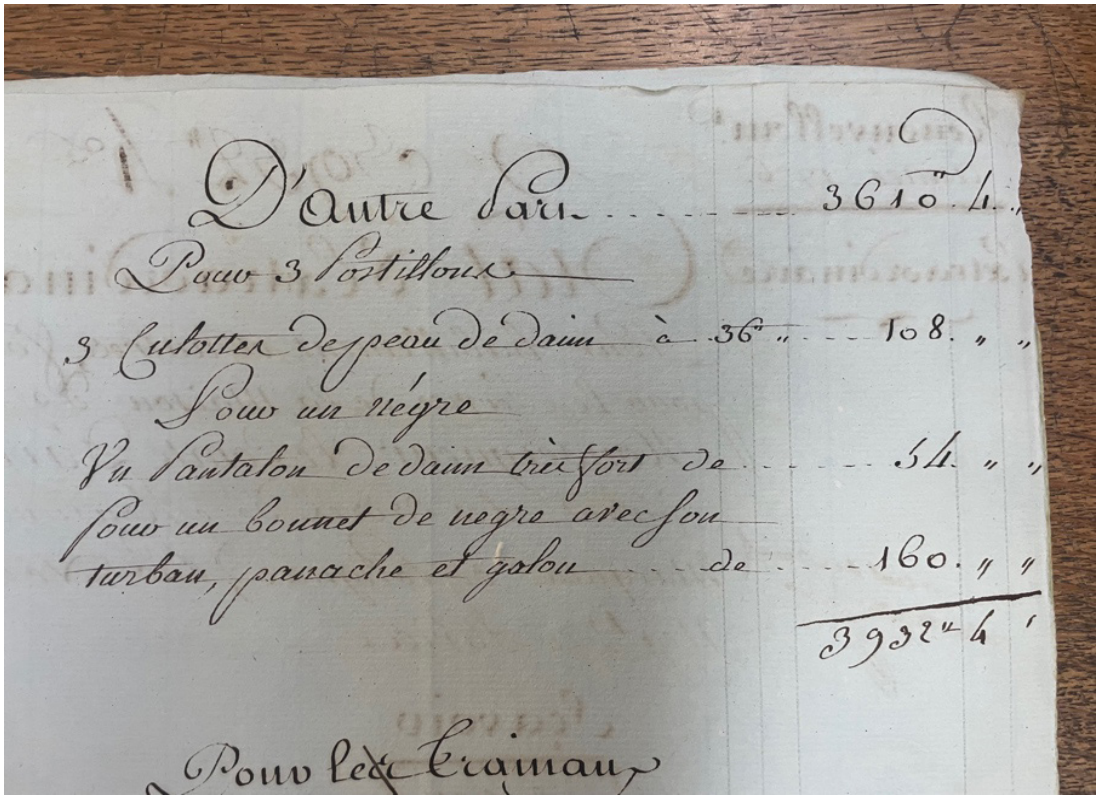

Figure 3. Archives Nationales de France, T//231 (Écuries de comte d'Artois), expense report written in brown ink on paper and signed by Papillon de la Ferté, head of the Menus Plaisirs, dated 1 June 1777. Photo by Meredith Martin.

Scene 3: Listed among the stable expenses are funds for a sled named '*Le ~~Nègre~~*'. Crafted in 1776 by the sculptor Daniel Aubert, who also designed furnishings

African descent. Although it is very likely that all of the enslaved individuals we discuss were African, Afro-Caribbean, or Afro-descended – and we refer to them here accordingly – it is possible they had other geographical or ethnic origins. On the ambiguity of the term ~~*nègre*~~, see Peabody 1996, chap. 4.

for Bagatelle, it was one of many royal sleds that featured the heads and bodies of figures – typically animals or mythological creatures like leopards, sirens, griffons, or stags – that family members would 'ride'.[2] According to archival descriptions, the sled's carved wooden head was disturbingly realistic: modeled on a real-life Afro-descended man (the same man in the Artois portrait?), its 'mobile' glass eyes had been fabricated by Auzon, a royal enameler and *oculiste*, and it wore an actual '*bonnet de ~~nègre~~*' and earrings crafted by a court *boursier*. Sledding, according to the children's author and educator Madame de Genlis (1746-1830), had been popularized at court by Marie Antoinette, who regularly took joyrides between Versailles and the Bois de Boulogne with Artois. '*Le ~~Nègre~~*' seems to have been a favored vehicle since, in January 1777, it underwent repairs for a broken foot caused by frequent use.

Scene 4: Around 1783, the Swiss artist Louis-Auguste Brun (known as Brun de Versoix), who was attached to the family of the Comtesse d'Artois, made several studies of members of the Comte's *Écuries*, including at least two depictions of dark-skinned pages wearing earrings and turbans (Fig. 4). In one of these drawings, a young Black man strides forward, points his finger outward, and asserts his corporeal presence, casting a dramatic shadow that anchors him to the ground. Unlike the more peripheral, evanescent individuals figured in the previous scenes, he commands center stage in an image that appears to have resulted from a sustained encounter between artist and subject. This portrait (if we can call it that?) contrasts with the otherwise rather stock depictions of turbaned Black attendants that appear in many paintings of the French court from this time, including Brun de Versoix's own equestrian portraits of Marie-Antoinette and a painting of the Versailles gardens by Hubert Robert.[3] The

2 Archival documents pertaining to *Le ~~Nègre~~* can be found in AN, T//231. See also Lacaze (2019, 132) and, for French court sleds more generally, Saule 2012. No images or objects related to *Le ~~Nègre~~* survive, but a eighteenth-century sled representing an African man was shown (together with the Brun de Versoix drawing reproduced as Fig. 3 of this essay) in *Exotic?,* an exhibition curated by Claire Brizon, Noémie Étienne, and Chonja Lee in 2020–2021. See https://www.archeotech.ch/fr/visite-virtuelle/exposition-exotic-regarder-l-ailleurs-en-suisse-au-siecle-des-lumieres (all web links were last accessed on 5 December 2024).

3 Brun de Versoix, *Portrait de Marie-Antoinette à cheval* (1783) and *Marie-Antoinette et Louis XVI à la chasse à courre* (1783), Musée national des château de Versailles et de Trianon, Inv. MV5718 and MV9082, reproduced in Hart (2016, 26, 27); and Hubert Robert, *Vue de*

presence of enslaved individuals in these images and at royal palaces more generally has gone mostly unnoticed by scholars – the work of Anne Lafont (2019a) and Miranda Spieler (2017) being two important exceptions – but Brun de Versoix's drawing suggests that they were very real, regular, and conspicuous fixtures at court.[4] Even so, we don't know anything about this particular young man, and an extensive search in the Artois household archives yields nothing. Could he be the same person evoked in the scenes above?

Figure 4. Louis-Auguste Brun, *Study of a Page*, 1783–1789. Brush, Indian ink, white gouache and black chalk on blue paper, 32.3x26.7 cm. MAH Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva. Dépôt de la Société des Arts de Genève, 1981.

bosquet des "Bains d'Apollon" (1774–1775), Musée national des château de Versailles et de Trianon, Inv. MV775.

