"Les boutons de l'habit de gala de Toussaint L'Ouverture" Questions of Authenticity, Use, and Meaning

Emily Kathleen Thames

Currently held in the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City is an intriguing set of eighteen late eighteenth-century buttons (Figure 1). These unique objects, allegedly worn by the leader and hero of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803), and which feature scenes of Afro-Caribbean society based upon the work of Agostino Brunias (1730-1796), clearly reflect a monumental moment in history during which reform and revolution dominated the European political sphere. Little more than cursory scholarly attention has been paid to the buttons, and the L'Ouverture legend with which they are frequently associated currently restricts that which exists. Since there is no concrete evidence to prove a connection between the buttons and the revolutionary figure, the primary objective of this paper is to analyze these buttons as objects independent from this supposition and to argue that the buttons contribute to an anti-slavery discourse even without the certainty of a famous anti-slavery patron. Through this examination it can be determined that the buttons' imagery is based upon a specific set of pro-slavery British prints, but these prints were used and interpreted within a pro-Abolitionist French context. This argument will simultaneously consider the buttons' material use as objects of adornment and the potential interpretations and implications of their imagery.[1]

The problematic legend of the buttons and their assumed association with Toussaint L'Ouverture raise significant questions to be addressed. The adornments were initially connected to L'Ouverture in a nineteenth-century letter, currently held by the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, which was written by a previous owner of the buttons, Jean Milare. Within this document, Milare details the provenance of the buttons and propagates the idea that the Haitian revolutionary was their original owner.[2] Though the purpose of this letter was to provide clarity regarding the provenance of the buttons, based on this document alone, no real connection can be established between L'Ouverture and the objects. Not only is the history of the buttons being recounted in this instance by an individual several degrees removed from their source, but he was also their owner and was attempting to establish the value and importance of the objects. Despite its problematic authorship, the L'Ouverture legend conveyed within Milare's letter abets the cultural imagination surrounding the objects. Scholars are drawn to the story and become enamored with the idea that the leader of the only successful slave revolt in history may have worn adornments possessive of such imagery.[3] Therein lies the difficulty concerning the Cooper-Hewitt buttons; they are only referenced within scholarship as periphery objects to the L'Ouverture legend. The buttons are never fully explored beyond their supposed associa-

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my advisor, graduate research project committee chair, and departmental chair Dr. Denise Baxter. Her constant support and guidance proved invaluable to me as I wrote the research paper on which this essay is based.

1 This examination will consider the objects as primary data, utilizing the material culture theory and method described by Jules Prown. Prown defines material culture as the study through artifacts of the beliefs of a particular community or society. To study material culture is to study the culture literally created through materials of a certain time that reflect the beliefs and ideals of the people using the materials themselves. By focusing on the material context of the buttons, it will be possible to derive how they may have been used and by whom. Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1. While this essay by Prown serves as a primary impetus for this discussion, other writings on material culture theory and method include Jules Prown, "In Pursuit of Culture: The Formal Language of Objects," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): 2-3; Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); Jules Prown and Kenneth Haltman, *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000); Carl Knappet, *Thinking Through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and Christopher Tilley, *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006).

2 Jean Milare, "Les Boutons de Toussaint L'Ouverture," letter in the possession of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York. I must thank Dr. Marijn S. Kaplan, Associate Professor of World Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of North Texas, for assisting me with the translation of this document.

3 When the Cooper-Hewitt buttons are mentioned within scholarship, it is only in reference to the L'Ouverture legend. This pattern is observed in: Lennox Honychurch, "Chatoyer's Artist: Agostino Brunias and the Depiction of St. Vincent," *St.Vincent and the Grenadines Country Conference Pre-Prints,* last modified 10 October 2003, accessed 22 January 2012, http://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/bnccde/svg/conference/papers/honychurch.html; Mia Bagneris, "Coloring the Caribbean: Agostino Brunias and the Painting of Race in the West Indies, c. 1765-1800," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009), 113-114; Ann Geracimos, "A Mystery in Miniature: An Enigmatic Button Once Decorated the Uniform of Haitian Liberator Toussaint L'Ouverture," *Smithsonian*, January 2000, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/object_jan00.html; Millia Davenport, *The Book of Costume* (New

tion with the Haitian leader and are therefore restricted by the very mystery that makes them seem so fascinating. In response to this observable pattern, this examination of the Cooper-Hewitt buttons will break with precedent and examine the adornments independent from the legend presented within Milare's letter and, by doing so, will allow previously unconsidered possibilities related to the use and meaning of the buttons to come to light.

