Coded Argent Automation on Eighteenth-Century Necks: The Representations of Enslaved Black Boys in French Portraiture*

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Abstract: This essay examines the overt and covert exhibition of European colonial violence on the silver collared necks of black male children portrayed as enslaved workers in French aristocratic and haute bourgeois portraits by Philippe Vignon and Nicolas de Largillière. I argue that the collar portrays practices of human trafficking and the illegal disregard of Louis XIV's 1685 Code Noir. More scholarship is needed on the actual material culture of these silver slave collars utilized on African or Caribbean subjects in elite households as visible instruments of illicit ownership and mechanization of the body. Since slavery was not permitted on French mainland soil, the use of the silver slave collar on a Black child in European households depicts a desire to "tame" or "mechanize" the black body for full control with a key, when the body is in fact, legally free. As visible methods of discipline and restriction, the slave collar's identity was clear until it encompassed the tiny necks of black male youth during the French Rococo.

Key words: Eighteenth-century, French colonialism, portraiture, Black child, slave collar, racial hierarchy, exoticism

In the trove of French paintings of the *Ancien Régime*, one convention emerges that makes peculiar use of small Black boys adorned with elegant dress and shiny silver slave collars. This essay examines the display of these silver slave collars as more than promotion of eighteenth-century ideas regarding racial hierarchy, class, and the exoticism of the Black colonial subject by French aristocrats and haute bourgeoisie.[1] It primarily investigates the description of the display of the Black enslaved child as symbolic of illegal human trafficking activity under Article XLII and the ornamental mechanization of his body as a toy through formalist, semiotic, and Marxist analysis. Even though slavery was permitted to exist and thrive in the Caribbean French colonies, there was one law in place regarding the separation of the child from his married parents. Existing art historical scholarship notes the slave collar as a degrading marker of racial difference and control, but does not examine its legality under Articles of the 1685 Black Code regarding punishment and parental separation nor the transformation of the Black body into a

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[1] The terms *haute bourgeoisie* or *haute bourgeois* refer to the upper-middle classes of French society. It refers to a class that was not aristocratic and attained their wealth through banking and industry. The petit bourgeois are considered tradesman and white-collar workers. These primarily Marxist stratifications are nicely explained on a the simply sociology website managed and reviewed by Harvard University undergraduate research assistant, Charlotte Nickerson and Dr. Saul McCleod from the University of Manchester in their semi-dictionary and sociological entry, "Bourgeoisie (Capital Class): Definition and Meaning," SimplyPsychology, updated Feb. 27, 2024, https://www.simplypsychology.org/bourgeoisie-capitalist-class.html.

technological one (Fig. 1).[2] Historian Pierre H. Boulle briefly states the Black child servant was like a "kind little toy" in the hands of European aristocrats until the child reached the age of puberty.[3] At that point, the child grew from a toy to being considered a potentially sexually dangerous figure around the European female aristocrat.[4] This study examines the child figure as a literal toy, not a metaphorical one, once we look at the awkward poses, stiff necks, glazed eyes, and rigid movements in tandem with white European dolls of said period.

The Black enslaved child on the canvas of the French elite is positioned as an inferior subject of the Crown and his Master. The silver slave collar adds another dimension of Marxist commodity fetishism by blinding the social relations and colonial violence that brought the mineral to the shores of France and around his neck. The sheen of the silver collar and lavish clothing also attempt to distract us from the visible stiffening and mechanization of the child's body. Boulle demonstrates the legal infractions present in recording Black and East Indian children as slaves at French ports as violations of the Edict of 1738 because slaves were only supposed to come from French plantation colonies with their Masters, be instructed in religion and/or a trade, remain only for three years, and not be utilized as domestic servants.[5] This paper seeks to remedy this gap in scholarship through the lens of semiotics, Marxist, and formalist analyses of two paintings made prior to the Royal Edicts of 1716 and 1738.

We can view the collar's luminosity in the contrast of metal to skin very clearly in Phillipe Vignon's painting and in Hyacinthe Rigaud's (1659–1743) *Young Black Servant Holding a Bow of 1697* (Fig. 2**).** Rigaud's heavy use of chiaroscuro on the young boy's shoulders and cheek provide some shadows on the collar, but does not obscure its shiny reflections. Yet, the width and brilliance of the silver slave collar clashes with the murky naming of many of these types of paintings. We find the Black subject sometimes called "Enslaved Servant," "Servant," or not named at all, contributing to the uncertainty of their legal status on French mainland soil. In several texts, Boulle identifies the confusion present in various edicts, laws, and cases regarding the regulation of Black freedoms, classifications of racial purity, and growing miscegenation brought to mainland France during the eighteenth century due to planters transporting their slaves. In particular, he asserts that the Black subject was treated more leniently in France until the establishment of Black slavery in the French West Indies and the creation of the Code Noir in 1685: "Prior to the establishment of Black Slavery in the West Indies, nonwhites tended to be viewed in France as exotic beings, objects of acute interest rather than suspicion and fear."[6] I suggest that the object of acute interest

[2] In terms of control, the silver slave collar was utilized to deter escape and engrave ownership by the placement of the Master's coat-of-arms and address within its interior. See David Bindman, "Subjectivity and Portraiture: From Courtly to Commercial Societies," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, eds. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), 75.

[3] Pierre H. Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Regime* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), 75.

[4] Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Regime*, 75

[5] Pierre H. Boulle, "Slaves and Other Nonwhite Children in Late 18th Century France," in *Children in Slavery through the Ages,* ed. Gwynn Campbell et al. (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2009), 176. In addition to the Black child and citizens of the Indian sub-continent, David Bindman also mentions the use of the dwarf. Bindman, "Subjectivity and Slave Portraiture: From Courtly to Commercial Societies," 73.

[6] Pierre H. Boulle, "'Racial Purity or Legal Clarity?' The Status of Black Residents in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of the Historical Society* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 19–46; Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime*.; Pierre H. Boulle, "Parisian Declarations of Non-whites before 1738 and 1790: Permanence of Categories and Interchangeability of Statuses," *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevo*, Debates (June 12, 2017). This is not an exhaustive list of texts that Boulle has written analyzing French legislation and the vulnerable Nègre/Nègresse, free person of color, and East Indian child or adult in metropolitan France during the eighteenth century but demonstrates that he is the leading scholar of the history of legislation and French Blacks during the eighteenth century.

during the early eighteenth century in the aforementioned paintings has been transformed into a Black doll, not created by French artisans, but created by French painters and elites on canvas.