4 See also Spieler 2025. Additional scholars who have written about Madame du Barry's enslaved page Zamor (discussed later in this article) are Cécile Bishop (2019) and Lise Schreier (2016).

As these four scenes anticipate, in this essay we consider the presence of African children and artifacts in late eighteenth-century Paris by examining their ghostly, ephemeral traces in images and archives. In their insistent materiality or implication of a real-life encounter, such documents have the power to animate their subjects and speak across historical shadows and silences. Yet, at the same time, they frustratingly distance us from the past and from the lives of these individuals in all that they leave out, gloss, or occlude.[5] Most of these documents, for example, belie the suffering that young African and Afro-descended individuals experienced by being trafficked to Paris, attached to an elite household, dressed in costume, and forced to perform in court rituals and spectacles that, as Saidiya Hartman has shown, helped mask or "disavow the pain of captivity" (Hartman 1997, 23). Others, as Spieler (2025) argues, suggest how domestic bondage in Parisian households generated feelings of intimacy and 'bonding' on the part of white enslavers that nonetheless did not lead to a broader recognition of Black humanity or a need for abolition. In what follows, we build on the important work of these scholars (as well as Lafont), while also highlighting the constitutive role of artworks in forging this disturbing dialectic of disavowal and recognition.

In addition to discussing the representation and realities of African children in Paris, we consider the contemporaneous display of African artifacts that also invited false feelings of closeness, here in a different sense of quasi-scientific 'knowledge' and mastery. By examining the lives of objects and human beings in the same essay, by no means do we mean to conflate the two. This is precisely what eighteenth-century merchants, collectors, and enslavers did, and we fully distance ourselves from that approach. Rather, we wish to explore a historical paradox they both experienced, one that we call 'spectacular blindness'. As we shall see, African children and collections were regularly on display at the eighteenth-century French court. Yet they were rarely fully seen, and the entangled histories, tragedies, and desires they embodied were very seldom acknowledged. We propose that it was their pervasive 'visibility' in all arenas of court life, from the most mundane to the most extraordinary, that helped make their humanity invisible to enslavers or transformed that humanity into a vehicle for elite

5 On the biases and omissions of the archive see especially Trouillot (1995) and Fuentes (2016).

white self-expression and oppression. Here we look at a range of images and objects that document both human lives and ephemeral encounters. They have different functions and fortunes, but we approach them all, across media, as glimpses of a bigger, complex performance. Constantly made into spectacle, the lives evoked here were spectacular blind spots – and, until recently, they have also been absent from most art historical narratives. Even today, their existence and depiction can still be met, voluntarily or not, with disavowal and silence.

2. *Scipio in the salon: Enslaved children on display*

What do the four scenes or snapshots described above add up to? What do they tell us about the presence and portrayal of African and Afro-descended individuals at the French court? First, they indicate that young, enslaved Africans were ubiquitous at Paris and Versailles, in the service not only of the Comte d'Artois but also Marie Antoinette, who was herself 'gifted' a six-year-old Senegalese child named Jean Amilcar in 1787.[6] Marie-Antoinette's close friend, the Princesse de Lamballe, had an enslaved Black attendant named 'Aza' who had been brought to Paris from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti); he likely appears in the background of a c. 1775 family portrait of the princess with the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres (later the Duc and Duchesse d'Orléans).[7] In 1774, the court newsletter *Mémoires secrets* reported that the Duchesse de Chartres had shown up at the Paris Opéra wearing a chic new hairstyle known as a *pouf* ornamented with the image of an enslaved Black boy (mostly likely 'Auguste' or 'Scipio', discussed below), "qu'elle aime beaucoup."[8] While emphasizing the intimate bond between enslaver and enslaved, the line also chillingly evokes the extent to which such children were often treated as faddish commodities, which could be discarded or exchanged like a once-loved outfit.

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6 See the research project of Morgan McArthur discussed in https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/french/news/search-marie-antoinettes-adopted-black-son.

7 Jean-Baptiste-André Gautier-Dagoty, *Presumed portrait of the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres, surrounded by the Penthièvre and Conti families*, c. 1775–1776, Musée Nissim de Camondo, Inv. CAM 567.

8 Ravenel (1830, 336) cited in Cannady 2022.

According to Madame de Genlis, who served as governess to the couple's two daughters, the Orléans family 'loved' all of the many African and Afro-descended children whom they kept as servants and entertainers at the Palais-Royal, their Parisian residence (Genlis 1828, 207). The existence of these children is recorded in portraits by Louis de Carmontelle, master of ceremonies for the Orléans clan, as well as in memoirs, police reports, and other sources, none of which were scripted by the children themselves (Fig. 5).[9] Unlike Artois's elusive Black page, in many cases we know their names – or, at least, we know the names their enslavers gave them – and we know where they came from: mainly Saint-Domingue, which was home to more than 500,000 enslaved persons of African descent on the eve of the French and Haitian Revolutions; and Senegal, notably during the colonial administration of the Chevalier de Boufflers, who bought and 'gifted' Amilcar and other children to French courtiers.[10]

Along with posing for artworks, African children were obliged to accompany and entertain their enslavers by performing tricks, playing music (as the young man named 'Narcisse' does in the Carmontelle portrait), and engaging in impish behavior that either contrasted with the supposed civility of their enslavers or reflected the fact that these aristocrats, too, could misbehave if they chose.[11] Enslaved children were also integrated into pedagogical spectacles that blurred the boundaries between education and entertainment, person and thing. Several such displays, including the curiosity cabinet of the Comte d'Artois, incorporated African artifacts that, like these children, had been seized and designated as 'moveable property' (literally *meubles*, the

9 On Carmontelle's portraits and their connections to colonialism and enslavement see Lafont (2019a) and Doe (2024). In the Réunion des musées nationaux online database, the Carmontelle portrait of Narcisse illustrated here is labeled with the offensive term '~~*nègre*~~': https://art.rmngp.fr/en/library/artworks/carmontelle_narcisse-negre-du-duc-d-orleans_mine-de-plomb_gouache_aquarelle_sanguine_papier. We have modified the title in our own image captions (as we've also done with Fig. 11, see below).

10 See Spieler's excellent chapter on the Senegalese children trafficked by Boufflers in *Slaves in Paris* (2025, chap. 5).

11 Spieler (2025, 136) writes of Scipio: "As the clownish proxy of his masters, he paraded his (and their) indifference to social constraints and forms of propriety that applied to everyone else".

word used to denote furniture) and brought to France on slave ships.[12] Once there, African objects and individuals became tools for learning not only about the world but also how to dominate it.

Among the rules courtiers flouted were legal restrictions regarding the presence of enslaved individuals on metropolitan soil. As a recent exhibition on the slave trade in Nantes has shown, these restrictions were habitually dodged by eighteenth-century plantation owners, merchants, and traders arriving in France, and in 1762 the Duc de Penthièvre, in an effort to tighten regulations, issued a decree stipulating that all enslaved arrivals must be documented and registered.[13] In 1777, the Crown went further and established a *Police des Noirs* that forbade the entry of both enslaved and free Afro-descended people into France – not out of a desire to end enslavement, but rather for fear that racial mixing might cause disorder in the metropole and the colonies (Boulle 2006; Peabody 1996). Yet aristocrats clearly did not adhere to these strictures, as the presence of Jean Amilcar, and the apparent absence of any documentation related to Artois's young page, attest. As for the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres, when they were interviewed by the *Police des Noirs* in 1777 about their own Black attendants – whom they had named Scipio, Aladin, Auguste, and Narcisse, perversely echoing some of the classical and mythological subjects of the artworks they collected – the couple claimed they "les regardaient comme libres".[14] The prominent metal collar around Narcisse in Carmontelle's portrait, however, suggests otherwise (Fig. 5).

