

The Legacy of Blackamoor Art: An Analysis of the Ca' Rezzonico Venier Collection

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The Museum of Eighteenth-Century Venice within the Ca' Rezzonico is a lavish eighteenth-century palazzo off the Grand Canal, extensively decorated by Venetian master painter Tiepolo and his contemporaries. Visitors frequently spend their time looking up at the ceiling paintings and decorative ornamentation of the rooms, and it seems that they often miss the pieces of furniture within these spaces – eighteenth-century wooden furniture by Italian sculptor Andrea Brustolon (1662-1732). With little mention of the history of Venice, a Ca' Rezzonico visitor loses all context in regard to the furniture. The method of display further decontextualizes these pieces, and any ability for the visitor to process the full meanings of the works are lost.

To unpack this collection, I will offer some background information providing historical context to the realities of race relations within Venice, particularly for black Africans and Ottoman Moors, and will combine this with an analysis of the popularity of porcelain collecting in the eighteenth century. I propose that the unique inclusion of black Africans, Ottoman Moors, and Asian porcelain creates a complex representation of the reach of Venetian and European power, inherently painting the collector as a worldly man. The goal of this research project is to identify the problematic stereotypes within this collection which are lost to the museum visitor, and to discuss what sort of interventions can be made so that displaying them can disrupt the racial discrimination for which they stand.

All of the wooden furniture in the collection was sculpted by Andrea Brustolon, sometime between 1700 and 1710. They were commissioned by patrician Pietro Venier (1647-1726) for the

Palazzo Venier in the Fondamenta San Vio.¹ The collection includes over forty pieces of furniture and an additional thirty pieces of porcelain. Each object includes one or more figures which follow the stereotypical iconographic representation of black Africans.

When represented on the African continent, black people were shown as wild savages with no concepts of civility or society. Because of the unique climate of some regions of the continent, people who could live in these areas were seen to exist on the edge of culture, policed society, and therefore humanity.² It is important to note the persistent theme of Europe's lumping of an entire continent into one group. Where there was an acknowledgement of the diversity within the African continent, there was an unwillingness to care. An example of a text which did acknowledge the diversity within the continent is *Description de l'Afrique* by Olfert Dapper, which served as an ethnographic description of many regions of Africa explored by the Dutch geographer.³ It is important to note that this book, like any other which would acknowledge diversity on the continent, still emphasized the exoticism of the African people, thus contributing to a homogenous image of the exotic black African.

The majority of the iconography of black people as depicted in seventeenth and eighteenth-century art represents them performing tasks within a European context. The combined views of African exoticism and wildness led to a common usage of black Africans as characters with very defined traits. As historian Francisco Bethencourt explains, "black people were used to express crudeness, idiocy, indifference, lust, malice, mockery, and cruelty".⁴ This iconographic trend became especially popular in central Europe in the seventeenth century and would have spread to Venice by the eighteenth century.⁵

¹ Simon Swynfen, "From Abbotsford to Australia: A Set of 'Brustolon' Chairs," *The Burlington Magazine*, 146.1215 (June 2004): 400.

² Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), 91.

³ Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 89.

Description de l'Afrique, Olfert Dapper (Amsterdam: Wolfgang, Waesberge Boom, and van Sommeren, 1686)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵ Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 96.

These characteristics played out through representations of the realities of the social standing of black Africans within Europe, usually as servants, soldiers, labourers, and slaves.⁶ In the Venier collection, larger than life soldier statues are seen to ‘guard’ the entrances to the Ballroom. In Pietro Venier’s original palazzo, these soldiers would have held similar posts. As historian Kate Lowe explains, “physical prowess was one of the few accomplishments of black Africans that was valued, and Africans were employed in a range of physical activities”.⁷ This, in combination with their slave status, language difficulties, non-literacy, and the stereotyped lack of civility and sociability led to these trends in employment.⁸ Because of the categorization of black Africans into the lowest of the socio-economic classes, a majority of representations of these people showed them as subordinates to global European dominance.

This subordination took many forms, but the common element was that black people were dehumanized and reduced to the usage of the European owners of these objects. Bethencourt notes some examples as “mugs, lamps, chair legs, sofas, and supports for objects such as columns and vases”.⁹ The latter seems to be the inspiration for the Venier collection at the Ca’ Rezzonico, where black characters serve as chair legs and arms, and as vase carriers and porcelain display cases.

The history of Venice as a centre for global trade, and its proximity to the Mediterranean Sea meant that Venice had a more frequent interaction with non-Europeans. Most notably, this involves a long and complicated relationship with the vast Ottoman Empire. This relationship was important in the definition of views of Europeans on Islam. Many episodes of European history resulted in the fear of Islam by Europeans, starting with the siege of Constantinople in 1453. As Bethencourt explains, “the three-day plunder of Constantinople along with widespread killing and rape of the population reinforced the reputation of ‘vile and brutish’ Turks, even though this kind of behaviour was common

⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁷ Kate Lowe, “The Stereotyping of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005): 32.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 96.

practice against cities that refused to surrender”.¹⁰ This event is key to Venetian-Ottoman relations, as Venice had a sizable colony in Christian Constantinople, and gained a new rival on the Mediterranean Sea.