In Boulle's further analysis of the "domestic servant" and Black slave in mainland France, he confirms our suspicions that the domestic servant is no better than a slave. White French elites wanted to maintain the condition of the domestic servant the same as a slave and only wanted to prevent the use of the word slavery or slave because of pressure from the Paris Parlement before and after 1777.[7] Even during the eighteenth century, Boulle states that French government officials such as Antoine de Sartine bemoaned the use of Black people in French elite households and clearly spoke of their excesses without naming names by speaking to their non-utilitarian use: "… some are even more wrongfully turned into instruments of luxury."[8] By extension, a toy doll is also an instrument of luxury—even a living breathing human paraded as one. When observing the works of Vignon and Nicolas de Largillière, we see more than just a misplaced and misused Black child among White royals found in other European and American paintings, we see a stiff and abnormally positioned figure.

In Phillipe Vignon's 1695 double portrait of two aristocratic sisters, Francoise-Marie de Bourbon and Louise-Francoise de Bourbon, a young Black male page is flanked by both women while wearing a shiny silver collar and silver earrings (Fig. 3). In his awkward leaning pose, the small Black child holds a basket of flowers while placed between two daughters of Louis XIV. What appears as a visual trope codifying differences in racial hierarchy, class, and power beginning in the early eighteenth century in the works of Vignon (1638–1701), Nicolas de Largillière (1656–1746), and others, becomes a visual minefield of possible illicit ownership. Moreover, it also becomes a display of the mechanization of the Black body into a toy. Unlike the White body, the Black African or French Caribbean body faced numerous hurdles in enjoying wholesale freedom from enslavement on mainland French soil. The "Freedom Principle" enjoyed by the White populace was one scholars Sue Peabody, Pierre H. Boulle, and Ana Lucia Arajuo have carefully demonstrated was not enjoyed by all and had to be officiated through the legal actions of enslaved Black people attempting to extricate themselves from the Masters who brought them to France in locations such as Nantes, Bordeaux, and Paris.[9]

The growing political sentiment of Black people as "useless and dangerous" to White French social order by 1738 in metropolitan France because they were not shipped back to their colonies (and also when shipped back) is not reflected in early Rococo paintings.[10] He is a benign, manipulated figure of diminutive size. However, the desire for child-sized court servants is one that did not begin with the African or Caribbean Black child in Europe. It has been studied by numerous scholars of European art such as Janet Ravenscroft, Federica Guaraldi, Maximilian Derksen, and others, particularly in Spanish Habsburg courts. It has also been painted by esteemed artists such as Diego Velàzquez (1599–1660).[11] Yet, the White European dwarf can enjoy the benefits of White human freedom in spite of his or her physical imperfections.

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[7] Boulle, "'Racial Purity or Legal Clarity?¸'" 26–8.

[8] Boulle, "'Racial Purity or Legal Clarity?¸'" 25.

[9] Sue Peabody, '*There are no Slaves in France:' The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5; Ana Lucia Arajo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 97–9.

[10] Boulle, "'Racial Purity or Legal Clarity?'" 35.

[11] Janet Ravenscroft, "Dwarfs-and a Loca-as Ladies' Maids at the Spanish Habsburg Courts," *Politics of Female Households*, no. 4 (2013): 147–77; Janet Ravenscroft, "Invisible Friends: questioning the Representation of the Court Dwarf in Hapsburg Spain," PhD diss. (Birbeck University of London, 2009).; Federica Guaraldi et al., "Court Dwarfs: An Overview of European Paintings from Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century," *Endocrine* 42, no. 30 (December 2012): 736–38; and Maximilian Derksen, "Induction and Reception of Dignity in Diego Velazquez's Court Dwarfs," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 14, no. 2 (July 2020):187–202.

Contemporary writers and bloggers such as Marjorie H. Morgan and Griff Stecyk have actually written the word "trafficked" when discussing the portrayal of these Black male children in Rococo paintings, and we can observe why many believe that something illegal is afoot.[12] Unfortunately, once we investigate the legal framework in which these boys were brought and worked in mainland France, we observe how this distasteful phenomenon began and persisted throughout the eighteenth century.

This phenomenon was not only present in the works of French elites, but also in British, American, and Dutch works. Historians such as David Bindman, David Dabydeen, and Robin Simon have focused or discussed the representation of Black figures in eighteenth-century British portraiture and showcase the differences in style from the French Rococo.[13] Museums such as the Australian Johnston Collection highlight the prints of British Artist William Hogarth in his *Harlot's Progress* series which repeatedly include the Black servant and/or Black servant child. The museum briefly describes the 1742 print entitled *A Taste in High Life* in their personal collection, the silver slave collar and turban, and the extremes British elites went to showcase their opulence in dress, porcelain purchase and display, and Black human possession. Numerous museum collections around the world, including the Metropolitan Museum, Louvre, Versailles, Yale University Art Museum, and the Maryland Center for History and Culture, display the practice of slave collars within domestic settings, not as punished nor runaway slaves.

This essay does not attempt to do a compare and contrast, but it does highlight the rigid and awkward robotic rendering of the Black child in the French Rococo which may also be present in the 1710 British colonial painting of a Maryland planter's son *Henry Darnall III* by Justus Engelhardt Kuhn in the slanted neck, rigid body, glassy eyes, and wide restrictive silver collar of the enslaved servant (Fig. 4). Part of the transformation of the human body into a toy is due to the constant glazed stare with a possibly glassy eye. Irish writer Leslie Daiken points out that the eye that can shut and close and appears sleeping does not arrive until around 1750.[14] These paintings predate this aesthetic development in dolls and reflect what was presently available in the constantly-staring wooden doll present in the early part of the eighteenth century. When we study the development of the French fashion doll since the late fourteenth century, we discover that they were life-sized dummies that displayed the clothing of French designers to their European aristocratic clients, to the smaller Pandora dolls of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which reflected clothing and coiffures and were around the size of two feet.[15] If women and children of the aristocracy are looking at fashion dolls that were more similar in size to their Black child servants—male or female—the court artist would have observed these objects as well.

