

ART • WEEKEND

Deconstructing Race in Western Painting

The most interesting part of this excellent exhibition is its presentation of black modernists, for here we enter relatively unfamiliar territory.

David Carrier December 1, 2018



William H. Johnson, "Portrait of Woman with Blue and White Striped Blouse" (ca. 1940–42), tempera on paperboard, 28 × 22 1/16 inches, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, gift of the Harmon Foundation (image courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC)

As its title indicates, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University, presents a three-stage narrative of modernity, beginning with Édouard Manet's "Olympia" (1865, not on view here), which famously shows a white woman accompanied by a black servant; on to works of Henri Matisse depicting black models; and, more recently, images of black women by a number of African-American female and male artists, some of them redoing "Olympia."

The show, closely hung, for there's a lot to see, thus retells the familiar story of Franco-American modernism in a suggestive, relatively original way. Its curator, Denise Murrell, opens her catalogue essay with a critical / historical perspective. In the 1980s, T.

J. Clark decisively reoriented commentary on Impressionism by focusing on its social history. To correctly understand "Olympia," he argued, requires taking

account of class, but not necessarily gender or race; he thus had much to say about the white woman in Manet's painting, but almost nothing about the black servant.



Édouard Manet, "Baudelaire's Mistress (Portrait of Jeanne Duval)" (1862), oil on canvas, 35 7/16 x 44 1/2 inches, Museum of Fine Arts (Szépművészeti Múzeum), Budapest (photo by Csanád Szesztay, © The Museum of Fine Arts Budapest/Scala / Art Resource, NY)

Although many Salon artists at the time were depicting female nudes, Clark argued, only this picture was shocking because it explicitly showed prostitution. That account, Murrell rightly observes, although correct as far as it goes, fails entirely to consider one of the two figures in the picture. In fairness to Clark, it's true that while we know something about Victoria Meuren, the model for Olympia, we have only the first name, Laure, of the model for her black companion.

But we do know that on his youthful trip to Brazil, Manet was shocked, so he said in his correspondence, by the sight of black women in a slave market. Slavery was abolished in France in 1848, when Manet was a teenager, making Laure a member of the new black Parisian community.

"Olympia" will appear in the show's Parisian iteration, but here in New York we do see other works by Manet of black women, including a portrait of Laure and most notably his "Baudelaire's Mistress (Portrait of Jeanne Duval)" (1862). And there are photographs by Fèlix Nadar alongside those of unknown photographers; a marvelous sculpture from the workshop of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, "The black woman (Why born a slave?)" (1872); and Frédéric Bazille's "Black woman with peonies" (1870). Once you start looking for them, it seems, you will find a number of black women in French artworks from this period.

In "Olympia," Manet set his black model in a dignified but subservient position. Then in the 20th century, Matisse first painted black female models in North Africa, followed by "Aïcha and Loretta" (1917), in which a black woman and a white woman sit side by side, the arm of the latter draped over the shoulders of the former; in 1930, he was inspired by a black play he saw in Harlem; and in Nice after World War II he employed three black women as models for his illustrations of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*.



Henri Matisse, "Dame à la robe blanche (Woman in white)" (1946) oil on canvas, canvas: 38 × 23 3/4 inches; image (visible): 35 5/8 × 23 1/4 inches, Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections, gift of John and Elizabeth Bates Cowles (photo by Rich Sanders, Des Moines, Iowa; Matisse © 2018 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

We know something about these women. Two of them, Carmen Lahens and Elvire Josephine Van Hyfte, died only recently and the third, Catherine Dubois, born in 1935 in Paris, and still alive, has recorded her vivid memories of sitting for Matisse socializing with him and her mother in Paris. Close to the end of his career, Matisse painted several splendid celebratory images of Van Hyfte, including "Woman in white" (1946) and *Asia* (1946).



Mickalene Thomas, "Din, une très belle négresse #1 (Din, a very beautiful black woman #1)" (2012), rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel, 102 × 84 inches, Jiménez-Colón Collection, Ponce, PR (© Mickalene Thomas / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Recently a number of female *and* male black artists, many American, some French, have radically deconstructed the traditional schema of the active male artist depicting a passive female model, questioning its assumptions about gender and race. And so the most interesting part of the exhibition is this third part, the presentation of the black modernists, for here we enter relatively unfamiliar territory.

We see very varied portraits of black women, including Norman Lewis's confident-looking "Black Girl" (1936); William H. Johnson's boldly painted "Portrait of a Woman with Blue and White Striped Blouse" (1940-42); and Romare

Bearden's *Patchwork Quilt* (1970), which depicts a black odalisque, lying face-down.

And, in radical revisions of early modernist interpretations, Faith Ringgold's "Matisse's Model (The French Collection, Part 1: #5)" (1991) shows Matisse, a black odalisque, and in the decorative background, an image of Matisse's "The Dance" (1910); Ellen Gallagher's "Odalisque (Self-Portrait with Freud as Matisse)" (2013) is a slide projection with Freud as the artist drawing a clothed Gallagher; and Mickalene Thomas's "Marie: Nude black woman lying on a couch)" (2012) sets the black model in a contemporary interior filled with decorative fabrics. Finally, in Awoi Erizku's "Elsa" (2013), a large color photograph of a sex worker, we return to Manet's original conception, but now with a nude black woman alone in a spare room.



Romare Bearden, "Patchwork Quilt" (1970), cut-and-pasted cloth and paper with synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 35 3/4 x 47 7/8 inches, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund, 1970, Art © 2018 Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY)

This exhibition reveals something about the apparent limitations and ultimate strengths of a social history of art. Compared with literature, visual art taken just by itself generally offers a relatively thin record of cultural history. To comprehend the politics of race (and gender) in France, you need to supplement the art of Manet and Matisse with historical research. (We do know, however, all too much about Baudelaire's essentially unedifying political ideas.)

Here, then, the lavish exhibition catalogue, which fills in a great deal of useful background information about the relevant history, is

essential. At its conclusion, Murrell speaks of "the recuperation of lost or marginalized histories" as defining "the present globalized moment." That is exactly what this exhibition accomplishes, and that's why her show speaks to our pressing contemporary political concerns.

Just as the American Republic prospered by extending its franchise to African-Americans and women, transforming in stages its ruling institutions, so the modernist artistic tradition of Manet and Matisse has developed and survived by being supple enough to critique and reject its sexist and racist elements, and thus make space for those thus far excluded.

Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today continues at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University (615 West 129th Street, Upper West Side, Manhattan) through February 10, 2019. The exhibition was curated by Denise Murrell, Ph.D., Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Research Scholar, Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University.

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