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book review of

Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration edited by Mary D. Sheriff

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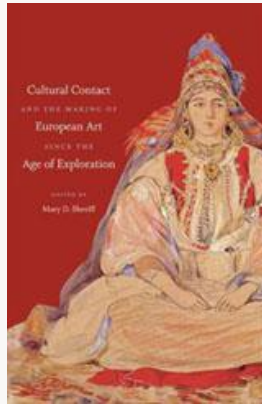
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Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration,
Edited by Mary D. Sheriff.
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One of the key tenets of this book is that cultural appropriation and exchange have been fundamental to the making of European art since the true beginning of global exploration in the late 1400s. Mary D. Sheriff makes the case, in her introductory essay, *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art, 1492–1930*, that this truism often gets forgotten or obscured in the art world. As an example she cites the layout of museums, in which artwork is separated into regional and stylistic categories, such as Italian Renaissance painting or French Impressionism, without acknowledging the debt to other cultures which many of these works might display. Sheriff wants us to understand that while she and the other authors within this volume recognize the heuristic necessity of such categorization, they feel it is time for a broader grasp of European art. Thus, in the Introduction and the seven essays that follow, the authors each explore a contact zone, a space in which “at least two recognizable entities (e.g., nations, cultures, regions)” interact, creating a type of exchange (2).

The essays follow a chronological path from the time of the Renaissance until the 1930s. Four of the essays fall within, or very close to, the purview of *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, and will form the focus of this review. These are Mary D. Sheriff’s “The Dislocations of Jean-Etienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter”; Elisabeth A. Fraser’s “Images of Uncertainty: Delacroix and the Art of Nineteenth-Century Expansionism”; “Gauguin in Black and Blue” by Carol Mavor; and “A Different Shade of Modernism: Difference and Distinction in Pedro Figari’s Representations of Black Bodies” by Lyneise E. Williams.

The book as a whole contains intelligent, perceptive, and engaging essays. Although the title of the book speaks to the making of European Art, a very broad term that might make the reader expect similarly broad subject matters within the essays, in fact, most of them focus on very specific themes. For example, in the entries pertinent to the nineteenth century, Mary D.

Sheriff investigates the meaning behind a single self-portrait of Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–89); Elisabeth A. Fraser is interested in the travel journals of Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) sole North African trip; Lyneise E. Williams examines a relatively obscure painter from Uruguay; and Carol Mavor explores Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) specifically, and not the Post-Impressionists generally.

Sheriff addresses this in her “Introduction”, calling these specificities ‘blind spots’ in the canon of art history, and identifying them as those “artists, practices, movements, or traditions occluded [from the canon] because they cannot be framed in established categories of analysis” (5). Thus, a second important purpose of the book is to begin to create an understanding of the richness and diversity that exists in art history, a variety that is not usually acknowledged in standard texts that focus on the canon and remain silent about what other artists were doing, reducing those artists, popular and respected as they may have been during their lives, to invisibility. Through their focus on these ‘blind spots’, Sheriff et al are broadening our knowledge of art history, and at the same time, attempting to re-imagine it as a “contact zone” (13). In this case, contact is used in a general sense: contact not only between nations and cultures, but also across disciplines and between mediums. In this way, these essays become exemplars for a new path within art history, one that does not deny the importance of national identity, artistic movements or individual genius, but which also acknowledges the other influences in play. The result, in this volume at least, is a collection that combines scholarship with intriguing subjects, providing an engrossing, thought-provoking, and challenging read.

