

Benoist, "Portrait d'une négresse"

Doris Y. Kadish
University of Georgia
dkadish@uga.edu

Marie-Guillielmine Benoist's *Portrait d'une négresse*, exhibited in the Salon of 1800, has provoked widely disparate reactions among art historians, ranging from Hugh Honour's praise for it as a "warmly humane and noble image" to Griselda Pollock's criticism of the painter for shamefully putting her black model on display, as on a slave auction block, to serve the cause of her own creativity.⁴ Under what political and cultural circumstances did a woman artist come to paint this portrait? What are the antislavery and feminist implications of its production and its reception?

A point of departure for answering the first question lies in Benoist's artistic training as a student of the famous neo-classical painter and revolutionary partisan Jacques-Louis David. With respect to both politics and art, the painting bears the mark of David's influence. Politically, it can be read, as I follow Honour in doing, as celebrating the emancipation of slaves, which was declared by the Convention in 1794, and which was nominally, if not practically, in existence when the painting was exhibited.⁵ Upon such a reading, it is noteworthy that Benoist surrounds her black subject with the tricolor symbolism of the revolution (red sash, blue chair, white clothing) and that she includes pictorial details that emphasize the model's emblematic freedom as a black: her white turban and earring connote freedom; the direct way in which she looks at the viewer indicates that she is not a slave; the single breast connotes maternity and the nurturing role of the French republic.⁶ It is true, as Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby and others have observed, that exhibiting an emblematic figure of the emancipation of slaves in 1800 differed from similar acts of portraying black subjects earlier in the revolutionary period. A notable case in point is the portrait of the deputy Jean-Baptiste Belley by Anne-Louis Girodet, also a student of David. If that portrait received a relatively favorable response, it may be because there was more support for ending slavery and for abolishing prejudice against blacks in 1797. In contrast, as Grigsby points out, the "reactionary backlash that had temporarily been defeated by the coup-d'état of September 4, 1797, held sway in 1800. When the Directory gave way to the Consulate, eleven years after the eruption of the revolution, many French people turned their backs on their earlier radical aspirations."⁷ But although such considerations may explain the reception of Benoist's *Portrait*, they do not obviate the political iconography of the painting, and its inspiration in the pro-revolutionary artistic tradition of David.

Artistically, *Portrait d'une négresse* also recalls David, whose sober neoclassical style served to further the patriotic mission of the revolution. James Smalls observes that Benoist incorporates "stylistic traits associated with neoclassicism such as simplified backgrounds, a minimal use of props and clothing, a sculptural approach to modeling the figure, direct lighting, stronger coloration and tonal contrasts." Noting another facet of David's influence on Benoist, he remarks that *Portrait d'une négresse* is unusual in that "a black female subject rendered in the neoclassical style is used to voice the more 'authentic' masculine traits of morality and virtue."⁸ But Benoist's neoclassicism can also be viewed as furthering an authentic feminine agenda, that of sentimentalism, if one

places *Portrait d'une négresse* in a larger cultural field in which women were expected to devote their efforts to edifying genres that furthered the causes of justice, religion, and morality. In the literary realm, writing about blacks was one such female-centered genre. Viewed thus in relation to sentimental art more generally, *Portrait d'une négresse* is not necessarily painted in what Marie-Juliette Ballot calls "a totally masculine style." Nor is it certain that it stands, as Smalls claims it does, as an anomaly in Benoist's career as an artist. That career, he observes, consisted largely of "sentimental, moralizing portrayals of women, children, and family life."⁹ By acknowledging the ties that the *Portrait* has with sentimentalism one can better place it in the artist's *oeuvre*. One can also perceive its links with the larger pattern of women defining themselves through and with black women in early nineteenth-century France.