12 The enslaved were defined as *meubles* in the Code noir, the decree regulating slavery in the French colonies that was first issued in 1685. See, among others, Ghachem (2012).

13 Louis Jean Marie de Bourbon, Duc de Penthièvre (1725–1793), then head of the Admiralty, was the father of the Duchesse de Chartres and father-in-law of the Princesse de Lamballe.

14 AN, COL, F1b4. We thank Erick Noël for this reference.

Figure 5. Louis de Carmontelle *Narcisse, Enslaved Attendant of the Duc d'Orléans*, c. 1770. Red and black chalk and watercolor on paper, 32x18 cm. Musée Condé, Château de Chantilly. Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (domaine de Chantilly) / René-Gabriel Ojéda.

Regardless of their official status, freedom was a precarious, essentially meaningless term for enslaved children who had been forcibly separated from their birthplaces as toddlers or infants. Genlis claimed that the Duc de Chartres had paid 1000 *écus* to a colonist from Saint-Domingue to buy Scipio (named after the ancient Roman general Scipio Africanus) when he was only two years and ten months old.[15] His wife, for her part, had paid more than 4000 *écus* in the form of bejeweled rings and snuffboxes to obtain a young boy named Auguste

15 Genlis 1828, 207–8, quoted in Ibeas-Altamira 2020.

from a colonial commissioner named Lascaris de Jauna, whose career she later promoted.[16] Indeed the practice was so pervasive that, according to the Abbé Grégoire, the verb 'kidnap' was coined around this time to describe the common practice of "going to Africa [or the Caribbean colonies] and stealing men, and mainly children" to bring back to Europe.[17]

In 1786, Thomas Jefferson, who was then living with his own enslaved domestics in Paris, told an American friend that he did not need to register an enslaved boy traveling with him since the child was so young that he would not "think of claiming freedom" for himself.[18] For these children, whose very lives embodied the ephemeral as an ever-present threat, it was imperative both to remain captive and to attract a captive audience. This idea is conveyed in an anecdote regarding Scipio, who had replaced Narcisse as the darling of the Orléans salon, leading the older boy to be "relegated to the antechamber". One day, while running errands with the Duchesse de Chartres, Scipio refused to leave the gilded confines of her carriage. According to Genlis, when asked why, he fearfully claimed, "I would rather stay here because if for once I would go outside the carriage, I would never get inside again" (Bocquillon 2019, 222).

The prevalence of enslaved children in palaces, gardens, and the streets of Paris made them spectacularly visible in ways that have been forgotten today, even if these children regularly appear in period images of opulent new Parisian residences like the Hôtel de Montholon and the Hôtel de Thélusson, both partially funded by profits from the slave trade.[19] Moreover, those who resisted this ocular regime – among them 'Aladin', an enslaved attendant of the duc de Chartes, who was apparently arrested for neglecting to show up at a Fête Dieu procession dressed in his servant's costume.[20] This essay, however, is not

16 Noël 2011. Regarding the Duchesse's promotion of Lascaris de Jauna, see her personal correspondence in AN, AP/300(I)/57(A), letters dated 13 May 1773, 23 and 26 June 1773, 10 September 1773, and 13 August 1779.

17 Grégoire 1814, 5-6, quoted and translated in Bocquillon 2019, 216.

18 Letter from Jefferson dated August 25, 1786, quoted in Spieler 2025, 135.

19 See, for example, Jean-Baptiste Lallemand's watercolor view of the Hôtel de Thélusson (1777–1781), as well as Jean-Jacques Lequeu's 1789 painting of the Hôtel de Montholon (exhibited at the Paris Salon du dessin in 2024), both of which depict dark-skinned attendants wearing turbans and exotic costumes in the foreground.

20 Spieler (2017, 240) cites a June 1769 police report claiming that Aladin had been imprisoned and told police that "he did not know of any fault except that of missing the

primarily aimed at recovering the stories of these invisible lives, which has been and continues to be the subject of a great deal of important work by historians as well as artists and curators.[21] Rather, it seeks to show how their visibility fueled the spectacular opacity we refer to above. By this, we don't mean a blindness or ignorance of the cruel realities of slavery itself: many of these courtiers, including the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres, owned plantations and were directly involved in the slave trade, and they did not call for abolition or for more humane treatment of the men, women and children forced to labor for their benefit and amusement.[22] This was perhaps because – not in spite of – the fact that they had an emotional attachment to the children whose personhood they claimed to recognize, a recognition that blinded them both to their own brutality and to the terror their servants experienced on a daily basis.

In her powerful book *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman writes about how slavery led to the "spectacular nature of black suffering" and the "dissimulation of suffering through spectacle" (Hartman 1997, 22–23), as well as to a racist understanding of Africans as somehow 'naturally' inclined to impish amusements, an idea pervasive in descriptions of enslaved African children at the French court and one that further glossed their subjugation. Although the scenes of enforced festivity that Hartman describes occurred largely on slave ships and plantations and not in Parisian salons, her argument about the convergence of terror and entertainment still applies, given that the spheres of metropolitan and colonial enslavement, as well as the pleasure, luxury, and cruelty that subtended them, were deeply entwined. Terror and spectacle also

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large Fête Dieu procession and of attending the small Fête Dieu procession without being attired in his dress uniform".

21 Many recent museum exhibitions, for example, have taken this perspective of historical recovery, among them *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2019); *Juan de Pareja: Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Vélazquez* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2023); and *Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North* (American Folk Art Museum, New York City, 2024).

22 In 1779, the Duc de Chartres purchased a sugar plantation near Port-au-Prince from his friend and fellow courtier the Comte de Vaudreuil, who owned several other plantations in Saint-Domingue. See AN, AP/300(I)/144/A. The study of plantations in Saint-Domingue owned by members of the French nobility and the court, and their connection to the Paris art world, is part of a larger, multi-media research project led by Meredith Martin and Hannah Williams entitled "Colonial Networks: Remapping the 'Paris' Art World in Haiti/Saint-Domingue" (2024), https://www.colonialnetworks.org/.

converged in the creation of artworks that aimed to depict enslaved Africans (sometimes with their enslavers, see Figs. 1 and 11) and further transform them into objects of aesthetic delectation. As we describe below, perhaps we should view these artworks not as fixed portraits in the conventional sense but rather as ephemeral, mercurial traces of human lives that oscillate between asserting subjectivity and subjugation, visibility and blindness.