In “The Dislocations of Jean-Etienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter,” Sheriff investigates the meaning behind a self-portrait by the now little known eighteenth-century pastelist Jean-Etienne Liotard. This pastel depicting Liotard wearing a Middle Eastern fur hat, includes text identifying the artist as the “Turkish Painter” from Geneva, and indicates that the portrait was painted in Vienna. Liotard’s emphasis on place forms the starting point for Sheriff’s analysis; from this simple image, she uncovers layer upon layer of meaning, peeling back the readers surface understanding of the portrait as a factual representation of Liotard to reveal evidence of the depth of meaning that culture, and cultural exchange, held for Liotard. Sheriff explores both the importance of place in Liotard’s life, as well as the subject of dislocation, and connects these to the artist’s identity, as expressed within his self-portrait. Of particular interest was Sheriff’s analysis of the portrait as a form of tribute to both Moldavia and Turkey, “two places that welcomed and even feted” Liotard (113). Because this portrait was commissioned by Holy Roman Emperor Francis I (1708–65) for inclusion in his collection of European artists self-portraits, Sheriff also includes a telling comparison of Liotard’s 1744 portrait with Hyacinthe Rigaud’s (1659–1743) 1716 oil portrait of the same collection.^[1] Rigaud’s portrait shows the artist gazing coolly out at the viewer, the image of a completely self-assured court painter and courtier; it could not be more different in feeling from Liotard’s, in which he appears uncertain, perhaps a trifle shy, and depicts no tools of an artist’s trade. Sheriff posits that while Rigaud has displayed himself as definitely French, and someone who asserts himself upon the world, Liotard has rejected a single national identity, preferring to appear as someone with connections to a variety of cultures, yet belonging to none; she sees him presenting himself as someone whose senses are open to the world, a willing receptacle of sensory impressions and experiences. Implied within this sensitivity is the idea that the knowledge gleaned through his senses would be translated into his art. Sheriff includes in her analysis a discussion on *turquerie*; the social composition and culture of Geneva, Constantinople, and Moldavia; and the

relationship between the Ottoman Empire and various European countries (most especially those closest to the empire, such as Austria). Sheriff's essay is well-constructed, thoroughly engaging, and convincingly persuasive; a stand-out in a collection of already strong essays.

Elisabeth A. Fraser's "Images of Uncertainty: Delacroix and the Art of Nineteenth-Century Expansionism" sets out to make the case that Delacroix's travel journals from his six-month trip to North Africa in 1832 reflect his feelings of distance and anxiety amongst the North African 'Other'.^[2] Fraser compares the images from other travel journals by Delacroix with those of his North African sketches, and observes an objectivity and hesitancy in his North African drawings, much at odds with his usual practice. Further, she discusses the tendency toward categorization and impartial visual 'records' of objects and costume that Delacroix exhibits in his North African journals, also something unusual for him. Fraser also imbues the motif of thresholds with a great deal of psychological significance for Delacroix, and implies that they signify his sense of vulnerability and his recognition of his own 'Otherness'. She notes that entries, gates, barriers, doorsteps and the like make up a significant portion of the journals, and connects it to "the experience of being outside, the possibility and desire of entering before him, the privilege of access not quite attainable" (143). This is then further related to the relationship of France with North Africa. Fraser connects Delacroix's uneasiness within the imperial setting and political situation to his objective and almost ethnographic sketches. Fraser builds her argument through a discussion of the political landscape of the time; travel imagery; the role of the ethnographer, and the balance between subjectivity and objectivity. She seeks correspondence in the visual evidence of Delacroix's work, both that created at the time of his trip, and those completed later. Fraser's essay is strong and well constructed, but despite this, it is not entirely convincing. For one thing, the reader who does not have a strong knowledge of Delacroix's sketchbooks has to take a great deal on trust in Fraser's analysis, since only one image from any of his other sketchbooks is given to demonstrate her points. More images would have helped spotlight the differences she sees, and would have been useful in establishing both Delacroix's habitual practice and the novelty of his 1832 sketches. Moreover, while her analysis is intriguing and plausible, it would have been bolstered by the voice of Delacroix. For instance, in a footnote, Fraser mentions Delacroix's later anti-colonial feelings and the "denigrating effect of contact" but it seems that this could have had a stronger place within the text and her greater argument (149). The only direct words by Delacroix that Fraser uses express his dissatisfaction with his work in the North African sketchbooks, blaming it on his desire for accuracy, and commenting that his work improved when he looked to the "striking and poetic side of the subject" (138). This quote supports the notion of his objectivity, but does not even hint at any possible underlying cause. The skeptical reader wonders if the objectivity and hesitation Fraser sees in Delacroix's sketches could be no more than the result of his self-professed desire for accuracy in the face of a completely 'alien' setting, without having any bearing on his psychological or emotional state.

