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exhibition review of

Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century

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Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century
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Andover, Massachusetts
14 January – 26 March 2006

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Wilmington, Delaware
21 April – 17 July 2006
Long Beach Museum of Art
Long Beach, California
25 August – 26 November 2006

Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century
Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw. Exhibition catalogue. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips
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Portraiture has a singularly powerful role in the shaping of individual identity through the
visual arts. The exhibition and catalogue, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the
Nineteenth Century*, explores the complexities surrounding self-representation for blacks in
nineteenth-century America. The Addison Gallery of American Art at the Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts and art historian/curator Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw have organized
an important exhibition that focuses on how portraiture was utilized in fashioning selfhood
by, and of, African Americans as they moved from enslavement to freedom in one of the
most tumultuous centuries in American history. This exhibition is part of a larger body of
scholarship that can be characterized as "Image of the Black" studies, an area of inquiry that
arose over the second half of the twentieth century concerned with how blacks have been
represented in Western visual culture since antiquity. The landmark publication series, *The
Image of the Black in Western Art*, provided an overview of the implications of representing
blackness in the West and laid the groundwork for this burgeoning field.[1]

Portraits of a People is one of the latest additions to a distinguished body of literature focusing
on images of African Americans. The 1990 exhibition and catalogue, *Facing History: The
Black Image in American Art 1710-1940*, organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in
Washington, D.C. and curated by Guy C. McElroy, was an important precedent for Du Bois
Shaw's *Portraits of a People*.[2] McElroy examined a wide spectrum of imagery that
encompassed not only portraiture, but also history painting, allegory, and genre. McElroy's
investigation uncovered many of the modes through which visual culture reinforced
stereotypes and served as a tool in the subjugation of African Americans throughout the
nineteenth, and into the twentieth, century. The exhibition catalogues for both *Facing
History* and *Portraits of a People* feature several works in common such as *Three Sisters of the
Copeland Family*, 1854, by William Matthew Prior, *Portrait of a Man [Possibly Abner Cocker]* , ca.
1805-1810 by America's first recognized African American painter Joshua Johnston, and
Edward James Royce, 1864, by Thomas Sully (fig. 1). Du Bois Shaw, however, clearly made a

conscious choice not to focus on the ways that American visual culture denigrated American blacks in the nineteenth century, since this territory is aptly covered by McElroy in *Facing History*, Albert Boime in *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, and more recently, Michael Harris in *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*.[3] Instead, Du Bois Shaw illuminates the way portraiture could be used to distinguish African American identity, and in many cases, to create a sense of self in a hostile environment. This exhibition and catalogue reveal the nuances present in depictions of blacks in nineteenth-century America, reinforcing the notion that images from this era should be not characterized as uniformly degrading, but understood as representing a multiplicity of identities, both imposed and self-defined.
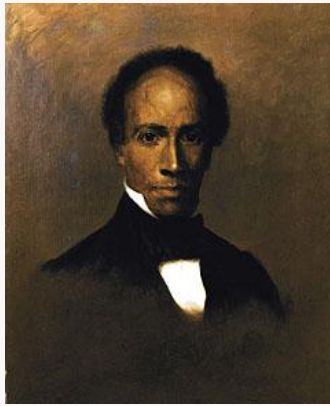

Fig. 1, Thomas Sully, *Edward James Royce*, c. 1864. Oil on canvas. © Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia, Historical Society of Philadelphia Collection. Gift of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society.

[larger image]

The exhibition, reviewed here at its second venue, the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington, Delaware, displays portraits of African Americans in a variety of media including paintings, drawings, prints, silhouettes, and photographs. Due to the uniformly rigid nature of nineteenth-century American portraiture, the exhibition is slightly static. The exhibition is contained in one large gallery with floating walls in the center of the room. The unusual pink color of the walls did nothing to enhance the works. However, the assembly of the more than 80 dignified images of African Americans from this racially divided era is not only fascinating but ultimately uplifting, particularly in light of the pervasiveness of derogatory representations of blacks in nineteenth-century visual culture (fig. 2).

