

Q & A

Adrienne L. Childs

Adrienne L. Childs, PhD, is an art historian, curator and associate of the W.E.B. Du Bois Research Institute at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University. She is curator of the exhibition “Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition,” 2020, at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. Her current book project is *Ornamental Blackness: The Black Figure in European Decorative Arts*, forthcoming from Yale University Press. She describes the book as a project that creates a framework for understanding how the decorative arts figure into the larger discourse of representing Blacks in European visual culture of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. We sat down with her to explore the genesis and range of diverse objects that employed the “blackamoor” as a decorative motif.



We’ve seen them at auction: exotically attired black figures, sometimes in pairs, sometimes singly, as pedestal bases or ornamentation for porcelains, clocks or torchieres. How did the vogue for representing the African body in European luxury items come to inhabit spaces of wealth and refinement in Europe and beyond?

As I see it, this vogue grew out of European court culture in the Seventeenth Century. The interest in decorative objects featuring Blacks as ornamental motifs is directly related to the presence of Black people in courts and courtly circles who were servants, groomsmen, entertainers and more. Blacks who were part of the spectacle of courtly life lent an air of exoticism to the visual culture. They turned up in paintings and decorative objects as well. Many of which mimicked their role as servants and exotic appointments. It was a courtly aesthetic.

How did your book project get its impetus?

As I was writing my dissertation on Blacks in Orientalist painting and sculpture of the long Nineteenth Century, I came across many decorative objects that related to the exotic characters I was focusing on in the “fine arts.” While researching, I discovered little or nothing that discussed the obvious connections to slavery and servitude with respect to these objects. I felt that it was a fruitful avenue to pursue. And it has been!

You are one of four recipients of the Decorative Arts Trust’s Failey Grant. How will the grant help you in finalizing the manuscript for the book?

I am working with Yale University Press. They require extra funds to produce a publication with high-quality color images through the text. This material requires a well-illustrated volume as many of the objects have not been published before. The Failey Grant has provided critical support for the upgraded production costs and the extensive illustrations program for the book.

It’s ironic, no? The black figure — enslaved, feared and assaulted — is also a symbol of luxury and opulence?

Ironic. Yes, there is a sense of irony in some of these objects. On one hand they are often one-of-a kind or commissioned objects made of luxury materials and destined for rarified spaces and aristocratic collections. On the other hand, they often brazenly depict enslaved Black people performing labor, sometimes in chains. It is an unabashed celebration or glorification of this inhumane practice that was overlooked by so many at the time and went virtually unacknowledged by later historians and curators.

Did this form of representation, so prevalent in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, die out in the Twentieth and Twenty-First? Are there any modern day “blackamoors” being created?

In the early Twentieth Century the blackamoor came back into vogue again in what some have called the Baroque Revival. Perhaps a backlash

against modernism. Interior designers were using them again, collectors were interested in them. I think they had a kind of Old World, almost kitsch charm. Bejeweled blackamoor pins were very popular with fashionable women in the 1920s through 1940s. There are some jewelers that still make blackamoor jewelry, such as Codognato in Venice. I think that they are quite controversial now. Who could forget the Princess Michael and Megan Markle dust up about her blackamoor brooch!

What were the socio-economic engines that drove both their development and circulation?

This is difficult to answer. The early objects such as the silver guéridons and candelabra created for Anne of Austria would have been totally out of the economic range of most people. As they become fashionable, workshops that catered to a wider clientele seized on styles that were considered courtly and replicated them. For instance, Antwerp workshops made blackamoor cabinets in multiples that circulated around Europe, even in the late Seventeenth Century. When the blackamoor trend gets picked up in porcelain objects in the Eighteenth Century, the circulation becomes wider and they become more affordable. So, it depends on the media. By the Nineteenth Century the blackamoor can be found adorning all manner of things, from finials on walking sticks to door knockers.

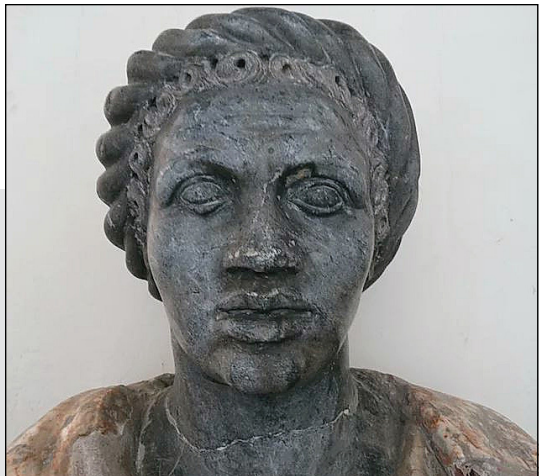
Is there also a male-female dynamic at work in representing Blacks in European visual culture?