"Gauguin in Black and Blue" by Carol Mavor is a poetic and often psychoanalytical exploration of Gauguin's life and art, seen through a blue-and-black lens. Mavor contends that blue and black were fundamental to both the nature of Gauguin's art, as well as to his life. In her reading, black signifies the color of melancholy, while blue represents nostalgia. While Gauguin is the acknowledged subject, it often seems more like Gauguin serves as a useful vehicle for her wider discussion, allowing her to incorporate into her musings such diverse topics as the early films of the Lumières; Freud's notion of the oceanic; her own possible

connection with Gauguin; utopian visions; children dreaming; air molecules and getting lost, to name a few. The sources she uses range from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Mavor's writing is evocative and a pleasure to read, but her essay remains unfocused. There are also times when it seems that Mavor forces her interpretation of Gauguin as a pilgrim; it must be this which causes her to miss an obvious association. When discussing the work *Still Life with Flowers, Interior of the Artist's Apartment, Rue Carcel, Paris* (1881), Mavor draws our attention to the sabot clogs hanging on the wall, suggesting that it would be unusual for Gauguin to have them before his trip to Brittany, when he became interested in sabots, and carved some himself (160). However, as Mavor notes earlier, Gauguin's wife, Mette, was from Denmark, a country where clogs were often worn; although it seems that this would be a logical explanation for their presence in Gauguin's painting, Mavor does not address it. Overall, while Mavor makes some excellent points and touches on many subjects, she rarely explores them in depth. Many times she alludes to something, such as Gauguin's abusive relationship with his wife, but does not take the opportunity to truly explore this black side of Gauguin. She prefers to focus on the blue nature of longing and nostalgia, for the most part only hinting at the black that lies beyond it. Throughout the essay, Mavor's tone is noticeably intimate and subjective for an art historical essay, a reminder that art has the capacity to resonate with the viewer on personal as well as aesthetic and intellectual levels. Its strength lies in this quality rather than as a significant scholarly contribution to the body of literature on Gauguin.

Lyneise E. Williams is responsible for the last essay in the book, "A Different Shade of Modernism: Difference and Distinction in Pedro Figari's Representations of Black Bodies." Her subject is the twentieth century Uruguayan artist, Pedro Figari (1861–1938), a lawyer and artist who was classically trained but acquired fame in Paris as a 'naïf' painter during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In her essay, Williams explores the development of Figari's style and subject matter, and connects it to his own changing social beliefs. Although Black people were a popular subject in Paris, in part thanks to performers like Josephine Baker (1906–75), by focusing on the *candombe*, a music and performance spectacle native to black Uruguayans, Figari rejects the stereotypical representations of many French artists and represents the black Uruguayans as specific and distinct, with a culture and artistic heritage of their own. Williams discusses Figari's art in juxtaposition with Uruguay's racial and social policies, arguing convincingly that Figari (a white man of Italian ancestry) was going against his social class by painting the *candombe* performers, even if not all his depictions are positive. She also demonstrates Figari's biting social commentary in her comparison of two *Honeymoon* paintings, one of an imperious and loveless Spanish Creole couple, the other of joyful Black Uruguayans. Within the essay are many images that help elucidate the text, and support the key points. The writing is tight, with a well-developed structure and a strong argument. Williams has done a thorough job of bringing to light a little-known figure in early twentieth century art and arguing for his importance.

Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration would be an enjoyable and intellectually satisfying read for the layman as well as for the professional art historian. The themes of cultural connection, interdependence, transmutation, and exchange, which flow throughout the book are enlightening, helping the viewer to see familiar (and not so familiar) art in a new way; further, they have relevance in today's increasingly diverse and global world, and a recognition of this could serve as the basis for a reconsideration of art historiography and (potentially) current art historical practice. The contributors to this text set out to make a thought-provoking book that brought some 'blind spots' in art history to light.

In so doing, they were highly successful. They have demonstrated that there is a wealth of material, across centuries, to be mined in these 'blind spots' and 'contact zones' and that the discipline of art history would be the richer for it. This collection is an excellent start in opening up new territory and methods of investigation pertinent to the new expansive nature of art history.

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Notes

[1] This collection is housed in the Vasari corridor of the Uffizi Palace. <http://www.polomuseale.firenze.it/english/musei/uffizi/>

[2] Delacroix was accompanying a French delegation, which was hoping to win Moroccan support for the French occupation of Algeria.