Fig. 2, View of installation. Photo by Carson Zullinger. [larger image]

Curator Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw carefully selected "rare and often enigmatic images" that largely represent specific individuals and index unusual instances of African American agency in the nineteenth century (14-15). The portraits range from eminent historical figures such as Frederick Douglass (fig. 3) and Ira Aldridge, to lesser-known sitters such as Charles Jones. In fact, rather than highlighting one of the more celebrated individuals in the exhibition, the catalogue cover features *Portrait of Charles Jones*, 1815, by Boston-based artist, Ethan Allen Greenwod (fig. 4). Jones is purported to be the son of Absalom Jones, the first black Episcopal priest in the America (92-94). The portrait of Charles Jones was a gift to the Addison Gallery of American Art in the final stages of the exhibition preparation.
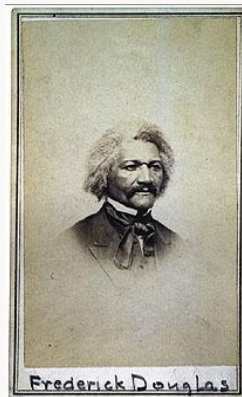

Fig. 3, W. E. Bowman, *Frederick Douglass*, n.d. Albumen print on card. © American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. [larger image]

Fig. 4, Ethan Allen Greenwood, *Portrait of Charles Jones*, 1815. Oil on panel. © Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Gift of William Vareika. [larger image]

Thematically the exhibition installation followed the categories delineated in the catalogue. The first area, "Establishing Identity" featured singular images of enslaved blacks or freedmen who emerged from the darkness of slavery to distinguish themselves. The next section, "The Rise of the Black Church" assembled images of prominent African Americans such as Reverend Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose leadership was fundamental to the institutionalization of the black church. Other sections were, "Abolition/Liberation," "Family and Children," and "Prominence and Individuality." Because of the layout, it was sometimes difficult to determine exactly what images belonged to the different categories, although the divisions and their explanatory text provided the viewer with a useful context for interpreting the portraits.

The detailed labels, largely quoted from the catalogue, provide a wealth of information about the sitters as well as the social and cultural implications inherent in their representation. Outstanding objects included one of the few paintings of a black female in the exhibition, *Mrs. Nancy Lawson*, c.1848, by William Matthew Prior (fig. 5). Prior's naïve style evokes the fashionable femininity of this wife of a Boston clothing merchant, whose portrait is evidence of a refined African American middle class invested in self-definition. The portrait presumed to be George Washington's cook attributed to Gilbert Charles Stuart is an interesting counterpoint to Edward Savage's *The Washington Family* 1789-96, pictured and discussed in the catalogue's introductory essay. The stunning three-quarter portrait of the black man in a white chef's uniform is thought to be Hercules, George Washington's enslaved cook who, after many years of service, disappeared from the Washington's Philadelphia home in 1797 (72). The portrait, a self-possessed, individualized likeness, is the polar opposite of the generic black servant who lingers in the shadows of the Savage portrait. These two paintings ostensibly executed within the same Washington family milieu, reveal the complexities inherent in the representation of enslaved African Americans. Executed more than a century later, the introspective *Portrait of Henry O. Tanner*, 1897, by Thomas Eakins (fig. 6) depicts Tanner, the first African American artist to gain international notoriety, and lends him the kind of self-reflexive *gravitas* often evoked in the portrayal of artists. Works in the exhibition uniformly feature the individualized portrayal

of African American men, women, and children that work against the ubiquitous dehumanization of blacks in American visual culture.

Fig. 5, William Matthew Prior, *Mrs. Nancy Lawson*, 1843. Oil on canvas. © Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont. [larger image]

Fig. 6, Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Henry O. Tanner*, 1902. Oil on canvas. © The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York. [larger image]

Although *Portraits of a People* does not address the stereotyping of blacks in America during this era, the exhibition does feature a problematic group of images of "light-but-not-white" children used to cultivate abolitionist sentiment (154). An interesting set of *cartes-de-visites* features the five-year-old "redeemed slave-child," Fannie Virginia Casseopia Lawrence from New Orleans. Her image was among those employed to demonstrate that the horrors of slavery were being forced on these nearly white children, hoping to arouse sympathies for the abolitionist cause. These images not only pointed to the almost institutionalized practice of slave owners' sexual exploitation of African American women, but also reinforced hierarchies among blacks regarding skin color. In the case of the photographs of light skinned slave children, the exhibition's overarching theme of individual agency and the construction of identity does not necessarily apply. These children, products of slavery's sexual pathology, were being exploited both by their slave-owner/parents as well as the

abolitionists who marketed their images in the name of liberation. They do, however, reveal the complex terrain of race and representation in nineteenth-century America.