3. *African objects as traces of colonial spectacle*

What kind of imbalanced interactions can we imagine between these kidnapped children, their kidnappers, and the spectacles built around them? How might they have been connected to looted African artifacts that were also transported to Paris with different degrees of attachment, detachment, and dispossession? Like the enslaved children who were sometimes shipped or shown with them, the African objects found in private collectors' cabinets in Europe from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries were brought to the continent against a broader backdrop of commercial, religious, and colonial expansion. Their acquisition is inseparable from increased trade with certain countries, notably the Kingdom of Kongo. They were amassed by merchants, soldiers and missionaries, who sometimes sought to convert African populations or exploit the nature and people present on the continent. These objects were variously stolen, exchanged, given away, or bought, and they were inserted into European aesthetic frames (both literal and figurative) that distanced viewers from these entangled histories while at the same time offering a fantasy of a dispassionate, 'close' gaze.

Throughout the early modern period, African artists were producing objects for European use, as was also the case in Asia. They can be found in the collections of wealthy French aristocrats and in the cabinets of many people, including scientists, traders, and members of the Church. Christophe-Paul de Robien (1698–1756), for example, a President at the Parlement de Bretagne in Rennes, assembled a famous curiosity cabinet that was seized from his son during the French Revolution.[23] The cabinet was largely composed of paint-

23 Coulon (2001). See also Archives Départementales d'Ille-et-Vilaine, "État des mandats délivrés aux commissaires biographes et à ceux du muséum personnel" L967, 19 Thermidor An II [06/08/1794]. See also Étienne 2025.

ings, books, fossils, archeological pieces, antiquities, and natural history samples. It also contained non-European art, including objects from Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Among the artifacts reported are: "two fetishes, three pieces of pottery, an ivory trunk, a horn spoon, three quivers, a plant-fiber hat, a terracotta from Libya and an ivory bell" (Ibid.). According to multiple authors, the ivory divination bell, which is still preserved in Rennes, bears little signs of use.[24] Nor does a Nigerian Olifant in the same collection. We have not had the occasion to examine these objects and cannot determine if they have been handled or not. In any event, these objects may have been manufactured for European markets, as was the case with other goods made abroad that are often categorized as export art.[25]

We would like to suggest that these objects are a window into the broader cultural and colonial background of eighteenth-century France. Such artifacts were themselves traces of ephemeral performances happening in Africa and elsewhere at the same time, and were sometimes taken by force and re-territorialized in Paris and nearby. Thus, African objects linked to the worlds of spectacle and performance were also present in the collections of the same French aristocrats (among them the Comte d'Artois) who enslaved African children and put them on view. Sandals, eggshells, amulets, arms, for instance, were brought back from Senegal.[26] A circumcision mask from Senegambia (Casamance) is now in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris (Fig. 6). At one point it became part of Artois's cabinet, although how he acquired it is not certain.[27] He may have purchased it from Denis-Jacques Fayolle, an employee of

24 Bassani (2000, 85). See also Bridges (2021, 186) https://issuu.com/ajpmeyer/docs/making.sens.of.the.world.

25 Chinese porcelain is a notable example, but other objects such as wampum belts were also produced for the market the Americas. See Etienne (2019, 15–31).

26 Multiple objects from African in general, and Senegal in particular, were present in France during the eighteenth century, as Ezio Bassani and Anna Absa Dembélé (2001, 181–91) have attested. Some can be traced via the Musée du Quai Branly database. An important contribution is also Bégué (2008). See the talk given by Paz Núñez-Regueiro and Frédérique Servain-Riviale during the conference "Collections premières," organized by Claire Bosc-Thiessé and held at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris in June 2023. See also Girard-Muscagorry (n.d.).

27 This information comes from the exhibition *La curiosité d'un Prince. Le destin du cabinet ethnographique du comte d'Artois,* curated by Núñez-Regueiro and Nikolaus Stolle and held at the Bibliothèque Centrale in Versailles from 18 September until 11 December 2021.

the French Navy who worked for the Bureau des colonies.[28] The provenance of this ritual object has long remained unclear, not least because it is described in an 1806 inventory as: "Hunting mask with horns; all from Louisiana".[29] During the eighteenth century, it was exhibited in Versailles in a private collection, and in 1786 it was transferred to the Hôtel de Sérent (8 rue des Réservoirs), where Artois's cabinet was housed (Núñez-Regueiro and Stolle 2021).

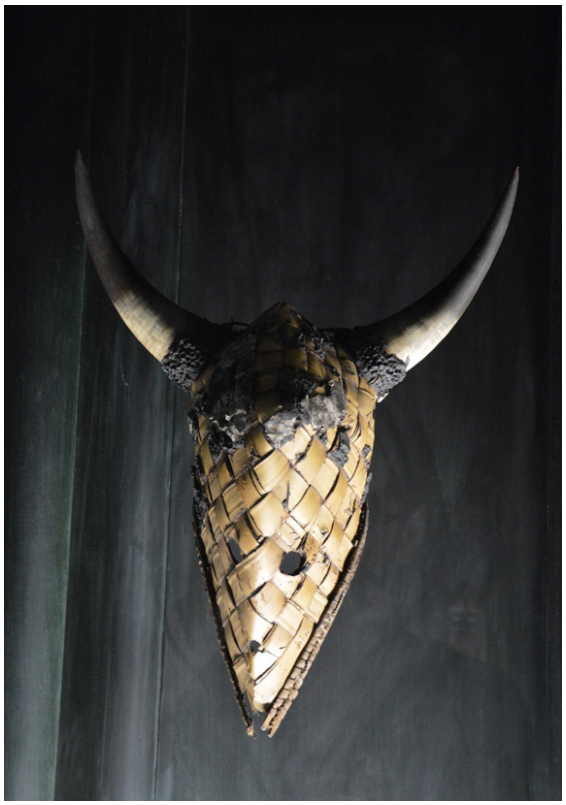

Figure 6. Mask (ejumba), Senegal (Casamance), before 1756. Paris, Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, collection du comte d'Artois. ©Wikimedia.

Whatever the exact biography of this object, this is a well-documented mask, and French collectors at the time knew its intended function, even if it was wrongly

28 Hamy (1890). See also the research by Núñez-Regueiro and her work in the Croyan Project: https://croyan.quaibranly.fr/fr/denis-jacques-fayolle-1, consulted on 5 December 2024.
29 Archives Départementales des Yvelines, 1 LT 675, "Inventaire du cabinet d'histoire naturelle", 1806; quoted in Bégué (2008, 76).

identified as coming from Louisiana in the early nineteenth century.[30] A mask similar to this one, in fact, had been engraved in a 1698 book recounting the travels of a French engineer, François Froger (Fig. 7). Thus, its status as a ritual object used in circumcision ceremonies in Africa was known and recorded from the late seventeenth century. The fact that it was an object described and published in European books might have encouraged other people to collect it in Senegal. At the end of the eighteenth century, this same mask might also have stimulated further studies of this kind of artifact in France.