Growing attention is being paid to the anonymous Black slaves and servants populating aristocratic and elite family or individual portraits, specifically by university museums such as Yale, and scholars of the French slave trade in the Caribbean and mainland seaport cities. In 2014, Hwa Young Caruso and John Caruso, Jr. documented Yale's efforts to exhibit problematic works displaying the Black domestic servant

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[12] Marjorie H. Morgan, "The Boy with the Pearl Earring: The Decorative Art of Slavery," ArtUK, March 30, 2022, https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-boy-with-the-pearl-earring-the-decorative-art-of-slavery.; Marjorie H. Morgan, "The Visible Invisibility of Black people in Aristocratic Portraiture," ArtUK, February 24, 2022, https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-visible-invisibility-of-black-people-in-aristocratic-portraiture.; Griff Stecyk, "We are no better in Paintings," Sartle, May 29, 2022, https://www.sartle.com/blog/post/we-are-no-better-in-paintings.

[13] David Bindman, *Hogarth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981).; Robin Simon, *Hogarth, France and British Art: The Rise of the Arts in 18th-Cenutry Britain* (London: Hogarth Arts, 2007).; and David Dabydeen, *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (London: Hansib Publishing Ltd., 1987).

[14] Leslie A. Daiken, *Children's Toys through the Ages* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger), 114.

[15] Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Delacorte Press, 1966), 103.; Daiken, *Children's Toys through the Ages*,112. See also Alice K. Early, *English Dolls, Effigies, and Puppets (*London B.T. Batsford Publishing, 1955) and Karl Grober, *Children's Toys of bygone Days: A History of Playthings of all Peoples from Prehistoric times to the XIXth century* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1928).

as slightly more important than the household pet (Fig. 5).[16] Art historian David Bindman also states the Black child servant becomes a pet for the ladies of the court.[17] But a pet is not a doll. A doll can be easily discarded once its owner has become tired of it, once it has been broken, or when its owner believes that he or she is too adult or mature for its use. In these cases, the doll becomes a man deemed too dangerous for the female aristocrat to control. The number of silver slave collars on Black children's necks presents the collar as a fusion of control and fashion currency, as offensive as it may seem. This surplus of wealth is evident in the household when the enslaved servant's owners can afford to commission and decorate their inferior subjects with silver collars and/or padlocks. More attention is needed to find the official identities of the ignored and whereabouts of the silver collar, but what becomes more immediate and glaring is the literal disfigurement of the child's body into a wooden or metal toy through its depiction of the body, specifically its shiny grimaces, unmoving lips, and glassy eyes.

In Largillière's *Helene Lambert de Thorigny*, the Black enslaved child looks upward to view his Mistress enclosed in a floral mandorla. Her movements are fluid and graceful, encompassed in visible and invisible circles (Fig. 6). The child appears to be holding a basket of flowers in a static and hardened stance. He completes the circle in various darker shades of chiaroscuro almost hiding the glare of his silver earrings and wide silver collar. His movements and posture do not appear organic even as he is placed within the floral wreath. She alone appears human and fleshy.

In Vignon's double portrait, the manifestations of a stiff, segmented body appear as the boy turns his head diagonally in a three-quarter profile position towards Louise-Francoise de Bourbon. His torso simultaneously stretches backwards diagonally and forwards with outstretched hands with basket towards Marie de Bourbon. This maladroit stance is further emphasized by his right leg bent in a forward position while the almost hidden left leg stands straight. The whites of his oversized eyes are as pale as the sisters' skins, and his dark pupils compose a glazed look. The glance of the eyes appear to stare at both Louise-Francoise de Bourbon and the small black dog she carries, providing an unnatural and mechanical view. While a human must fix its gaze in one direction or object, a toy need not. Toy eyes can transform into reflective mirrors of their surroundings, particularly if made with glassy, glazed, or polished materials.

Upon examining both eighteenth-century dolls created for the entertainment of the French Court and those sold today by toy auction houses, we see the rigidity of the wooden dolls, their glazed eyes, and their elegant court dress and coiffures.[18] Scholars identify the movable limbs of the eighteenth-century doll, but what is clear is that these dolls were not automata or proto-automatons. These dolls were made of wood, not metal, and needed the human hand in order to enact movement. The automatons, made in Europe from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century, were not in the hands of the European court's children in the early part of the eighteenth century.[19] In the paintings of Vignon and Largillière, the Black subject's luxuriously dressed body also appears stiff and soulless. His eyes appear unfixed in any

[16] Hwa Young Caruso and John Caruso, Jr., "Yale Center for British Art: Images of Eighteenth-Century British Slavery," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 16, no. 2 (July 2014).

[17] David Bindman, "Introduction," in *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary*, ed. Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby (Winter Park: Cornell Museum of Fine Arts, 2007), 12.

[18] Clear pictures of eighteenth-century Pandora French dolls can be found at Rebecca Devaney, "Fashion Minsters, Merchants, and Miniatures," Textile Tours of Paris, accessed Nov. 2024, https://www.textiletoursofparis.com/blog/fashion-ministers-merchants-and-miniatures.

[19] During my in-person visit to the Musée de la Magie and Museum of Automata of Paris, France in June 2024 during the International Committee for the History of Art Conference (CIHA) in Lyon, France, some similarity in the stares and stiff movements is found in the image of the Black male servant in French paintings, but the dates of creation, formation, and exchange of inventor to client of French or Swiss automata are decades after the creation of the stated paintings. *Guide Du Musée de la Magie et du Musée des Automate* (Paris: Georges Proust, 2024), 85. See also Evan Andrews, "7 Early Robots and Automatons," History Channel, updated October 15, 2023, https://www.history.com/news/7-early-robots-and-automatons.

direction. As British novelist Antonia Fraser confirms, the eighteenth-century doll had a stilted appearance, glossy layer of paint on its surface, painted body, movable arms, and painted or occasionally glassy eyes.[20] Both Fraser and Daiken advise us that the date of the first use of the glass eyes cannot be confirmed, but they were in use during the eighteenth century.

Like a toy, the Black enslaved child can be physically manipulated, caressed, controlled and discarded after disinterest. In these paintings, we find accompanying images of a dog or parrot, but these pets reflect more agency than the young Black child as toy. A toy only moves at the physical behest of its holder. A more advanced robotic toy can move with the use of batteries and/or a remote control. A dog or parrot, if unconstrained, still has a chance of unfettered escape. If the Black child seeks to be fed and clothed in palaces and mansions, he must stay put with or without a slave collar.