The objects measure three-eighths of an inch in height and one and seven-sixteenths of an inch in diameter. Set in the *verre fixé* style, intricate depictions composed of gouache on tin are pressed beneath a glass cover, and a thin strip of gilded metal binds the painted tin layer and the glass face to an ivory backing.[4] Embedded in the back of the button is a loop shank, also gilded metal, that once anchored the objects to the clothing they adorned. The buttons would have been removable and transferrable because they were merely sewn to a garment.

The scenes on the buttons display an assortment of interactions between Afro-Caribbeans in the West Indies, including Black and Red Caribs, Afro-Creoles, individuals of mixed-race, freemen, and slaves, and feature a fascinating array of figural compositions.[5] All levels of society are exhibited, from well-dressed women wearing elaborate necklaces to men wearing nothing but feathered headdresses and cloths around their waists. Though none of the scenes exactly repeat, most of the individual figures reappear from button to button. A small girl with a parasol tucked beneath her arm, a well-dressed man with a cane, a woman in pink lifting her hand delicately to her face, once with a glass and once with a flower, plus several others are recurrent. This reiteration of stylized forms creates a sense of rhythm throughout the objects, and though there is no known original order or placement of the buttons upon the garment they would have adorned, a sense of continuity from scene to scene is discernible due to the repeated figures and backgrounds.

The style and manufacture of these objects indicates their French origin. Prior to this time, buttons were only worn by the upper classes and varied in style and use. However, during the eighteenth century in France, buttons rose in popularity as a form of artistic and cultural expression of the male upper class.[6] As gendered objects, buttons during the eighteenth century were almost exclusively used in male dress and clothing featuring highly decorative and luxurious detail. French buttons from this time might encapsulate curiosities and fragments of nature beneath domed glass, were encrusted with jewels, were covered in embroidery, and even served as minute canvases for elaborately painted landscapes, portraits, and still-life scenes.[7] As scholars have demonstrated, buttons during this time period in France were highly valued fashion items utilized by the elite class, intended to demonstrate not only the sophistication of the wearer, but also wealth in the display of expensive materials.[8]

As French buttons, these objects would have adorned a man's coat representative of the French fashion.[9] In examples of surviving late eighteenth-century French suits such as those in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art or Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the placement of buttons on a man's ensemble can be determined to have been at the cuff of the coat sleeves, the base of the lapel, and along the length of the coat on either side of the front coat opening. Clearly, eighteen buttons of this size would have caught the attention of anyone being addressed by the wearer. Such a display draws the viewer's eye to the objects with the twist of the torso or the gesture of a hand.

The Italian artist Agostino Brunias is most often cited as being the creator of these adornments, although there is no clear evidence to support this conclusion. While the buttons

York: Crown Publications, 1948), 2:706-707; Lisa Taylor, *Buttons in the Collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum* (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 1982), 6-7; and Stephen Doyle and Susan Yelavich, *Design for Life* (New York: Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 165.

4 The 1996 exhibition catalogue *European Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* describes *verre fixé* as the adhesion of a painted surface to a glass face. For more information, see Graham Reynolds and Katharine Baetjer, *European Miniatures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996),186.

5 As Mia Bagneris demonstrates within her dissertation, these terms are ambiguous. However, the terms Black and Red Caribs refer to island natives of African (Black) and non-African (Red) descent. Afro-Creoles are Africans born in the Caribbean colonies. See Bagneris, "Coloring the Caribbean," 42-46.

6 Melinda Watt, "Buttons," in *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 109.

7 According to Melinda Watt in her chapter for *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, during this period the value of the decorations on a man's ensemble, including the buttons, jewels, and embroidery, could amount to as much as eighty percent of the total cost. Watt, "Buttons," 109. Additionally, Davenport states that though the decoration on French coats and waistcoats diminished at the end of the eighteenth century, buttons increased in size and importance, "in the fabrication of which all possible materials are exploited." Davenport, *Book of Costume*, 2:653-655.