Figure 7. François Froger, *Relation d'un voyage fait en 1695, 1696, & 1697 aux Côtes d'Afrique, Détroit de Magellan, Brésil, Cayenne, & Isles Antilles par une escadre de Vaisseaux du Roy, commandée par M. de Gennes, Faite par le Sieur Froger Ingénieur Volontaire sur le Vaisseau le Faucon Anglois*. Paris, Chez Michel Brumet, 1698, 44. Image source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

30 This misidentification has been underlined by Peter A. Mark (1987) and Ezio Bassani (2000).

Collections of African artifacts were also put in motion and may have been among the material used to perform ephemeral teaching lessons. Indeed, the Comte d'Artois's collection had a pedagogical purpose. Before the French Revolution, the owner of this *hôtel*, Armand-Louis, Marquis de Sérent (1736–1822), served as tutor to Artois's two sons: Louis-Antoine, Duc d'Angoulème (1775–1844) and Charles-Ferdinand, Duc de Berry (1778–1820). This ceremonial mask was therefore displayed and probably used in an educational context, although it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the Artois family had specific knowledge of or access to it. The cabinet seems to have been definitively installed only in 1789, and was only partially accessible to royal children. Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves: what kind of discourses could this mask have shaped and conveyed? What was said, and also left unsaid? How was it described, but perhaps also manipulated and touched by the children and their teacher? Indeed, if the mask was extracted from its original context, and thus separated from the clothes and body of the dancer who would have worn it during an African ceremony, it was later relocated and re-socialized in its new French location. There, it appeared not only as a fragment coming from Senegal, but also as a pedagogical tool allowing for the creation and performance of new stories. It seems uncontroversial to say that this knowledge would have been only partial, and definitely not neutral.

Pedagogical practices that developed at the end of the eighteenth century in France favored direct access to collections. The aim was no longer simply to study texts but also to handle objects directly, and to learn through practice and play. At Versailles, there was a pronounced scientific culture that was both a form of entertainment and an elite political pedagogy. The aim was to amuse young aristocrats but also to educate them and enable them to rule, often using the most innovative knowledge. As Pascale Mormiche, a specialist in French princely education, explains:

> Si les sciences et les curiosités à Versailles sont un amusement pour certains, elles s'affirment cependant comme la base d'une nouvelle culture pour les dirigeants, où la technique et les instruments permettent de gouverner. Sérent (et au travers de lui, peut-être le comte d'Artois) oriente cette collection disparate vers des nouveaux savoirs et matériaux des sciences: la connaissance des humains d'espaces géographiques colonisés par le royaume, la connaissance des graines, origine de l'agronomie française, etc. (Mormiche, 2022).

As we will see, the boundaries between technology, industry, knowledge, and entertainment in eighteenth-century Europe were very porous. The Artois

collection included many objects from the Americas, notably from New France, a former French colony that had been lost to the British in 1763, as well as from Senegal. The provenance of these collections is explained by the very possibility of capturing them in contexts where France had a strong colonial presence since the seventeenth century. These displaced fragments undoubtedly also served to inform prospective sovereigns about the populations they might dominate or conquer, in a future ultimately thwarted by the French and Haitian Revolutions.

Furthermore, collecting African objects – like buying African children – was linked to the slave trade. Artifacts were sometimes transported to Europe on the same boats involved in human trafficking. The Senegambian mask may have arrived in France via a ship that first carried enslaved people to the Americas, and then returned to France (Mark 1987). During the second half of the eighteenth century, dozens of so-called *bateaux négriers* (slave ships) sailed under the French flag, transporting enslaved people bought on the island of Gorée, in Saint-Louis, or Senegambia. On their return to France, the ships' holds were loaded with ivory, plant samples, rocks, and dried animal specimens. It is currently impossible to trace the ships on which Artois's African artifacts may have travelled, but it is possible that their provenance is directly and materially linked to the slave trade.[31] There is thus a convergence of interest between the choice of objects collected, their representation, their commercialization, and their study. This alignment highlights the links between colonization and collecting, enslavement, and the production of knowledge – albeit a knowledge that both came from and engendered forms of blindness. The French pedagogical and political discourses surrounding such spectacular objects both elucidate and obscure the history of people in Senegal, as well as the implications of French colonialism.

4. Wax Bodies, Body Casts, and Death Masks: What is shown and what remains unseen

The acts of collecting, exhibiting, and conserving African objects severed these fragments from their original contexts (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1992, 3).

31 For more examples of circulating objects, see Araujo (2023).

They isolated the mask from the costume, the dancer's body, the performance site. The artifact presented in a cabinet is isolated, disassembled, and recontextualized, whether on a shelf or on a wall, when it is integrated into a display device called a 'trophy'. In the eighteenth century, many objects were hung on walls according to their shape, to create a decorative assemblage, without analysis of their provenance or function. Others were physically transformed, to be reinscribed in a European scientific framework that gave them a name and a provenance. Objects were cut, engraved, inscribed, and placed in large wooden cabinets made to preserve them. Some of these cabinets, like those of the Comte d'Artois, used mannequins to recreate an invented or 'original' environment for these objects. The mask of Senegal was presented on such a mannequin (Bassani 2000, 77). Thus, fake bodies were also present in exhibition spaces and were used to stage and spectacularize collections as well as to 'explain' (in fact, fabricate) an object's supposed function. They were also used to showcase different types of people whose skin color and hairstyles they claimed to represent.

Some of the heads of the Artois mannequins are still preserved at Versailles (Fig. 8). These figures are made of wax, a material at the crossroads of early modern science and ephemeral entertainment. Ceroplasty, the art of modeling wax, was linked to both spheres (Messbarger 2010). The medical uses of these wax casts could also be quite spectacular. In Paris, around 1669, Antoine Benoist (1632–1717) presented on the rue des Saint Pères an installation of wax mannequins known as *Le Cercle*, representing the court. Philippe Mathé-Curtz (1737–1794), known as Curtius, a Bernese doctor, used the technique of wax modelling to create spectacular shows with lifelike figures (Ruimi 2017). One of Curtius's display salons was located adjacent to the Palais-Royal starting in 1776. A few years later, Philippe Joseph d'Orléans, father of the Duc de Chartres, sought to take advantage of the burgeoning interest in the Palais-Royal as an entertainment and shopping mecca. Curtius's venue included wax mannequins of celebrity figures like Marie-Antoinette displayed alongside a number of curiosities, including mummified bodies (Spies-Gans 2017).

Figure 8. Wax head, c. 1700. Versailles, Bibliothèque Centrale.
Photo by Clémence Fort.

Wax mannequins were found in many of the cabinets of the French aristocracy. A 1740 drawing from the cabinet of Parisian naturalist Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (1702–1744) depicts two figures carrying different objects (Fig. 9). One of the two men appears Asian, while the other is likely meant to be African. He may be wearing a *mpu* bonnet from the Kongo kingdom that, in its original context, testify to a wearer's high status. *Mpu* caps are among the best documented African artifacts in France prior to the nineteenth century through numerous descriptions and representations (Fromont 2017, 22). The man also appears to have a Benin bell attached by a string that falls to his waist.[32] These kinds of mannequins were regularly offered for sale; after Bonnier de la Mosson's death a series of them were listed among the items in the posthumous sale

32 Email communication with Yaëlle Biro, February 2023.

catalog of his collection.[33] Intended for ruling elites and scientists, these figures made African presences both visible and opaque: they showed a 'reality' created by an invented accumulation of human types and objects but masked the violence that was part of their history. Yet, between the lines, they bore witness to them, and today they serve as an archive for researchers.