In Largillière's *Portrait of a Woman and an Enslaved Servant*, the parrot moves his head, torso, and foot in a natural way while the young child tilts his head diagonally to look upwards at his Mistress while wearing his silver slave collar. The collar appears to restrict his neck and head movements, and his eyes gaze upward with pupils placed completely to the upper right of his eyeballs in a highly uneven fashion. The placement of the pupils in the upper register of the eyes gives the eyes the look of marbles which roll easily in maneuvered directions. The gleaming silver slave collar reminds us of Dani Ezor's analysis of European obsession with whiteness and the polishing and sheen of silver as metaphor for racial purity.[21] Historian Jennifer L. Perlman clearly identifies three contrasts between painted French elites and their Black servants: size, age, and power.[22] She argues that that the visual preponderance of French female royals with Black servants was due to shifting trends in perceptions of race and gender and the power French elite women held in their visual depictions. However, in addition to plays for prestige, and beauty, the White female royal is playing with her child servant and the Code Noir. His dehumanization is rife with robotic and mechanical movements, disconnected and strained physical posturing, and small scale. He becomes an unfamiliar object—neither slave, servant, nor human. A psychoanalytic critique of the transformation of the child into a machine is warranted in further research. The owner of the small, orphaned child, and even his painter, may need to mechanize his frame in order to assuage the guilt of possessing him.

As eighteenth-century art historians Adrienne L. Childs and Anne Lafont describe, the Black slave or servant functioned as mere anonymous decorative objects or accessories in European aristocratic artworks.[23] We do not know their specific names, parents' names, purchase price, etc. Their very identity remains camouflaged by the neglectful and surreptitious actions of ship captains, slave traders, government officials, and others. Boulle has attempted to document the names, status, and age of Black immigrants to France during the eighteenth century. Despite incomplete documentation, he discovered

[20] Fraser, *A History of Toys*, 107.

[21] Dani Ezor, "'White when Polished:' Race, Gender, and the Materiality of Silver at the Toilette," *Journal18,* no. 14 (Fall 2022).

[22] Jennifer L. Perlman, "The Princess Served by Slaves: Making Race Visible through Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century France," *Gender & History* 26, no. 2 (August 2014): 242–62.

[23] Adrienne L. Childs discusses the contrasts in skin tone, status, and position of the Black enslaved object in French Rococo paintings, but then expands on the notion of racial hierarchy and colonial exploitation in the creation of porcelain sugarboxes with their display of dark-skinned Blackamoors as a distinctive desire to showcase contrasting skin tones, racial inequities, and an aesthetic and practical ode to the Black and brown labor employed in New World sugar plantation economies. See Adrienne L. Childs, "Sugarboxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Farham: Ashgate, 2010): 159–77.

that most Black children had been registered as slaves, not domestic servants, and hailed from the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti).[24]

At first glance, in the works of Vignon, Largillière, and others, the silken sheen of the servant's or slave's clothing and the accompanying silver slave collar rub the edicts of the Code Noir the wrong way, for we cannot even confirm the individual's legal status on French soil in these costumed circumstances. However, before we can discuss further the exhibition of the silver slave collar on the young Black child, we must address how his body came to arrive on European shores.

European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade created the structures in which a small Black child could even arrive in the hands of a European aristocrat through purchase or gift.[25] The French aristocrat was first emboldened to commission paintings of a Black enslaved child because of the laws which codified and regulated the rights and responsibilities of the free owner and his property.

Louis XIV's 1685 Code Noir legalized the slave trade for France, its colonies, and possessions. It also provided Blacks some semblance of legal recognition. The Code Noir had rules for the White Master, free person of color, and slave. Slaves were divided into field or domestic hands. Two Articles of the Code Noir are especially pertinent for our analysis of these two paintings—Articles 42 and 47. First, the Code Noir permitted slave owners to beat and chain slaves under Article 42. We read:

> Article XLII. The [M]asters may also, when they believe that their slaves so deserve, chain them and have them beaten with rods or straps. They shall be forbidden however from torturing them or mutilating any limb, at the risk of having the slaves confiscated and having extraordinary charges brought against them.[26]

If the Black male children are enslaved, then placing a silver slave collar could pass legal muster as an example of a type of chain of physical restriction. The Code Noir does not proscribe what age slaves could be purchased either. If categorized at ports by pirates, navy officials, or ship captains as "servants" in order to avoid violations of the Code Noir, one still questions what age servant a Master could own. Even if France permitted the purchase of a child servant, which French laws permit the allowance of the chaining of adult or child servants with collars—silver or otherwise? We see in Francois Boucher's print after Watteau, a White adult servant wearing neither a neck restraint nor turban in contrast to the Black teenager or adult servant (Fig. 7).

At the bottom of Claude-Louis Desrais's 1779 fashion plate, a caption advises that the slave collar was engraved with the coat of arms of his Mistress. However, they are not collars of only decoration or possession (Fig. 8). Their designs limit movement of the neck and may provide one reason why these children performed such little physical labor. We see the additional menial tasks given to the Black enslaved child in the fashion plates of the French Royal Court in the holding of the Mistress's dress train.

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[24] Boulle, "Slaves and Other Nonwhite Children," 179. Boulle advises us that the Governor of Senegal would bring a group of small Black children to the ladies of the French Court as gifts because of the high demand and interest for small Black male children as "domestic servants."

[25] See Footnote 24.

[26] "The Code Noir (The Black Code)," Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution, accessed Nov. 2024, https://revolution.chnm.org/d/335. This site is a collaboration of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (George Mason University) and American Social History Project (City University of New York), supported by grants from the Florence Gould Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.Brown University has also provided the Code Noir entirely in French in the original format of the 1735 Manuscript in a website entitled "Remember Haiti," accessed February 19, 2024, https://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/remember_haiti/race-france.

Schreier states that the Black page is not even a domestic worker but a prop.[27] Yet, he is more than a prop. I argue that he is similar to a toy robot. He is placed some steps away from his Mistress while holding her train, moving in his own locomotive fashion, and without signs of volition or liberty from his charge. He must move where she moves. He must stop when she stops. These tasks highlight the role black enslaved children played in these elite households that did not provide religious instruction nor vocational training as required by the Edicts of 1716 and 1738, not the Code Noir.

Article 47 of the Code Noir also leaves the door open for the mechanization and manipulation of the Black body by his owner. It states:

> Article XLVII. Husband, wife and prepubescent children, if they are all under the same [M]aster, may not be taken and sold separately. We declare the seizing and sales that shall be done as such to be void. For slaves who have been separated, we desire that the seller shall risk their loss, and that the slaves he kept shall be awarded to the buyer, without him having to pay any supplement. . .[28]

Once a Black family is under the care of a Master, the Code Noir prohibits the separate sale of a nuclear family with a Husband and Wife. The ambiguity of the child's purchase remains in the hands of the Master who decides on the matters of baptism and matrimony of his slaves. Bereft of familial connections and protections, the orphaned Black male child is vulnerable to sale and egregious dehumanization by the silver collar's decoration. Sadly, the phrase that companies utilize today to refer to the separation and sale of toys from their batteries were first used against African and Caribbean slaves.