8 For more information regarding eighteenth-century buttons, see Diana Epstein and Millicent Saffro, *Buttons* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001). This is one of the few volumes that addresses button history at length, and it was written by the proprietors of Tender Buttons, a button collector shop in New York City. Within their chapter devoted to French and English buttons during the eighteenth century, it is possible to determine the heightened popularity of these adornments, both in a display of the wide variance of types available, as well as the evidence presented within production over the century of an evolving sense of style and fashion. Painted buttons, in particular, are discussed, as are popular themes presented on buttons during this time period.

9 While decorative buttons were considered fashionable in France until the end of the century, male dress in England became increasingly more reserved and plain starting in the 1770s, a result of the growing popularity of the simplified country fashion adopted by English aristocrats. Both Madeleine Delpierre and Aileen Ribeiro indicate the decline of French taste in England during the last few decades of the century. See Madeleine Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth*

do possess imagery that resembles Brunias' work, there are no other existing examples of buttons or even miniature paintings by the artist. Additionally, the figures represented on the buttons are not concurrent with Brunias' meticulously rendered style, as observed in the intricate stippling technique he used in his engravings. Therefore, this paper argues that the buttons' scenes are actually based upon specific prints by Brunias that circulated throughout Europe and were copied in both England and France (Figures 2-7).[10] The similar figures depicted in the prints and on the buttons are far too definite to be mere coincidence, especially in consideration of the sheer quantity of figures that are present within both sets. Conceivably an individual in possession of these prints, or copies of them, created the scenes on the buttons.

The time Brunias spent living and working in the British West Indies during the late eighteenth century inspired the Afro-Caribbean subject matter present in his prints and paintings. The artist first travelled to the West Indies in 1764 under the employ of Sir William Young, for whom Brunias served as personal painter.[11] He returned to London in 1775, and between the years of 1779 and 1780, the artist published a set of prints featuring West Indian scenes, each of which possesses a personalized dedication to one of six different British governmental officials.

This set of prints was published during the rise of the Abolitionist movement, and while there is a certain amount of ambiguity to Brunias' imagery and style, based on contemporary examples of viewership and use, it is arguable that they were interpreted as positive views of slavery. The primary patron of Brunias' works, Sir William Young, not only owned slaves and West Indian plantations, but was vocal about the benefits of slavery. To encourage settlement in the Caribbean isles in his publication *Considerations Which May Tend to Promote the Settlement of Our West-India Colonies*, Young states, "A sugar estate of five hundred acres of good land, properly cleared, and supplied with slaves, cattle buildings, and other requisites, in an island where the lands are new and luxuriant, and the rains frequent, must assuredly produce a noble income."[12] Based on the tone of this statement, it is evident that Sir William considered slaves to be ancillary property, one of the many tools required for a healthy colonial economy. Representations such as those he commissioned from Brunias would conceivably have supported Sir William's ideology regarding slaves and slavery.

These works were openly cited in support of the pro-slavery agenda in England, as exemplified in a publication from 1785 by James Tobin entitled *Cursory Remarks Upon Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies*. Tobin, an ardent and strong spoken anti-Abolitionist, makes reference to Brunias' prints to support the institution of slavery, saying,

> To the mere European reader I beg leave to recommend an inspection of a set of prints, etched by Brunias, an Italian painter, from drawings made by himself on the spot, representing the negro dancings, cudgellings, &c. &c. of the different islands; which are drawn with much exactness and strong character.—Let them compare these plump, active, and merry figures with the emaciated, squalid, and heart-broken inhabitants of the distant English villages.[13]

Clearly, when Tobin viewed these prints in 1785, he saw happy, comfortable figures and was not inclined to be concerned for their plight as slaves.