Conflicts with North African pirates would have further contributed to anti-Muslim sentiments. This piracy involved the capture and enslavement of Christians throughout the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coast of Europe.¹¹ Guillaume Postel, a French writer in the sixteenth century, criticized Moors (North Africans) as “the worst scoundrels, infidels, and traitors among all the followers of Muhammad”.¹²

The geographic overlap between the western regions of the Ottoman Empire and the African continent, combined with the ignorance of racial diversity and a feeling of Venetian superiority, may have led to the conflation of one iconographic representation for a combined “other”. This combination of black iconography with Venetian-Ottoman history is epitomized in the enormous black captives who support the tomb of Doge Giovanni Pesaro (1589-1659) at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. The tomb was sculpted by Baldassare Longhena (1598-1682) from 1665 to 1669, with German sculptor Melchior Barthel (1625-1672) aiding with the colossal figures.¹³ Without context, it would be valid for a visitor to assume that these men represented black slaves, because they follow the historical iconographic trends of black enslaved Africans. I propose, however, that they may also represent captured Ottoman sailors.

While the sailors may very well have been from North Africa, their identity as Muslim Ottoman sailors is key. As historian Paul Kaplan explains, “Early commentaries refer to the four figures as ‘*mori*’”, and the doge was active in a naval campaign against the Ottoman Empire in defense of the island of Crete.¹⁴ These men therefore represented an over-compensating superiority over the

¹⁰ Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Paul Kaplan, “Italy, 1490-1700,” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Vol. III: From “Age of Discovery” to Age of Abolition, Part I: Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010), 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

perceived other. Without context, it is valid that a visitor would assume these men represent victims of the African slave trade, because they follow the historic iconographic trends of black Africans. But for Venetian contemporaries to Doge Pesaro, these men would have served a dual purpose: asserting dominance over the whole of the African continent to the west of Venice, and the expansive Ottoman Empire to the east. By depicting ‘Moors’, the implication is two-fold. Firstly, an assertion of dominance over black North Africans, who are from the African continent and therefore representative of the larger idea of European dominance. Secondly, North African Moors are part of Ottoman Empire, and therefore representative of a desired defeat over Ottoman Empire.

If we consider Kaplan’s assertion that the tomb was incredibly influential,¹⁵ it is valid to assume that Andrea Brustolon would have seen it while working in Venice. I argue that the figures included in Brustolon’s furniture, like those who act as chair legs or vase stands, both implicitly reference the overall European idea of dominance over the African continent, and the Venetian quest for dominance over the Ottoman Empire. Patricians like Petro Venier would have been very conscious of the ongoing Venetian-Ottoman conflict, and by including references to this in their own furniture, they are asserting their support for the Venetian Republic, while showing they are themselves part of the intellectual and successful elite.

When decontextualized, it is understandable that a visitor would not understand the multiplicity of meanings within the Brustolon furniture. But when combined with a historical context, and when displayed alongside the Venier ceramics collection, the complexity of meanings may become more apparent.

Historian Erin Campbell argues that porcelain was one of the most important medium in Europe for the representation of the exotic during the eighteenth century.¹⁶ The collection of ceramics from the East was seen as a symbol of status, and so the ownership of these objects by the Venier

¹⁵ Kaplan, “Italy, 1490-1700,” 187.

¹⁶ Erin J. Campbell, “Balancing Act: Andrea Brustolon’s ‘La Forza’ and the Display of Imported Porcelain in Eighteenth-Century Venice,” in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, edited by Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 107.

family contributed to their status as elite Venetians. By using some of the objects in the Ca' Rezzonico Brustolon collection as stands for their porcelain, these stands had two distinct yet congruent functions, as both representations of “the other” and as vessels to display “the other”.

Campbell posits that the Venier collection really embodies a “microcosm of the world”.¹⁷ By representing African slaves, Ottoman Moors, and Japanese and Chinese porcelain – within a European palazzo – the works demonstrate “the collector’s mastery of the world”.¹⁸ Besides the representations of the exotic “other”, the iconographic program of the furniture uses allegories of the seasons, four ages, the elements, virtues and vices, and the liberal arts. This set therefore really serves to embellish the intelligence and worldly-ness of Venier.