He is useless in his role as true domestic, but necessary for elite reminders of the African's critical role in the transatlantic slave trade of the body to the New World or Old Europe. A timeline of commodity exchange reduces silver to a base mineral of physical control and illogical ornamentation. Instead of the African religious object as fetish, the European aristocrat has fetishized its Black child slave or servant. William Pietz concludes from Marxist commodity fetishism that the capitalist material objects conceal exploitative social relations.[29] Emily Apter calls the hidden nature of the fetish object Marx's socioeconomic hieroglyphics.[30] But what happens when the court and bourgeoisie painters of the French Rococo conceal nothing? In fact, the Black enslaved child features prominently as costumed captive, his silver collar a marker of denigration for its wearer and high social status for his owner. On the necks of Black slave children, the silver collar displays the insatiable pursuit of value in transoceanic capitalism. The oppressive labor employed in the extraction of the raw material occurs far away from the site of European consumption in these households—an indexical dynamic by which the commodity production points to its source of migration as raw material, not from Africa, but other locations of global colonial reach and oppression. The mining of silver was primarily performed by the red and brown bodies of the indigenous *mita* in the Americas for European powers, particularly Spain. In applying the theory of commodity fetishism in Marx, we observe the dual role silver played in its restriction of the Black child's body on French soil. Marx states:

> As a general rule, articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labor of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work independently of each

[27] Lisa Schreier, "Setting the Tone: Commodified Black Children and Slave Imagery in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Fashion Press," *H-France Salon* 8, no. 6 (2022): 1–16.
[28] "The Code Noir (The Black Code)."
[29] William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985), 9.
[30] Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1–2.

> other. The sum total of the labor of all these private individuals forms the aggregate labor of society. Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labor does not show itself except in the act of exchange.[31]

The historical foundation of materialism of Marx is not only laid bare on the necks of enslaved Black children, but attempts to restrict and gloss over its connotations of physical violence. The application of commodity fetishism is further complicated when we consider the wholesale and brutal extraction of silver from Potosí mines and the involuntary nature of the child's enslavement and subsequent objectification in different parts of the world. In Marx's view, social relations have formed the basis of this metamorphosis of silver. American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai identifies the commodity not only in its Marxian conceptualization as a product of industrial capitalization exchanged in various institutional frameworks, but goes further in his analysis of commodity as the exchange of things (pre- and postindustrialization) where the exchange involves the exchange of sacrifices as initially investigated by economist George Simmel in 1907. Appadurai's discussion and expansion of this notion of sacrifice leads us right to the objectionable image of the Black enslaved child with his silver slave collar. Appadurai indicates that "one's s desire for an object is fulfilled by the sacrifice of some other object, which is the focus of the desire of another."[32] These paintings demonstrate that sacrifice of the other is the Black child's humanity and freedom.

By closely analyzing the works of Vignon and Largillière, we review the display and use of the slave collar as a tool of negative bodily transformation. More importantly, by comparing the human figure to the child-sized or smaller eighteenth-century doll, we observe how the Black human body was turned into a segmented and inflexible object of disrespect and inanimation. This alternative reading and observation of the Black child's body was performed in the contextual interpretation of two Code Noir laws which simultaneously permitted his physical restraint and removal from his parents' arms. The artist has decoratively rendered the child's body as an inelastic figure as wooden as the fashion dolls of eighteenth-century France.

[31] Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm.

[32] Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities and Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 31.

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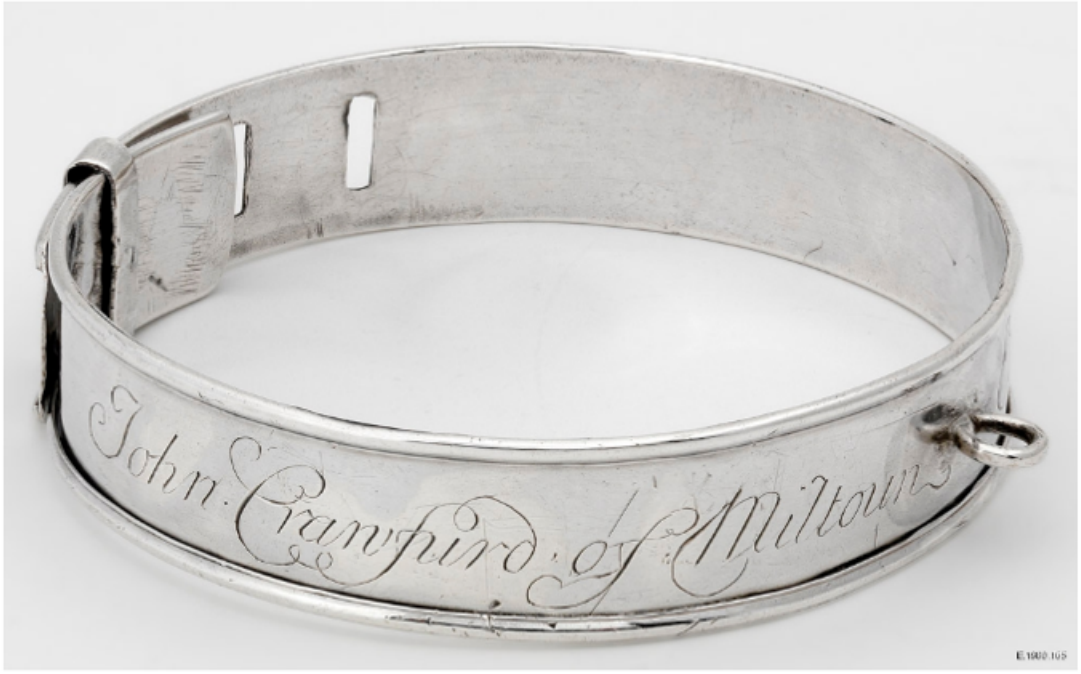

Figure 1. Silver collar circa 1732, with a loop made by Robert Luke (d.1752). Inscribed “John Crawfurd of Miltoun.” 28 mm x 150 mm (141 g). Glasgow Museums, Scotland, Purchased with grant aid from the National Fund for Acquisitions. Creative Commons Attribution (Non-Commercial 4.0 International License).