Having established the Cooper-Hewitt buttons as examples of late eighteenth-century French production, with imagery based upon English prints that were evidentially read as pro-slavery representations of Afro-Caribbean society, the interpretation of these objects becomes somewhat problematic. The inherent duplicity of the buttons, as both French in style but representative of English Caribbean themes, visual in appearance but material in nature, further complicates their interpretation. However, considering the material use of these objects as clothing adornments that contribute to an individual's identity through the construction of physical appearance, these challenging factors can be reframed within the construction of identity. Groundwork can be laid for how these objects would have been worn, and an argument can be established for how they were used, viewed, and interpreted.[14]

Based on their style and origin, the wearer of these buttons would have been male, most likely living in France or the French colonies. The quality of the objects implies that

Century (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 58-59; and Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 211-213.

10 Brunias' body of works, specifically his West Indian inspired pieces, gained some popularity in England and France through print circulation, as well as the printing of copies after Brunias' work into published volumes. The prints engraved by Brunias' own hand were published in London prior to his returning to the Caribbean. Also in England, John P. Thompson published prints after Brunias' work in 1804, examples of which are currently held by the Barbados Museum. In addition, Bryan Edwards' book *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* contained copies of the artist's work, starting with the second edition published in 1794. In France, Brunias' imagery was also extant, with works such as *The West India Flower Girl* being copied by Parisian engraver Louis Charles Ruotte. Additionally, Nicolas Ponces' book *Recueil de Vues des Lieux Principaux de la Colonie Françoise de Saint-Domingue*, published in 1791, features a unique collection of circular engravings, six of which are reversed copies of the prints Brunias created while in England. Interestingly, these views claim to be of the French colony of Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti, even though the original prints by Brunias clearly determine the location to be Dominica and Barbados, which were British colonies.

11 Honychurch, "Chatoyer's Artist."

12 William Young, *Considerations Which May Tend to Promote the Settlement of Our New West-India Colonies* (London: James Robson, 1764), 40.

13 James Tobin, *Cursory Remarks Upon Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies* (London: G. and T. Wilkie, 1785), 98.

the wearer would also have been wealthy because they are valuable, fashionable, luxury items made of expensive materials. An individual capable of affording these objects and an appropriate coat to match them would undoubtedly have been prosperous. Additionally, the buttons would have been worn on a coat intended for formal, social occasions, and as a result, the intended viewer of the adornments—present at events such as those where the objects may have been worn—would most likely have fallen into the same socioeconomic category as the wearer.

In considering the use of these buttons by a member of the French upper classes, what can be said about the reception of the objects' imagery? Why would a wealthy French man wear representations of Afro-Caribbean society during the height of the Abolitionist movement in France and England?[15] How would the viewer of these objects have reacted? This paper suggests that these buttons, possessive of such imagery during the last two decades of the eighteenth century during the rise of the Abolitionist movement and utilized in elite French circles, indicates their use as anti-slavery materials. This supposition is based on an analysis of the growing hostility directed towards Africans in France over the century and a survey of African representations in French art during this time period and is further supported through a comparison to like objects.

Numerous studies detail the stringent laws, set in place in France over the course of the eighteenth century, that attempted to not only limit the number of slaves in France, but also the number of Africans and individuals of African descent in general. Regulations intensified over the century starting in 1675 with the *Code Noir*, which introduced official restrictions on slaves and people of color in France and the French colonies.[16] Following the *Code Noir*, the Edict of 1716 attempted to regulate the growing number of slaves being imported to France from the West Indies, requiring permissions and registrations before the slave could enter France.[17] However, the African population in France continued to rise and the Declaration of 1738 was issued to impose more strict and severe procedures and penalties.[18] In 1777, the last law of this kind to be made under the Old Regime prohibited the entry into France of all blacks, slaves, mulattos, and other people of color.[19] Considering the progression of this legislation, it is clear that towards the end of the eighteenth century, being of unwelcome African descent in France was difficult.[20]

Strict regulations regarding Africans and people of color in France intensified over the eighteenth century, reaching its height in the same historical moment as the Abolitionist movement. Simultaneously, while contention grew in regard to slavery and the slave trade, so, too, was there mounting dissention towards the ruling French aristocracy. The language of Abolitionism became intertwined with that of the French Revolution, and in the 1760s and 1770s, prominent writers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Raynal, and