Other factors are also relevant for understanding how Benoist came to depict the black woman who appears in *Portrait d'une négresse*.¹⁰ For Benoist, as for Germaine de Staël and others, the network of a woman's closest contacts within the family was an enabling condition for the spread of abolitionist ideas. Even if not confined to the home, women typically stood at the center of a domestic circle that informed their identity. For Benoist, the family was also a contact zone in which she learned of and had contact with blacks. Her father had served in the Department of the Colonies. Her husband's brother, Benoist-Cavay, was Commissary of the Navy and lived in Guiana and Guadeloupe, where he was married; it was presumably through him that she met the black servant or slave represented in the *Portrait*. A similarly important role can be attributed to her husband, Pierre-Vincent Benoist. Writing under the pseudonym J. Castera, Pierre-Vincent translated Mungo Park's *Voyage in the Interior of Africa* the same year as his wife exhibited the *Portrait*. In 1787, he had also translated Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women*, which Benoist illustrated. Clearly, neither abolitionism nor feminism was foreign to the Benoists. One can hypothesize that Benoist felt a bond with a woman who had lived through political and cultural disruptions not unlike her own. For, as noted earlier, during the revolution, Benoist had endured the dangers of capture and imprisonment, hiding and physical displacement, and precarious living conditions for her young children. Perhaps part of what many viewers see as the power and revolutionary thrust of the *Portrait* can be traced to a common identity that the artist perceived between herself and the black woman.

Our second question about *Portrait d'une négresse*—what are the antislavery and feminist implications of its production and its reception?—has provoked a range of disparate responses from art historians, as noted above. Those who question its liberatory significance call attention to a variety of factors. Grigsby notes that the title, *Portrait d'une négresse*, fails to name the subject, contrary to portraiture conventions of the time. The model is thereby stripped of her individuality and presented merely as a type, a black and a woman: "The very title *Portrait of a Negress* therefore exercises a form of mastery or subordination: the sitter is robbed, like a slave, of her person's property."¹¹ Helen Weston reminds us that critics at the time dismissed the possibility of finding beauty in a black woman or of rendering black skin color against a colored background. She notes that such reactions reflect the mounting hostility toward blacks that was part of the changing political climate at the turn of the nineteenth century and that would culminate in Napoleon's re-establishment of slavery in the French colonies in 1802. Accordingly, Weston categorically rules out abolitionist intentions on the part of the artist. She notes

that it was through Benoist's connections with Napoleon's brother Lucien that her husband obtained a coveted government position and that socially the families of both the artist and her spouse were deeply imbricated in Napoleonic circles of influence and power. She thus concludes: "It is out of the question that she would have exhibited or been allowed to exhibit a painting of a black woman which celebrated liberty and equality when the men in power in the circles in which she and her husband moved were actively ordering the suppression of slave rebellions, and setting in motion the mechanisms to reintroduce slavery."¹²

But even Weston admits that the ideological message of the painting is "confusing." A different story from the one that she wishes to tell emerges, for example, if, instead of highlighting the seemingly racist reactions at the time, we focus on the fact that, among the initial responses to the painting, some viewers complained of a perceived intimacy between the white painter and her black model. The opposition of brown skin and white drapery was considered to thematize that intimacy.¹³ Such a reaction suggests the possibility that the existence of a bond between black and white women was acknowledged from the start. It supports a more progressive interpretation of the painting as one in which women forged identities across race, class, and gender lines. This interpretation is supported by evidence that, within the immediate family of the painter, liberal sentiments never lost their hold. M. Benoist's familiarity as a translator with the works of Park and Wollstonecraft was noted earlier. And although I do not know of any expressions of antislavery views expressed by either the painter or her husband during the censorious years of the Napoleonic regime, it is significant that once abolitionist activity resumed in the 1820s, with the creation of the *Société de la morale chrétienne*, the name of Pierre-Vincent Benoist appears in the list of subscribers almost from the start.¹⁴ One can imagine that his antislavery convictions were shared with his wife and that they may even have influenced the painting of *Portrait d'une négresse*.