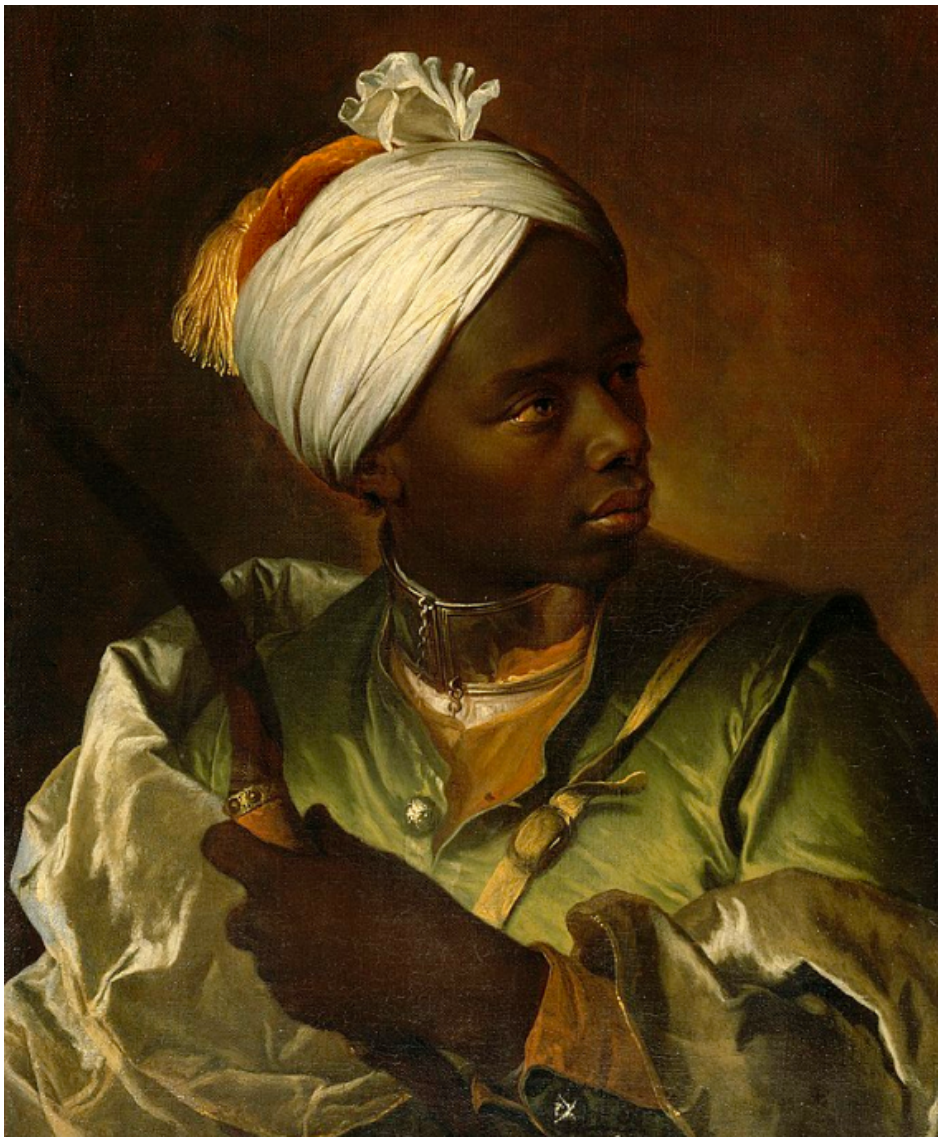

Figure 2. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Young Black Servant Holding a Bow*, 1697. Oil on Canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dunkirk, France/Bridgman Images.

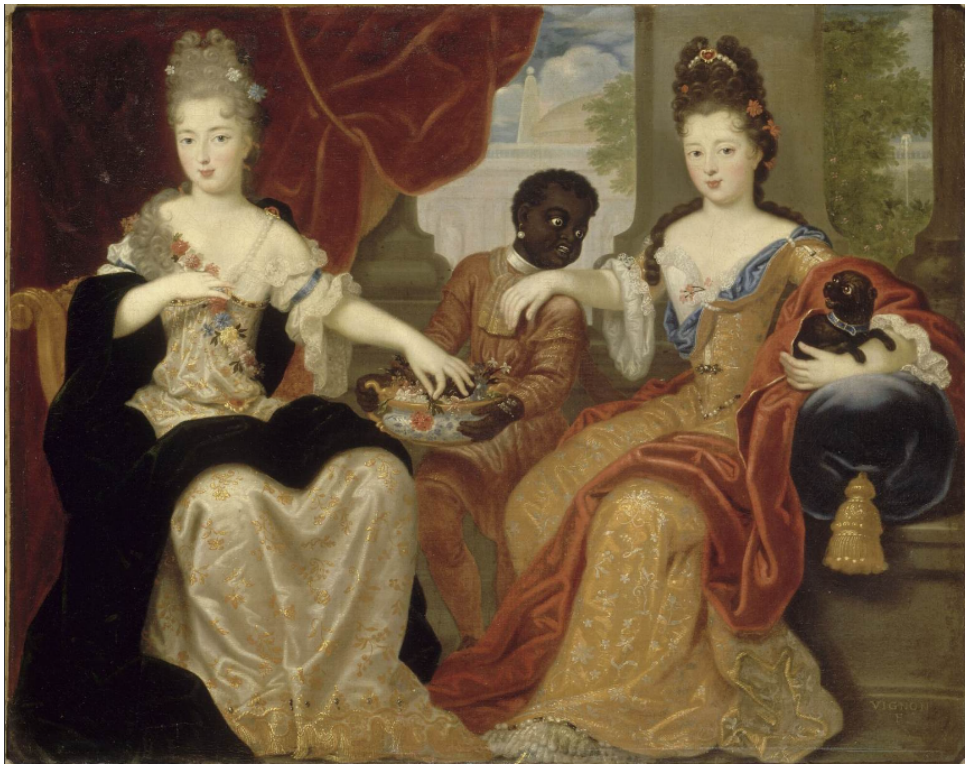

Figure 3. Philippe Vignon. *Francoise-Marie de Bourbon, "Mademoiselle de Blois," the future Duchess of Orléans (1677-1749) and Louise-Francoise de Bourbon, "Mademoiselle de Nantes," the future Princess of Condé (1673-1743), illegitimate daughters of Louis XIV and the Marquise de Montes.* Oil on canvas. 80.3 x 100 cm. Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon/Versailles/France, Photo: Christophe Fouin. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 4. Justus Engelhardt Kuhn, *Henry Darnall III,* 1710. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Maryland Center for History and Culture, 1912.1.3.