The exhibition catalogue, in which Du Bois Shaw authored three separate essays, is a welcome addition to the study of race in American art and culture. The introductory essay, "Negro Portraits: Signifying Enslavement and Portraying People," establishes the link between the European portrait tradition featuring blacks as accompaniments to white sitters, and the presence of black slaves in early American portraiture. Since the Italian Renaissance, black servants in European households were considered worldly, exotic possessions and their representation signified wealth and status in portraiture. Aesthetically, the dark skin of the servant was thought to enhance the whiteness, and therefore the beauty, of the European female being portrayed. For example, Du Bois Shaw discusses French painter Pierre Mignard's *Duchess of Portsmouth, Louise de Kéroualle* of 1682. Mignard depicts the French-born mistress of Charles II with a young, adoring black female servant. The black child, holding pearls, coral and a seashell, symbolizes exotic luxury, and also points to the slave economy of the colonial world, a source of incredible wealth for Europeans.

A ubiquitous element in European portraiture, the black servant as a trope of wealth was, however, less prevalent in American art. One important example of the role black servants played in American colonial portraiture is *The Washington Family*, 1798-96, by American artist Edward Savage. In addition to George Washington and his family, the painting depicts a slave, dressed in livery, who has been identified as Washington's valet and butler William Lee (18). The image of the dark servant in the periphery of this family gathering certainly represents the particulars of the Washington household, but also evokes the stature of the Washington family as well as the culture of American slavery. However, in contrast to the European model, it lacks a sense of exoticism often imported by black figures. Their differences notwithstanding, black figures in *Duchess of Portsmouth* and *The Washington Family* are among the innumerable anonymous blacks that had no agency in their own representation and were fashioned as tropes, typologies, or vicious stereotypes in Euro-American visual culture. These images serve as foils to the individualized renderings in *Portraits of a People*.

Two essays provide targeted interpretations of works in the exhibition, an approach I find refreshing in lieu of the typical overview. The first, " 'On Deathless Glories Fix Thine Ardent View': Scipio Moorhead, Phillis Wheatley, and the Mythic Origins of Anglo-African Portraiture in New England" presents a challenge to the accepted narrative surrounding the engraved portrait of Phillis Wheatley. The engraving served as the frontispiece to her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (fig. 7). Wheatley was the first person of African descent from New England to publish poetry in English in "the British public sphere" and the first woman in colonial America to have her portrait printed with her writings (27). Her portrait has been attributed to enslaved African American artist Scipio Moorhead. This attribution is linked to art historian James Porter's conjecture that because Wheatley wrote a poem entitled "To S.M. a young African Painter, on seeing his works," Morehead *could* have been the author of her portrait (28). Other than this anecdotal incident, there exists no documentation of Morhead's involvement in the project, nor any evidence of Morehead's output as an artist. This idea has grown into what Du Bois Shaw refers to as a "New World Ur" story (27). She argues for the "manumission of this image from its traditional, arrested

place at the beginning of the African American art historical canon" and calls for its reinterpretation as evidence of a "heterocultural Atlantic world" in which Americans, British, enslaved and free Africans shared experiences and ideas in a complex and layered manner (29). Du Bois Shaw's essay presents a fascinating story about Phillis Wheatley, her Bostonian owners, and British abolitionist patrons that reveal the complex, trans-Atlantic nature of the process entailed in publishing the volume, calling into question the attribution of this work to African American artist Scipio Morehead.
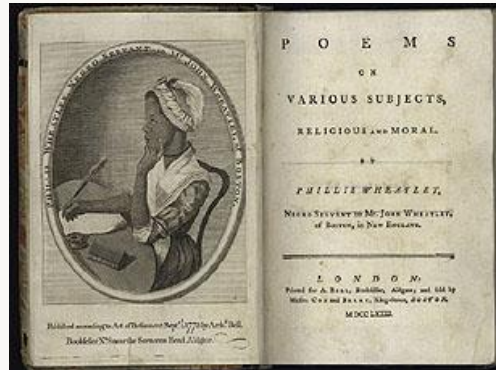

Fig. 7, Scipio Moorhead, *Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston*, 1773. Frontispiece engraving. © Special Collections, Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College. [larger image]