14 The use of dress in the construction of identity (a topic well covered within many disciplines) provides insight for considering how the buttons may have been used and for deducing who may have worn them. Carolyn L. White, an archeological and anthropological scholar, focuses on the effect of personal adornment on identity. White establishes that fashion, clothing, and dress are widely understood to be a system of communication, possessive of symbolic, communicative power. Such objects, as a result, contribute to the identity of an individual, since they are not only performative in their use, but inscribe meaning upon the body of the wearer. Carolyn L. White, *American Artifacts of Personal Adornment, 1680-1820: A Guide to Identification and Interpretation* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005), 4-7. Consequently, what the buttons represent and how they communicate their message not only speaks of the wearer, but also of the audience. If it can be surmised who would have worn and seen these buttons, a plausible interpretation of the objects and their intended message can also be deduced. With reference to the literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes, clothing and dress communicate information, acting as signs or sign systems, from the wearer to the viewer. As he describes in *The Fashion System*, "a Fashion utterance" is composed of both a linguistic system (language) and a vestimentary system referring to the actual garment. Barthes argues that, "the function of the description of Fashion is not only to propose a model which is a copy of reality, but also and especially to circulate Fashion broadly as meaning" (10). In considering the buttons, it is critical to not only consider what meaning they would have projected, but also who might have received that message. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 10-27.

15 Abolition became a serious political subject in both England and France during the 1770s and 1780s, leading to eventual anti-slavery legislation. In England, domestic slavery was outlawed in 1772. Slavery in all of the French territories was abolished in 1792 but reinstated in the French colonies in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1808, England abolished its slave trade. In 1815, the Vienna Treaty marking the end of the Napoleonic Wars condemned the world slave trade, and England led the enforcement of the treaty. England and France would eventually outlaw slavery in all of their territories, England in 1833 and France in 1848. Clearly, for nearly seventy years slavery reform and abolition were prominent legislative topics in these countries. For more information about dates and developments regarding Abolitionism, see Edward Rossiter, "The Abolition of Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Its Consequences for Africa," *African-American History* 7, no. 4 (1993): 48-49.

16 Samuel L. Chatman, "There Are No Slaves in France: A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth Century France," *Journal of Negro History* 85 (2000): 145-146.

17 Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

18 Chatman, "No Slaves in France," 148.

19 Ibid., 148-149.

20 According to Peabody, the exact number of Africans in France at any point in time during the eighteenth century is difficult to confirm. However, it is possible to conclude that mid-century, France's African population was "disproportionately small" compared to England's during the same span of time. Based on estimates, about ten thousand of England's total population of nine million people were Africans or people of African descent, while only four to five thousand accounted for France's nearly twenty million inhabitants. Peabody, *No Slaves in France*, 4.

Diderot "used the symbol of the African slave to criticize the perceived tyranny of the French crown."[21] Slaves and slavery became synonymous with the plight of the people of France during this time, and conceivably the visibility of Africans was repressed in France by the ruling class to discourage this connotation.

Representations of Africans within French art during the eighteenth century arguably followed a similar pattern of restriction due to the concern placed on the actual presence of black individuals in France. As Madeleine Dobie argues in her book *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth Century French Culture*, Old Regime France attempted to keep representations of Africans and references to the colonies away from the metropole because their presence was a reminder of the institution of slavery that existed in the colonies. Given that abolition was an increasingly popular topic, Dobie speculates that the French government tried to limit the visibility of the colonies and demonstrates within her book that representations of Africans or references to the colonies within French culture became nearly non-existent until the end of the century, when the Abolitionist debates created a context in which such imagery was acceptable.[22]

An analysis of the black page trope within French art exemplifies the waning popularity of African representations over the course of the century before the rise of the anti-slavery movement. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the inclusion of a black slave, servant, or groom within aristocratic portraiture became highly popular, and by the early eighteenth century, especially in France, this trope became fashionable with the upper classes.[23] These figures served as foils to the main sitter and were often extravagantly dressed in clothing to make reference to their exotic origin, performing the same decorative function as a fashion accessory.[24] However, towards the end of the century, with the rise of Abolitionism, as well as the frequent inclusion of black slaves and servants in caricatures and satirical prints, the black page trope decreased in popularity.[25]