This is an interesting question. I would say that the blackamoor trope is associated primarily with images of men, but not totally. It was primarily the male servants that we would find depicted in paintings of courtly life, although there were most certainly women servants present — they just did not turn up in images as much. As many of the decorative objects depict labor such as lifting or serving, they are largely male as well. Women turn up more in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century. We might find a male and female pair, or two males, but seldom two females. Sometimes it is difficult to even determine the sex of the figure.



Female blackamoor candlestand, circa Eighteenth Century, Villa Melrose Antiques, Los Angeles.

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Moor Term (detail), Seventeenth Century, Palais de Compiègne, France.

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Has the show you curated at the Phillips Collection closed due to Covid-19? Will it be extended once it is safe to remove restrictions?

“Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition” opened in February and promptly closed two weeks later due to Covid-19. Originally slated to close at the end of May, the show was extended, and it opened back up to limited engagement last fall. Now it has closed, but we were able to extend it seven months and make it available through the end of 2020.

In addition to curating exhibits and writing books, you’ve also taught. Which discipline is most appealing to you?

I like teaching classes on race and representation in European art from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Century. I also like teaching the history of art by African Americans.

Who are the collectors of such material?

Well, we know of the “princely” collectors, such as Louis XIV in the Seventeenth Century, or Augustus the Strong in the Eighteenth Century. By the Eighteenth Century, Venetian craftsman had begun a robust trade in blackamoors that many collected while on the “grand tour.” That is why we currently think of the blackamoor as a Venetian character, but I am not entirely sure about that. I have not really uncovered the origin story yet. In the Nineteenth Century, wealthy British collectors started putting blackamoors in their



Murano glass chandelier, Eighteenth Century, Cafe Lavena, San Marco, Venice, Italy.

country homes — another nod to Old World tastes. Americans also started collecting them as they did many other European decorative arts in order to display their worldliness. Perhaps the most significant collection is the Acton Collection in the Villa La Pietra in Florence. Museums have them but often do not exhibit them as it is difficult to interpret these fraught objects.

Not much critical attention has been paid to this material. What value do you believe your book will have for museums, historic homes and academia?

I am really crafting a story that did not exist before. This story could likely be told in many ways. Mine is more of a survey of objects in collections in Europe and the United States that offers an overview of this trend and how it developed over the centuries. I aim to suggest how we might look at these objects critically and in a richer context. The book might help museums to situate objects within a larger tradition and perhaps find the language to interpret them and communicate to their audiences about them. I hope that academics on related fields see that material culture is both a reflection of and an actor in the story of the Black Atlantic world.

In your research, you’ve no doubt categorized the many forms of Black ornamentation? How many examples have you cataloged?

There are many categories of objects in my study. But in truth I have not taken the time to list them out. It almost seems like any object — from wallpaper, to sugar bowls to clocks — that could be ornamented was at some point fashioned with a Black figure.

Where has your work documenting the history of the blackamoor in decorative arts taken you?

This is the fun part because I love to travel. I have been around the United States to California, New York, South Carolina, Georgia, Rhode Island, Virginia, Connecticut, Massachusetts and more. In Europe I have been to England, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Scotland and The Netherlands. I have always been welcomed warmly by museums and historic properties who are supportive of this topic.

Beyond decorative arts, a 2015 exhibition that you were involved with, “ReSignifications,” included reimagined European artworks such as Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl Earring” with Awol Erizku’s “[Ethiopian] Girl with Bamboo Earring.” As contemporary artists respond to such tropes, what are your thoughts on new perspectives of race, beauty and representation?

The answer to this could be another book. As I have written about in my recent exhibition “Riffs and Relations,” I see a trend in the contemporary practice of Black artists that deliberately and intensely reexamines European art history. Their complex responses to the history of art are aimed at examining different aspects of that history that have been lost or unexamined. Some want to insert their stories and images into a canon that has been exclusionary. Some want to explore how Black people figured into European history but were largely relegated to the margins of art history. Others want to claim or assume the kind of power that representation in art has afforded certain cultures and not others. And sometimes contemporary artists seek to repudiate or unmask the mystique of European art history that has maintained a central place in books, collections and museums at the expense of diverse voices.

—W.A. Demers



Vitrine with bronze clock, early Eighteenth Century, François-Duesberg Museum, Mons, Belgium.