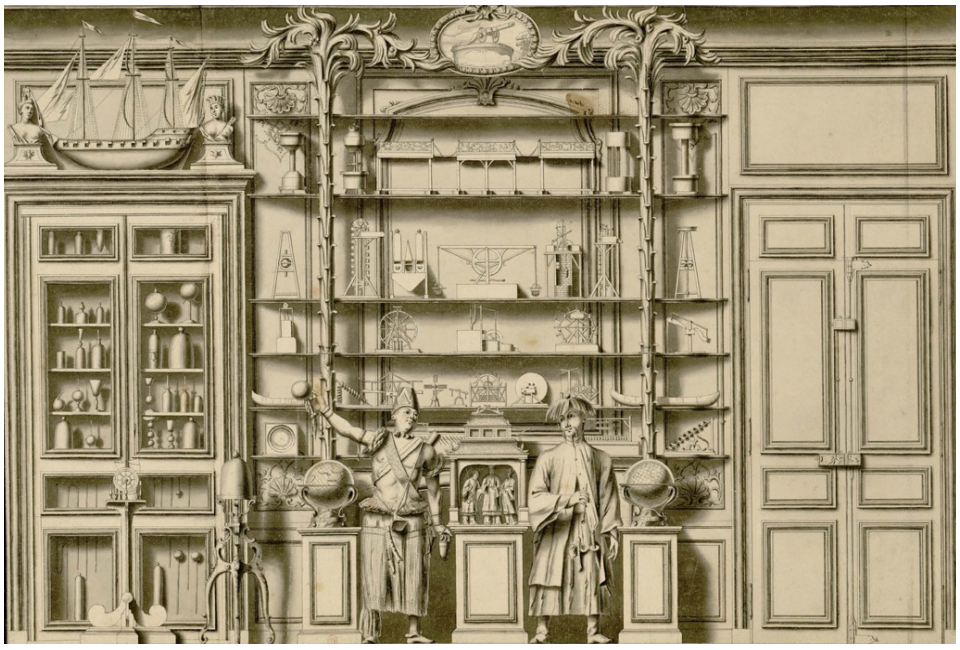

Figure 9. Jean-Baptiste Courtonne, Cabinet de Bonnier de la Mosson, from *Recueil de dessins,* 1739–1740. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art. OA 720 (p. 29). Image in the public domain.

As Lafont (2019b) has noted, the interconnection among science, art, colonial conquest, and trade blurs the boundary between subject and object. This boundary is even more clearly thrown into crisis when living or dead people of color are placed at the center of performances and scientific studies. Saartje Baartman, born enslaved in South Africa, was brought to Europe and made to dance; eventually she was sold to an animal exhibiter named Monsieur Réaux

33 An annotated copy at the Getty Research Institute records their price between 100 and 150 *livres*. See Gersaint (1744).

in Paris (Patin 2013). He put her on public display at the Palais-Royal (renamed after 1792 Palais-Égalité, and later Maison Égalité), near where Curtius also had his salon.[34] In 1815, she died at the nearby Cour des Fontaines. Upon her death, she was dissected against her wishes by the French anatomist Georges Cuvier, who removed and exhibited her actual body as well as a life cast. Baartman was at the center of a show both during her lifetime and after her death (Patin 2013). She was viewed by many spectators, and was exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme until 1976. What was seen in this context? Even after her death, when generations of children visited the museum and saw her bones, her vulva, and the painted cast of her body, the dispossession and commodification of her body were not the subjects of the display. These remains were caught up in a classificatory scientific discourse that asserted itself in the eighteenth century. They were shown, but the reality of her life was erased.

What was seen and discussed is very far from the realities and lives of the people put on view. The exhibition of her fragmented body obscured the late eighteenth-century link between spectacle and racism, entertainment and slavery, culture and death. Here again is the paradox of spectacular blindness: if a crowd of early modern European museumgoers witnessed this presentation, it is unlikely that they would have thought or spoken about the trauma of enslavement, the physical and cultural erasure of people and memories, the violence of ethnic cleansing, and the commodification of human beings. In the extreme visibility of the displayed Black body, a sense of interiority and humanity is lost. In this erasure, the viewer's humanity is also called into question.

Not only were persons and things conflated during these performances, but the act of exhibition sometimes also transformed humans into objects. In Vienna, Mmadi Make, renamed Angelo Soliman, was kidnapped as a child in Nigeria and sold into slavery in Sicily before obtaining his freedom and working for the Austrian aristocracy (Wigger and Hadley 2020; Yonan 2019). His life in Europe is truly exceptional and is by no means representative of the trajectory of most enslaved children. In 1759, the Venetian painter Bernardo Bellotto depicted him in front of Liechtenstein Palace in Vienna (Fig. 10). He is portrayed as a diminutive little boy – even though he was 38 at the time – holding out a tray and gazing beseechingly up at Prince Joseph Wenzel I von Liechtenstein, the palace's owner and Soliman's employer. Whereas Soliman's personhood is diminished,

34 About the Palais-Royal, see Plumauzille (2013).

the Prince by contrast looks commandingly outward while offering scraps to the performing dogs beneath him: land, humans, and animals are all shown to be tamed and brought under his command. Soliman's inclusion in this image further underscores the omnipresence of African children in European courts (and paintings), along with an offensive association of Africa with a form of unthreatening, 'childlike' inferiority and dependence. Like many other enslaved children (and adults), including Artois's page, Soliman is dressed in a fashion that aims to construct his Otherness, alluding also to the *blackamoor,* a dark-skinned figure with a Turkish turban often appearing in eighteenth-century decorative arts.[35] After he was temporarily expelled from the palace, Soliman nonetheless managed to rejoin the court and became (interestingly for our discussion) a tutor to the children of the Prince of Liechtenstein – a position he held when Bellotto's insulting image was made.

Figure 10. Bernardo Bellotto, *The Liechtenstein Garden Palace in Vienna from the Belvedere*, 1759–1760. Oil on canvas, 100 x 159 cm. Vaduz, Sammlungen des Fürsten von und zu Liechtenstein. ©Wikimedia.

35 See, for example, Childs (2010).

When Soliman died in 1796, a death mask was created by the artist Franz Thaller and given to the German anatomist Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of phrenology, which purported to determine mental traits based on skull morphology. Gall included the Soliman mask in his collection of heads and labeled it 'African'. His aim was to prove the supposed inferiority of people of African origin: "in general, the ~~negro~~ is inferior to the European in terms of intellectual capabilities", because "the ~~negro~~ had a smaller head and a less considerable brain mass" (Wigger and Hadley 2020, 95).[36] As for Soliman's remains, against the wishes of his family, they were seized and given to Abbé Simon Eberlé, director of the Natural History Cabinet in Vienna. He asked that the deceased's skin be removed, before exhibiting it on a wooden mannequin. The corpse was dressed in ostrich feathers and glass beads, much like the mannequins in Artois's cabinet, and placed in a display case depicting an exotic forest and including taxidermied animals.[37]

These involuntary performances had a post-mortem life. African bodies were put on display after death. Bones and organs were displayed in cabinets. Human bodies were transformed into commodities and things at multiple stages, both while they were alive and after their death. These people and their remains continued to be visible in courts, museums, and cabinets. Their bodies were spectacularized. They became caught up in multiple discourses, whether educational, scientific, colonial, or theatrical. Their exhibition, amplified by the artistic practices of drawing and molding, obliterated the suffering of these individuals and transformed them into physical types and scientific data. Their display was a form of entertainment, but also a form of knowledge dependent on omissions and silences.