In comparison, the Cooper-Hewitt buttons make no attempt whatsoever to disguise their association with colonialism or slavery, presenting representations of black, Afro-Caribbean bodies for viewing by the wearer's audience. The button imagery focuses on the black figure and features the Africans without a master and dressed in modern European clothing, rather than in the *Turquerie* or exotic costume featured on black servants within European portraiture. The Africans on the buttons are shown functioning within their own society, rather than being an isolated exotic reference within a controlled European setting. The black figures on the buttons do not serve to promote European affluence in the same manner as does the black page within portraiture, and due to these differences, the sentiment attached to the "fashionable" black page within portraiture does not apply to the representations on the buttons.

As exemplified by the black page trope, the fashionability of African representations in eighteenth-century French art varied, at first serving to promote the wealth and prominence of the aristocracy and upper classes early in the century. By contrast, towards the end of the century, imagery of the black body became fashionable within Abolitionist art, instead. This style of representation and the use of African depictions on material culture objects were not restricted only to France, as can be seen with the popularity of the Wedgwood Medallion in England.

The image on the Wedgwood Medallion of a kneeling, pleading slave with the words "Am I not a man and a brother?" was designed in 1787 as the seal of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.[26] Among the members of the society, the famous British potter and businessman Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) contributed to the cause in the creation, duplication, and disbursement of the Medallion. Wedgwood's intent was that circulation would advertise and promote the Abolitionist message. After its release, the Wedgwood Medallion became a fashion craze and was used in "an array of contexts," including hairpins, dinner plates, bracelets, rings, and snuffboxes.[27] As fashionable propaganda for the Abolitionist cause, the Wedgwood Medallion became ubiquitous in England towards the end of the eighteenth century at the height of the anti-slavery movement.

In a comparison between the buttons and the Medallion, there are initial differences. For instance, the Medallion was mass-produced and seen in multiple contexts by a large British audience. The buttons, on the other hand, were a one-of-a-kind set of French objects. The Medallion portrays a single, half-naked, kneeling slave, pleading for consideration, while the Africans on the buttons represent all levels of West Indian African society, participating in social activities and

[21] Ibid., 9.

[22] Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 5-7.

[23] David Bindman, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and David Bindman, vol. 3, bk. 3, *From the Age of Discovery to the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

[24] Ibid.

[25] David Bindman and Helen Weston, "Court and City: Fantasies of Domination," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and David Bindman, vol. 3, bk. 3, *From the Age of Discovery to the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 135.

[26] Sarah Parsons, "Imagining Empire: Slavery and British Visual Culture, 1765-1807" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2000), 96. For more information regarding the Wedgwood Medallion, see Mary Guyatt, "The Wedgwood Slave Medallion: Values in Eighteenth-Century Design," *Journal of Design History* 13, no. 2 (2000): 93-105; and Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[27] Parsons, "Imagining Empire," 96.

only rarely gazing out of the picture plane. The Medallion instills a sense of compassion for the slave, while in contrast, the representations on the Cooper-Hewitt buttons of totally autonomous individuals, independent and confident within their culture, require no sympathy.

Though the appeal to the viewer varies greatly between the Wedgwood Medallion and the buttons, they arguably perform similar functions as pro-Abolitionist propaganda. These objects were used as adornments, which ascribe meaning to the identity of the wearer. Wearing the Wedgwood Medallion in England, for instance, demonstrated one's allegiance to the Abolitionist movement, as well as advertising the movement itself. Wearing the Cooper-Hewitt buttons in France, which display black, Afro-Caribbean representations, called attention to the rising debates surrounding slavery and revolution. To have worn this imagery as an elite male in France during a time when the visibility of Africans was being institutionally repressed can only indicate the contentious attitude of the wearer, arguably indicating a connection to the Abolitionist movement.