The meaning of the painting becomes even more complicated if we take into account certain facts about Benoist's life later in her career as an artist. After her husband was granted a prominent position in the Restoration government, in recognition of his long devotion to the monarchy, it became apparent that it would no longer be suitable for such an official to have a wife whose works would be publicly exposed and criticized. Accordingly, Benoist yielded to her mother's advice and ended her artistic career. In a letter dated October 1, 1814, she explains her final separation from what she has known and loved her whole life, her art, in words that echo the language of slavery. In making the decision, she says, "her heart bled"; it was a "searing blow" that came after a life of "hard labor" and "tribulations." Now her art has become "an object of humiliation"; and she warns her husband that to even talk about what she has done would be "to reopen a wound."¹⁵ That it had become acceptable to depict black subjects at this time is evident from Louis XVIII's acquisition of the painting. What was not permissible, however, was for a woman in the social position to which the Benoist family had now risen to play a public role as an artist. Weston interprets this letter as proof of Benoist's feminist leanings, which she sets in opposition to abolitionism:

This is the language of slavery and resonates with the metaphors used by Mary Wollstonecraft: prejudice; a system that leaves some bowed in submission to others; a life of hard toil that is disallowed from reaping the fruits of its production—display and success in her case; bleeding hearts

and open wounds. It was, in other words, at this point that she experienced the oppression of a system that left woman bowed in helpless obedience, that she perhaps felt something akin to the experience of the black servant of her portrait. At this point she would have seen the force of Wollstonecraft's arguments.¹⁶

But can one not just as arguably read Benoist's heartrending letter as evidence that she continued to support the cause of antislavery? Whereas Weston seems to consider that feminism and abolitionism are incompatible, I would argue that the language of slavery used here suggests just as strongly that the painter's attitudes toward injustice and oppression toward women intersected with and reinforced her belief in the misfortunes suffered by blacks.

Ultimately, whether Benoist's highly charged and ambiguous depiction of race and gender in *Portrait d'une négresse* is perceived as abolitionist depends to a significant degree on where, when, and with what cultural or historical information the viewer sees the painting. As we have seen, neither the critical reception at the time of its exhibition nor facts about the painter's life preclude reaching the conclusion that the painting was seen as reflecting antislavery sentiments. On the contrary, I believe that one can make the case that viewing it in an abolitionist perspective is compatible with the conditions of a popular reception in the nineteenth century. Smalls notes that the allegorical reduction of the black woman to a mere emblem of liberty or the republic was only relevant for elite audiences that understood the abstract discourse of allegory.¹⁷ I believe that viewers, then and now, are far less likely to focus on the model's depersonalization and more likely to be riveted by her face and her gaze, which proclaim the dignity and independence of a black woman. Having noted the anonymity of the "négresse," Grigsby sums up the model's amazing sympathetic power: "Lovely the pictured black woman is, as well as strikingly assured and direct with her level gaze; we might even call her self-possessed." Honour calls the painting "perhaps the most beautiful portrait of a black woman ever painted."¹⁸

4. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art, IV* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 7; Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminine Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (NY: Routledge, 1999), 299.

5. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (London: Yale UP, 2002), 58.

6. Honour emphasizes the model's "gaze of reciprocal equality," *The Image of the Black*,

7. He attributes to Gisliind Nabakowski et al, *Frauen in der Kunst* (Frankfurt on Main,

1980) the interpretation of the black subject's freedom on the basis of her turban and the symbolism of the bare breast, 248.

7. Grigsby, *Extremities*, 57-58.

8. Smalls, "Slavery is a Woman," 9, 10.

9. Marie-Juliette Ballot, *Une Elève de David, La Comtesse de Benoist* (Paris: Plon, 1914), 150; Smalls, "Slavery is a Woman," 3.

10. Biographical information is provided in Ballot based on Benoist's unedited correspondence.

11. Grigsby, *Extremities*, 60.

12. Helen Weston, "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover: La Ville-Leroulx's *Portrait de Nègresse* and the Signs of Misrecognition," *Work and the Image*, I, ed. Valerie Mainz and Griselda Pollock. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 57.

13. Weston, "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover," 55; Grigsby, *Extremities*, 59.

14. *Journal de la Société de la morale chrétienne*, 1822, No. 2.

15. Ballot, *Une Elève de David*, Helen Weston, 211-12. Helen Weston calls attention to the key phrases in this letter in "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover," 64-65.

16. Weston, "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover," 64-65.

17. Smalls, "Slavery is a Woman," 15.

18. Grigsby, *Extremities*, 60; Honour, *The Image of the Black*, II, 7.