The images and objects we mention here are all traces of ephemeral performances and spectacular blindness. Collections and casts have an indexical relation to human lives, but they also encouraged forms of dehumanization. In such artifacts, the 'Other' is never far away, but never there either. Human beings are commodified, either because their material culture is extracted from a context that halts the original performance (such as the circumcision mask from Casamance) in order to fabricate a new one (Sérent's tutoring at

36 See also Firla 2008, 320–330.

37 It is worth noting, however, that Monica Firla (2000, 33), an expert on Soliman, suggests (without certainty) that he might have donated his body to science.

Versailles), or because their bodies are recorded and museified. Even if we acknowledge the differences in all these productions, we choose to see them as traces of vanished actions. They help to obliterate the existence of a subject, or, paradoxically, to remember it. It can be both, as we would like to suggest with the moving example of Angelo Soliman. In the eighteenth century, his life and work were known and respected. Today, he is still exhibited near Vienna without any real recognition of his existence, in a degrading set-up close to the original one. It is not only the act of casting which matters, but also the context in which it is done and then preserved. Such multivalent readings are also ephemeral and can change over time.

5. The magic lantern at the Palais-Royal

The programs of princely education and display described above can be compared to those of Madame de Genlis, whose pedagogical lessons for the Orléans children likewise favored innovative, hands-on instruction and a phantasmatic blending of life and art (Julia 2019, 119–120; Freund and Stammers 2023). Around 1785, Genlis introduced the novel technology of the magic lantern into her classroom, as recounted in a manuscript written by one of her pupils, Adélaïde d'Orléans (1777–1847). Entitled *La Lanterne Magique au Palais-Royal*, it describes a sequence of moving images or *tableaux* that included historical and geographical vignettes – among them a voyage to Italy taken by Adélaïde's mother, the Duchesse de Chartres – but that mainly depicted elite leisure activities like card playing, carriage riding, and gardening. Together, the scenes recall both the still portraits and moving pictures (*tableaux roulants*) of Carmontelle, who had earlier in his career taught drawing and mathematics to the young Duc de Chartres. Carmontelle's proto-cinematic *tableaux* became popular during the 1780s, and surviving examples depict French elites moving through panoramic gardens and landscapes in ways that reflect his training as a royal topographical engineer. Like Carmontelle's portrait of Narcisse (Fig. 5), such images may have held out the promise of possession and domination – of both land and people – to royal children who were being taught through these spectacles that the world was theirs to be known and consumed.

In Adélaïde's manuscript, one troubling description from this magic lantern performance stands out:

Tableau no. 7: Madame la Duchesse de Chartres avec Scipion sur ses genoux: Voilà Madame la Duchesse de Chartres avec son ~~nègre~~. Voyés comme le jeune enfant badine joliment et délicatement sur les genoux de la princesse, admirés la gentillesse de ce petit ~~négrillon~~, comme il est doux, mignon, la finesse de sa taille (Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, "La Lanterne Magique au Palais-Royal" Fonds d'Orléans (1775–93), Ms 2048).

Although no image in Carmontelle's *oeuvre* precisely evokes this tableau, it recalls a type of portrait prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe representing elite white women (and men) with Black attendants.[38] A noteworthy example, attributed to the circle of Jean-Marc Nattier, is in the collection of the Musée de l'Aquitaine in Bordeaux, which gives its current title online as *Presumed Portrait of the Comtesse de Fontenelle with her '~~négrillon~~'*, a demeaning term for an enslaved African boy that was used in plantation inventories at the time (Fig. 11). Although the child's identity is unknown – according to Erick Noël, the Fontenelle family trafficked more than 15 enslaved individuals into France during the eighteenth century – the image, which proposes a racist analogy between the boy and a captive monkey in the background, does suggest the close convergence between colony and metropole, especially given the Fontenelle family's extensive ties to Saint-Domingue as administrators, slave traders, and plantation owners.[39] Its similarity to Adélaïde's description of the magic lantern *tableau* further suggests that we need to think of these paintings not so much as inert images but as animate traces of human lives, particularly the lives of young children forced to pose for them. Such lives may be recorded but they are also occluded through a process of aestheticization that made them vehicles for the staging of elite white subjectivity. That process was amplified through the Palais-Royal's magic lantern display, in which the body of the African boy (in this case Scipio) was further dematerialized, made into a ghostly specter or screen for the projection – and disavowal – of its white audience's fears, anxieties, and desires.[40]

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38 The closest portrait in Carmontelle's oeuvre is probably *Mlle Desgots, de Saint Domingue, avec son ~~nègre~~ Laurent* (1766), Musée Carnavalet, Inv. D4498, https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/mlle-desgots-de-saint-domingue-avec-son-negre-laurent-1766. See Doe (2024).

39 Erick Noël, personal correspondence, April 2024. Lafont (2019a) makes a similar point about the close convergence of colony and metropole.

40 For more on the 'projection' associated with the magic lantern and its imperial and colonial resonances, see Casid 2014, chap. 2.

Figure 11. Circle of Jean-Marc Nattier, *Presumed Portrait of the Comtesse de Fontenelle with an enslaved attendant,* c. 1730-1740. Oil on canvas, 75.5x60 cm. Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine. ©Wikimedia

What were the Orléans children supposed to learn by looking at this tableau of Scipio with their mother? Here he models 'proper' comportment, a far cry from his usual antics as described in period memoirs that have him disrupting lessons, walking around on all fours, breaking fans, and stealing ladies' shoes.[41] In another image from 1774, when he would have been approximately 4 years old, we see him somewhat integrated, albeit still marked as Other, into an intimate family portrait of the Duc de Chartres gazing down at his son, the Duc de Valois (later King Louis Philippe of France), ensconced in a gilded cradle. Scipio looks up at his enslaver while grabbing a rogue cat who is trying to jump into the

41 See, for example, Genlis (1807, 95–96) and Bonnard (2019, 184–185), both cited in Ibeas-Altamira 2020.

cradle, although the extent to which Scipio is attempting to prevent or facilitate the disruption is unclear (Fig. 12). In addition to the ambiguous relationship among the figures, the painting seems to offer a visual meditation on boundaries, thresholds, and limits, all of which, for Scipio, present a constant threat. One small deviation from the 'role' he is expected to play and he, too, will be relegated to the antechamber, pulled back from the cradle, tossed from the carriage.

One such 'misstep' pertaining to Scipio is relayed in a July 29, 1779 entry in the *Correspondance secrete*:

On a donné vingt coups de nerf de boeuf bien appliqués au petit ~~*nègre*~~ de la Duchesse de Chartres, Scipion, pour avoir répandu dans le jardin du Palais Royal la nouvelle de la mort du Comte d'Orvilliers, et de seize vaisseaux pris aux Anglois. Ce petit misérable animal inutile, malin, gourmand, saltimbanque, indocile, &c. espiegle au reste, mal élevé, s'étoit ingéré de dérouter ainsi la curiosité publique. La moitié de Paris en a été la dupe deux jours durant (CS, 1787, 189).