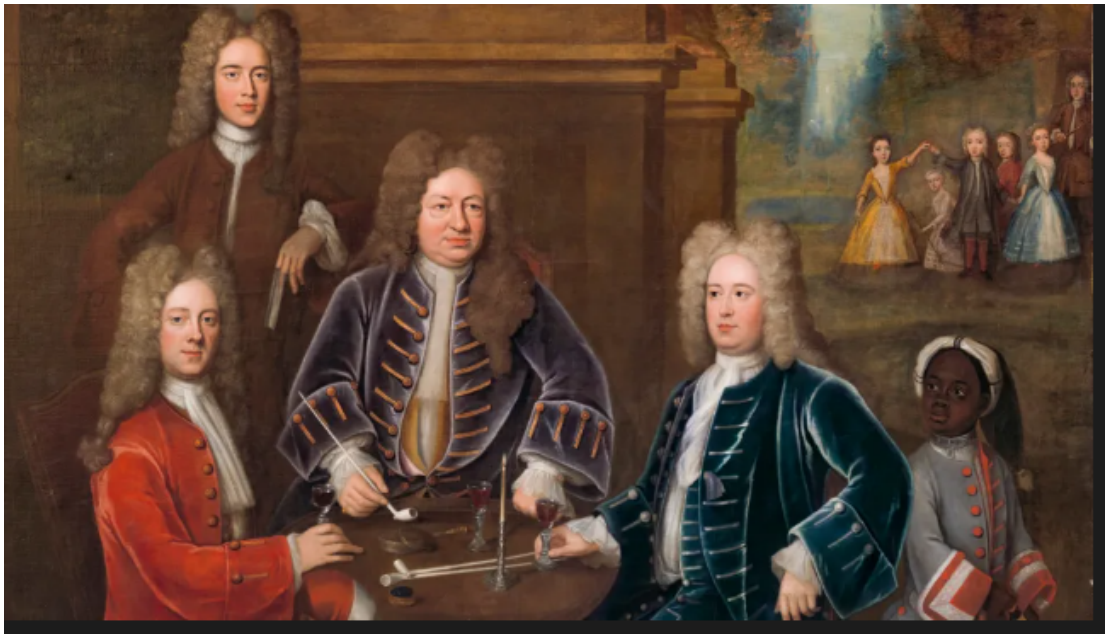

Figure 5. John Verelst, *Elihu Yale with Members of his Family and an Enslaved Child*, 1719-1721. Oil on canvas. Yale Center for British Art.

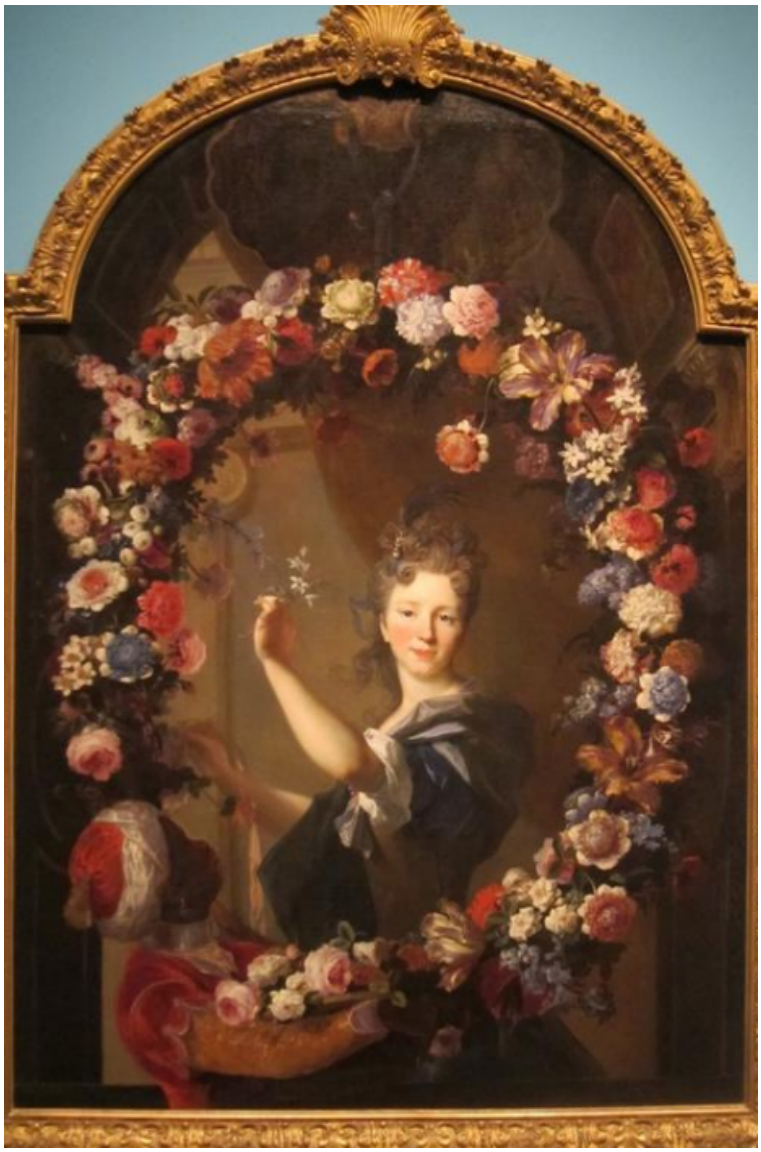

Figure 6. Nicolas de Largillière, *Hélène Lambert de Thorigny*, Oil on canvas. 1696-1700. Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art.