Published in London in 1773, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was in high demand and touted in British abolitionist rhetoric. The engraving of Wheatley as an accomplished woman of letters working at her desk challenged the existing stereotypes of black females as sexual commodities then prevalent in British print culture, and potentially influenced subsequent representations of female writers. The publication timeline indicates that the portrait of Wheatley would have been done in the spring of 1773 in either Boston or London (58). On both sides of the Atlantic, sources for this type of imagery abounded. The woman at a desk or table was a convention in Colonial American portraiture (37) and can also be compared to the rococo fashion for women at writing desks popularized by artists such as Francois Boucher. Wheatley and her American portraitist could have been exposed to these typologies in Boston through mezzotints and intaglios of European art, or the rich portrait tradition in the local Anglo-American community (36-37). A British portraitist would have been firmly grounded in Anglo-European portrait traditions. Indeed, the portrait may not have been executed from direct observation at all, but an imaginary rendering created in specifically for the publication. Similarly, *Portraits of a People* features two posthumous images loosely identified as Phillis Wheatley. The first, a silhouette, c.1820, tentatively identified as Wheatley by its owners presents little evidence to substantiate this claim. A lithograph by Bernard Impremerie identified as Phillis Wheatley from the French periodical *Revue des Colonies* from 1834-42 presents an exoticized, generic portrait of a black woman. The three images of Wheatley in the exhibition have no visual correlation to one another.

As Du Bois Shaw demonstrates, documentary evidence of the actual likeness of Phillis Wheatley has yet to be uncovered. The genesis of the engraving of Phillis Wheatley could

have grown out of any number of circumstances, calling into question the attribution to the mysterious Scipio Morehead. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two enslaved Africans in Boston in the middle of the eighteenth century is often touted as the origins of African American art history.

Du Bois Shaw's recasting of this important engraving uncovers its broader implications, but does not necessarily remove it from the canonical narrative of African American art history. Even if the slave, Scipio Morehead, was not the artist, the strength and agency inherent in the image, its popularity, and position in the struggle for freedom, demonstrated the potential power wielded by the dignified fashioning of black identity. This remarkable engraving has served as a hallmark of African American self-representation and has inspired African American artists to combat racism through the crafting of their own identity. Images such as that of Phillis Wheatley and the many portraits in this exhibition, whether created by black or white artists, fueled the African American art movement that began in earnest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is this power of self-representation harnessed by African American artists that would be fundamental to the trajectory of African American art through the twentieth century.

The final essay, "'Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles': Silhouettes and African American Identity in the Early Republic," is another in-depth analysis of a single piece from the exhibition. As Du Bois Shaw fleshes out the story of Moses Williams, a manumitted "Molatta" slave in the household of Charles Wilson Peale, she provides us with a glimpse into the racial dynamics of art and identity-making in the orbit of one of nineteenth-century America's foremost artists.[4] A former slave of the Peales, Williams learned taxidermy, animal husbandry, silhouette making, and other skills taught to the junior members of the family. Although never instructed in the high art of painting, Williams became exceptionally skilled at producing silhouettes utilizing the physiognotrace machine. The physiognotrace was a mechanized instrument that traced the actual structure of the sitter's profile by skimming the face forehead to chin and inscribing it on paper. From the trace, the likeness of the sitter was extracted from the white paper and placed over a dark surface to create the silhouette. Either a technician or a sitter could operate the machine.

The 1803 silhouette titled *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles* has recently been attributed to Raphaelle Peale, son of Charles Wilson Peale. Du Bois Shaw contends that the author of the silhouette of Moses Williams could have been any number of skilled silhouette-makers in the Peale household, including Williams himself. Du Bois Shaw imagines what it may have been like for Moses Williams to have created his own likeness in this medium (52). She proposes that we consider that the work as a self-portrait and proceeds to extrapolate the potential implications of this kind of identity-making project on the part of a mixed-race, ex-slave artist in ante-bellum America. According to Du Bois Shaw, his anglicized portrait with a long braid was purposefully altered by the artist to connote tropes of whiteness, magnifying a sense of confusion surrounding racial mixing and the construction of identity in early nineteenth-century America.[5] Although there remains no evidence that the silhouette is indeed a self-portrait of Moses Williams, Du Bois Shaw points out that, similarly, there exists no evidence that Raphaelle Peale authored the work. She maintains that by considering Raphaelle Peale as the only potential artist, in spite of the wealth of information about Moses Williams and his success as a silhouette maker in the Peale

household, historians deny the possible agency of this black artist and obfuscate potential African American contribution to American art. By exploring the possibility of Moses Williams creating a self-portrait Du Bois Shaw exposes the failure on the part of historians to consider the potential involvement of the disenfranchised, faceless, enslaved people whose contribution to American art has yet to be recovered.

Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw's *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*—its images, essays, and substantial catalogue entries—are a valuable addition to the literature on American art and visual culture. This distinctive exhibition takes on the monumental task of recovering the histories of African Americans in the nineteenth century and gives the visitor a rare glimpse at the individuality and humanity of a people struggling for selfhood (fig. 8).

Fig. 8, View of installation. Photo by Carson Zullinger . [larger image]

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Notes

[1] For blacks in American art see Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the American Revolution to World War I, pt. 1: Slaves and Liberators; pt. 2: Black Models and White Myths* (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 1989).

[2] Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, Publishers, 1990).

[3] Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and McElroy, *Facing History*. For a notable addition to this literature regarding nineteenth-century England see Jan Marsh, ed. *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900* (Manchester: Manchester Art Gallery, 2005).

[4] In several letters quoted by Du Bois Shaw, Peale referred to his mixed race slave as a "Molatta" (46-47).

[5] Du Bois Shaw fleshes out her interpretation of Moses Williams as self portraitist in her recent book on African American artist Kara Walker. See Gwendolyn Du Bois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 23-27.
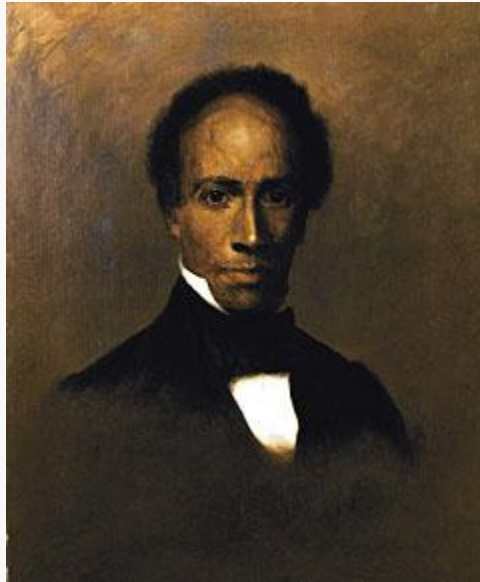
Illustrations

Fig. 1, Thomas Sully, *Edward James Royce*, c. 1864. Oil on canvas. © Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia, Historical Society of Philadelphia Collection. Gift of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society. [return to text]

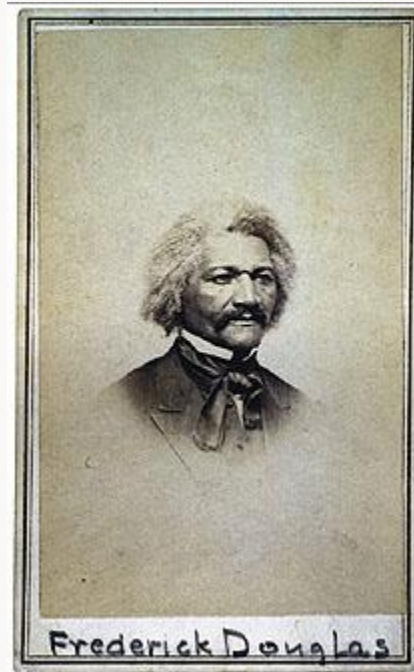Fig. 2, View of installation. Photo by Carson Zullinger. [return to text]

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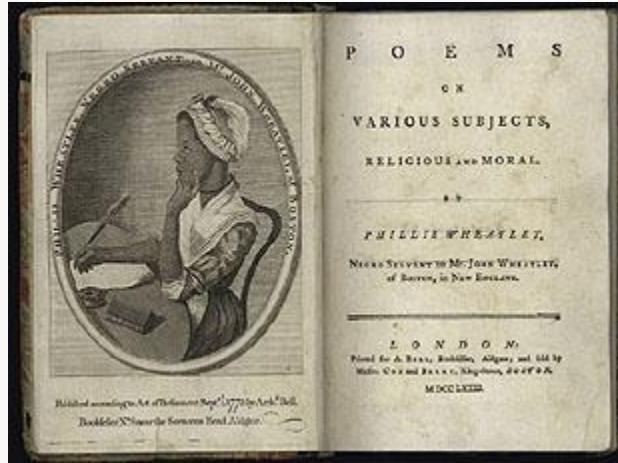
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Fig. 8, View of installation. Photo by Carson Zullinger . [return to text]