Figure 12. Nicolas-Bernard Lépicié, *Louis Philippe, Duc de Valois at the Cradle,* 1774. Oil on canvas, 55x41 cm. Private collection. © Château de Versailles, RMN-Grand Palais / Christophe Fouin.

By spreading this false rumor about the death of the Comte d'Orvilliers, a well-known French naval commander and enslaver in the Americas, Scipio was not only humiliating the Comte himself. He was also dredging up a painful memory for the Duc de Chartres, who had served under d'Orvilliers and had spread his own false rumor about a heroic victory their squadron had achieved against the British, only to be mocked by Parisian satirists once it was revealed they had been defeated (Chaline 2017, 77–80). Could Scipio's rumor have been a deliberate attempt to deride his master and resist the subservient, flattering role he was incessantly forced to perform? Either way, it seems clear that his 'tricks' could elicit not only praise but also corporal punishment more commonly associated with the brutality of a colonial plantation (such as the ones owned by the Duc de Chartres as well as Genlis's own family members)[42] than the pampered confines of a Parisian palace. The intended lesson for the Chartres children, however, was that despite Scipio's deviations from the script, they were the ones who ultimately dictated the performance and determined its outcome. They learned how the coerced performances of Scipio or Narcisse could be vehicles for their own narcissistic self-projection: opportunities to imagine themselves as 'enlightened' while remaining in the dark.

6. Conclusion

The offstage afterlives of these enslaved children are tragic more often than not. The majority simply vanished, although a far larger majority never appeared in historical documents in the first place. Many were abandoned by their enslavers, some of whom, like Marie-Antoinette and the Duc de Chartres (who became known as 'Philippe Égalité' during the Revolution), were guillotined or fled France after 1789. Some, including Narcisse and Édouard, an enslaved attendant from Guadeloupe who was 'given' to the Duc de Chartres's eldest son (Louis Philippe) and accompanied the Orléans children on field trips led by Genlis, joined the military.[43] Others, like Madame du Barry's

42 See fn 23. Genlis's extended family, including her father, brother, and husband, had deep ties to Saint-Domingue, and one of the children in her pedagogical circle, her orphaned niece Rose-Henriette Perrone de Sercey, had been born on a plantation there.

43 For details about Édouard's life as recounted in period sources, one of which identifies him as the "~~nègre~~ de M. de Chartres" [meaning Louis Philippe], see Ibeas-Altamira (2020). He is recorded as accompanying the Orléans children on field trips in Genlis (2020).

African or Bengali page Zamor, died in poverty, leaving behind minimal possessions whose posthumous inventory, as Cécile Bishop has observed, "offers a poignant contrast with the luxury that surrounded him at Du Barry's home under the Ancien Régime" (2019, 67). Even so, Bishop notes, this inventory at least has the effect of re-materializing Zamor, of allowing us to conjure a "haptic, affective body very different from the black chimera" (Ibid.) she views in his portraits. The archival scrap from the Comte d'Artois's stable books has this effect too (Fig. 2). It makes us think of a flesh-and-blood individual made to wear these buckskin breeches, to feel their soft, pliable leather against his skin, and to don an elaborate turban that reinforced his difference and reminded him of the spectacle he was compelled to be. This costume made him at once excessively visible – palpably present – and contributed to his invisibility and dehumanization. Forced into an impossible role, he had to keep up appearances, to live the ephemeral as a permanent condition.

In November 2024, as we were finishing this article, a painting identified as a "presumed portrait of the Comte de Beaujolais [the Duc de Chartres's youngest son] and Scipion" (Bonhams auction, lot 24, collection Barbet) was sold in Paris. In our view, the identification of the two sitters (and the artist) is far from certain and needs further research, but we wanted to make a few preliminary remarks here. Based on the sitters' clothing, the painting appears to be from the early 1790s, and it depicts a white child with his arm around a young Black man who grips a porte-crayon – and is thus presumably the author of the drawing the white child holds. The image begs the question: how did this young Black man learn to draw? One might wonder whether he was able to attend the white child's lessons – we know, for instance, that drawing instruction was a key aspect of Genlis's pedagogy – and learn indirectly. If so, he was for sure not merely an object of knowledge or an educational 'tool' for learning how to dominate the world but an active participant in the learning process. This possibility raises important questions about eighteenth-century pedagogies and who, even obliquely, could have had access to their benefits. From this perspective, the image foregrounds the young Black man's presence and artistic skill. At the same time, the white boy's expression – a mix of paternalistic pride and wry skepticism – reinforces our argument of a (failed) attempt to erase the Black boy's agency by turning it into a performance. His artistic talent appears surprising, as if it were something not naturally expected of

him. The painting, in turn, transforms this unexpected ability into a spectacle where the white child remains the one in command.

The setting, finally, is strange to say the least. Is it possible – though again, this is speculative – that the two sitters are being portrayed in one of the most precarious and ephemeral environments of all: a prison cell? Revolutionary-era prison portraits were quite common, and the Comte de Beaujolais was in fact incarcerated beginning in 1793, first in Paris at the Prison de l'Abbaye (which somewhat resembles the building in the drawing) and then in Marseille.[44] As for Scipio, his fate is unknown. Although Genlis later claimed in her memoirs that he joined the army, there is no official record of him enlisting, and it is true that both enslaved and 'free' servants were sometimes forced to accompany their masters into prison, in some cases disappearing without a trace.

Beyond the Enlightenment ideal of transparency, education, and public knowledge, in this article we have sought to underline a very profound and specific form of blindness, both at the time and still potentially in current scholarship (including ours). Scientific discourses about the Other and spectacular pedagogy through objects were born in Europe in close connection to the ideas of seeing and knowing the world. The study of the human body and the field of anthropology, while inheriting a much longer tradition of studying people, took an important step toward systematization and theorization during the eighteenth century. Yet the realities of colonialism were left unsaid and unseen, even though they were directly connected to the rise of such sciences. Thus, the Enlightenment narrative of knowledge production goes hand in hand with modes of silence.

As we have tried to show, visualizing the Other and its fragmentary material culture doesn't mean overcoming opacity; in the case of spectacular blindness, it is quite the opposite. Yet silencing a topic or a historical fact has not always been an effective way to hide it. Today, images, archives, and documents from the past, no matter how problematic, still bear traces of human lives. Some museums have only begun to address the horrors of enslavement to which their artworks, visibly or not, bear witness. Yet African children, for one, are

44 We are grateful to Melissa Hyde for telling us about this portrait; to Miranda Spieler for suggesting that the setting might be a prison; to Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell for weighing in on the costumes, and to Amy Freund for exchanging ideas and sharing another prison portrait of the Comte de Beaujolais. We hope to collaborate on a longer article at some point.

very present and visible in their collections. There is not a straight line of opposition between visibility and invisibility, knowing or ignoring, showing or hiding, ephemeral spectacle or persistent memory. We have highlighted a grey zone of paradoxes and mirrors, where what is shown is never what is seen, and where the (in)humanity of the very near spectacle often remains a blind spot.

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