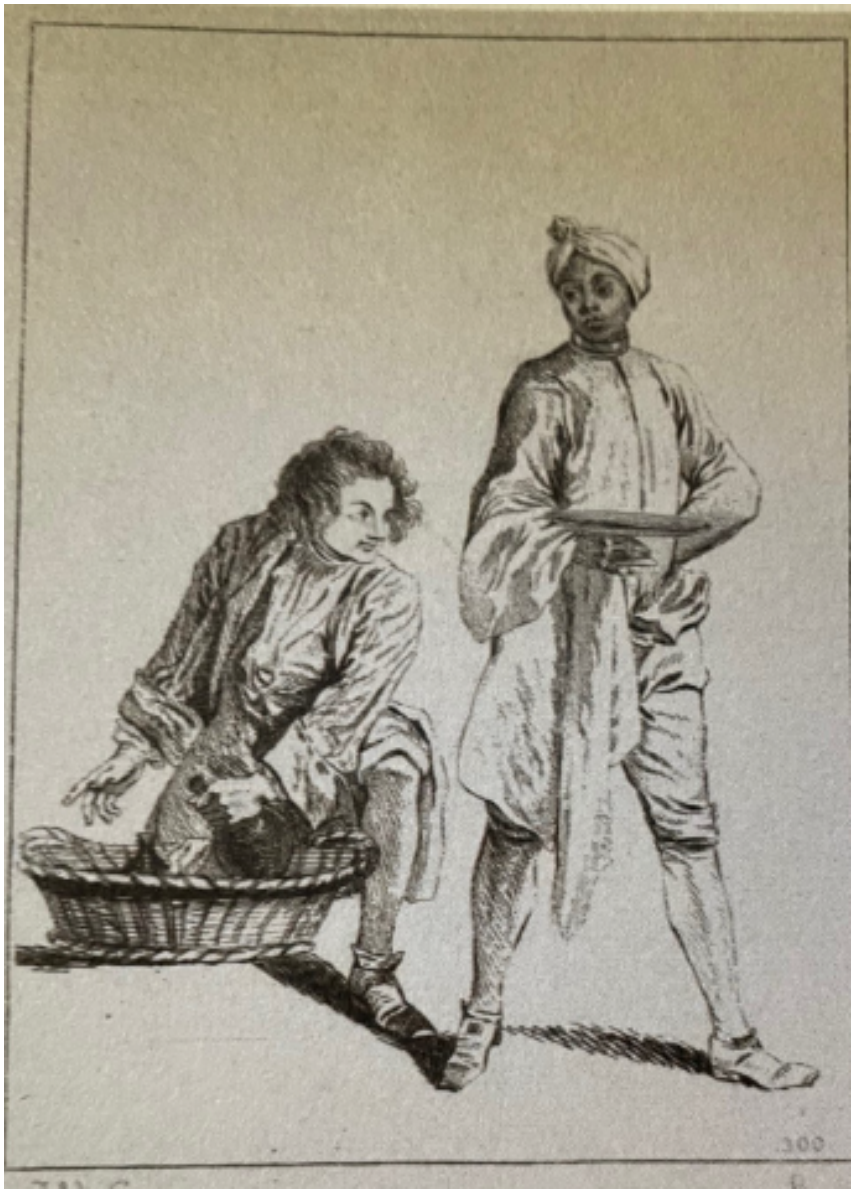

Figure 7. François Boucher, *After Antoine Watteau's Black man carrying a tray and kneeling valet pulling bottles from a basket*. 17th-18th century. Etching. 35.1 x 53 cm. Photo: Angèle Dequier. Louvre Museum, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

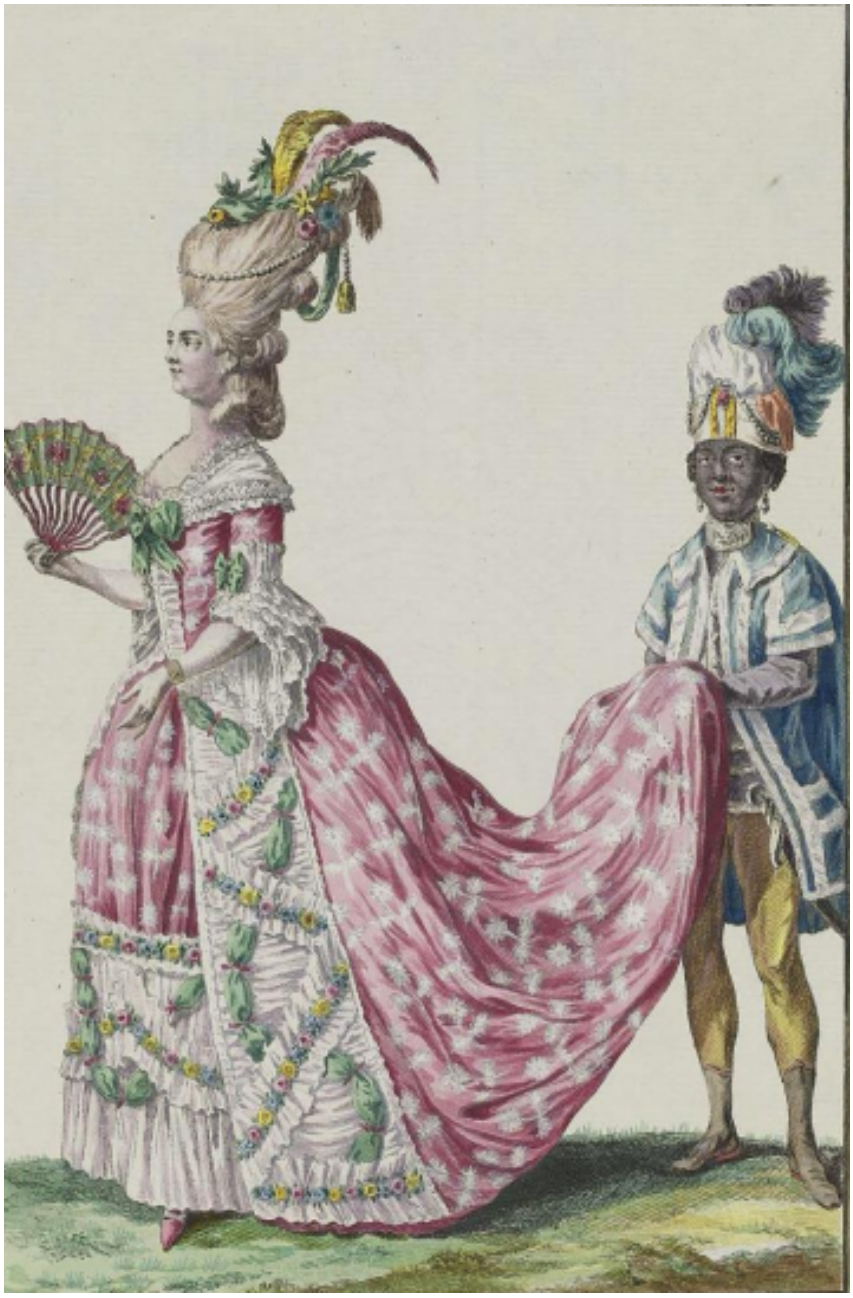

Figure 8. Claude-Louis Desrais, *Lady of Quality with Young Black Male Holding Her Train*, 1779. Hand-colored engraving on laid paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection 44.1384.