Considering the origin and use of the Cooper-Hewitt buttons within the restrictions of the L'Ouverture legend with which they are so frequently associated confers a sense of mystery; they are remnants of a legend. However, when viewed independently as objects of material culture, they speak volumes regarding purpose, intent, and usage. Though it cannot be determined whether or not L'Ouverture owned or wore these objects, the connotations of the imagery they possess and their function as buttons in late eighteenth-century France leads to the conclusion that they would have been used and interpreted within an anti-slavery or Abolitionist context. Due to the imagery they possess and their function as buttons in a late eighteenth-century French context, it is evident that there is more to these objects than merely being pretty adornments for a fancy suit. There is a discernible connection to be made between these buttons and their wearer who, based on this examination, would have possessed a connection to Abolitionism and the anti-slavery movement.

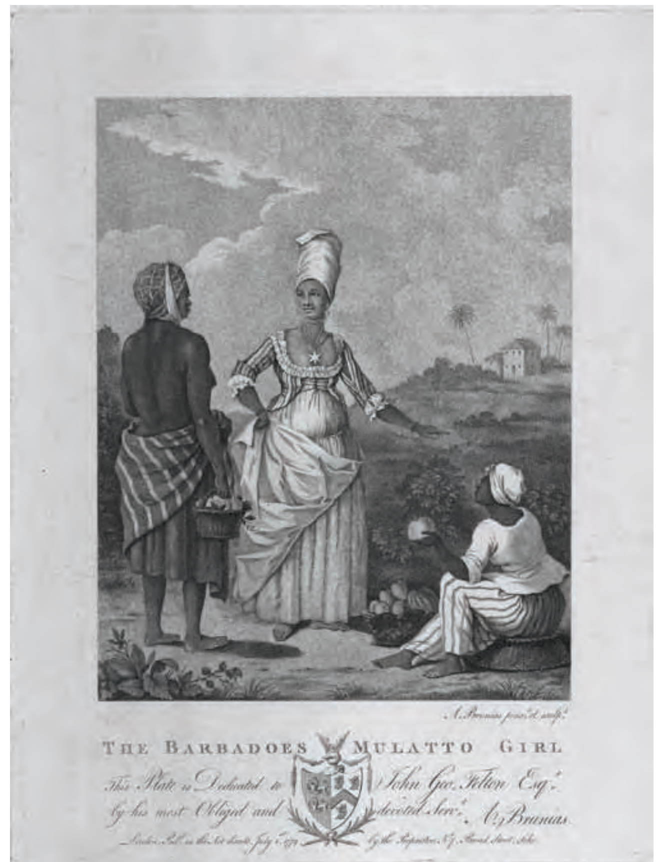
If it could ever be proven that L'Ouverture possessed the buttons, many additional questions would arise to be addressed. Why did he wear them? How and where did he wear them? What did the imagery mean to him? Did he see himself as one of the figures on the buttons? Where and when did he get them? Were they gifts or commissioned by himself? Was L'Ouverture's intention to emulate the French or to mock them? In light of these and other questions, an entirely different history regarding the objects could be established, although the fact that these objects were utilized within a French context would not change, nor would the assertion that these buttons were intended for a pro-Abolitionist context at the end of the eighteenth century.

University of North Texas

Figure 1. *Buttons* (12 of 18 total), late eighteenth century, gouache paint on tin, ivory, glass, and gilded metal, 3/8 x 1 7/16 inches. Museum numbers 1949-94-1 through 1949-94-18, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum.

Figure 2. Agostino Brunias, *A Cudgelling Match Between English and French Negroes*, 1779, stipple engraving and etching with hand coloring, 11 5/8 x 13 7/8 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Figure 3. Agostino Brunias, *Free Natives of Dominica*, 1780, stipple engraving and etching, 12 1/2 x 9 7/16 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



[*above*] Figure 4. Agostino Brunias, *A Negroes Dance in the Island of Dominica*, 1779, stipple engraving and etching with hand coloring, 11 7/8 x 14 3/4 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

[*right*] Figure 5. Agostino Brunias, *The Barbadoes Mulatto Girl*, 1779, stipple engraving and etching, 12 5/16 x 9 5/16 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

[*below, left*] Figure 6. Agostino Brunias, *The West India Washer-Women*, 1779, stipple engraving and etching, 12 3/8 x 9 3/8 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

[*below, right*] Figure 7. Agostino Brunias, *The West India Flower Girl*, undated, stipple engraving and etching with hand coloring, 12 1/4 x 9 7/16 inches. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.