The piece which most evidently embodies this idea is *La Forza* (Strength), a display-stand with the capability of holding up to five pieces of porcelain. This piece was probably designed by Brustolon to display the Pietro Venier’s collection of over thirty Chinese and Japanese porcelain vessels.¹⁹ At the base of the stand, Hercules stands triumphant over a few of the labours he was tasked to perform, including the Nemean Lion and the Lernaean Hydra. Hercules’ physical journey took him through North Africa, “understood as Ethiopia in the world of classical mythology”. Conquered Africa is therefore represented by the three black slaves who hold up a tray on which the porcelain is placed. They are conquered two-fold: they are literally enslaved, and the materials from which they are made, ebony, comes from a conquered tropical climate. The porcelain (Asia) is therefore seen as the prize for Hercules’ (Europe) labours.²⁰

Visually, the porcelain is elevated above the black figures, representing the hierarchy of value for the cultures which each element represents. While the black figures are dehumanized, showing the lack of respect for the cultures (or perceived lack of culture) of the African continent, the celebrating

¹⁷ Campbell, “Balancing Act,” 108.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 110.

of the beauty of porcelain correlates with the respect for the ancient traditions of Chinese and Japanese cultures. While they are still viewed as exotic, it is regarded with respect.²¹

Campbell notes that Hercules also represents a potential loss of equilibrium which threatens Venice. The river gods, slaves, and porcelain sit atop a slab of wood which could tip over if not supported properly by Hercules. Notable changes in Venetian society include the advent of large trading powers like Portugal, Spain, the Dutch Republic, and England, and greater interests in New World colonization.²² This piece therefore symbolized the struggle for Venice to stay on top of the shifting power dynamics within Europe. Regardless of the implicit meanings, there is still an explicit assertion of dominance over other cultures, namely the black figures included on all the pieces of furniture.

Historian Mimi Hellman discusses the importance of furniture as social actors which “condition and stage domestic space”.²³ With this in mind, the importance of the messages portrayed within the Brustolon furniture becomes more apparent. Hellman suggests that, “decorative objects conveyed meaning not simply through possession but also through usage, through a spatial and temporal complicity with the body”.²⁴ Therefore the iconographic subordination, as explained earlier, becomes a physical submission as well, as the figures become *used* by the owners. Hellman goes further to argue that “objects were not simply owned, but indeed *performed*”.²⁵ Through the ownership of these objects, the collection becomes a representative dominance over the figures depicted within them.

Contemporaries to Brustolon and Piero Venier would have understood the implicit meanings of this piece within the collection. A learned Venetian who entered the Venetian home would have understood the multiplicity of the meanings behind the black figures and could have pieced together

²¹ Campbell, “Balancing Acts,” 111.

²² *Ibid.*, 113.

²³ Mimi Hellman, “Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32.4 (1999): 417.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hellman, “Eighteenth Century France,” 417.

the collector's influence. But modern museum visitors do not have the same critical skills to contextualize *La Forza* and other works in the Venier collection, so their meaning is lost. Because of this, a critical museum patron may assume this piece to exalt the African slave trade, because of the iconography of the black men in chains. While this assumption is fair, and there is no doubt that the treatment of black Africans in Venice was unfair, it does not do justice to the true and complex treatment between Venetians, black Africans, and Ottomans. Furthermore, the decontextualization of the collection means the active function of the furniture, as explained by Hellman, becomes lost.

By pushing the furniture to the sides of the rooms, the pieces lose all sense of context and become lost in the ornate walls. Not only is the complex meaning of the furniture lost to visitors, but their role as actors within the domestic space is erased as well. To alleviate this problem, the Ca' Rezzonico could display the pieces as they were intended to be used, returning some of their original function to the rooms. The pieces are already overshadowed by the ceiling decorations for which the majority of visitors have come to see – further removing this context lessens the important message they have to convey to the visitors.

This message is an acknowledgement of the gross realities of Venetian history, a fact which many patrons remain ignorant to. Museums like Ca' Rezzonico have a unique opportunity, because they are able to show the juxtaposition between the lavish lifestyles of the Venetian elite which many people are familiar with, and the harsh realities of life for others within the time. In Venice particularly, the presence of objects such as the Venier collection has become a part of the city, and many visitors do not notice them because of the fervour of activity around them. A critical curatorial intervention would allow the Ca' Rezzonico to display these objects, while still acknowledging the history of racial discrimination for which they stand. At the bare minimum, the museum should offer panels discussing the facts surrounding the objects, including artist, owner, and subject. Further contextualization could offer criticisms of the iconography represented in the figures, aiding visitors in their own interpretations and reflections.

Another option for museums like Ca' Rezzonico, is to support and display the works by artists like Fred Wilson (b. 1954). Wilson creates new exhibition contexts for objects found within museum collections, disrupting the “taken-for-granted assumptions about how museums exhibition and interpret their collections”.²⁶ As Wilson explains:

I try to bring out the meanings that I see in the objects, often the ones that, for one reason or another, are hidden in plain sight. This is not to replace the museum’s view of the object’s meaning with my own, but to let both meanings or multiple meanings be present at the same time. I am interested in at least acknowledging that the object can be understood from many different vantage points.²⁷

Wilson attempts to highlight the multiplicity of meanings behind an object and is conscious of the idea that individual visitors bring their own experiences into a museum setting, experiences which will inherently shift their own meaning-making. He seeks to explore the multiplicity of meanings in objects and “how context changes meaning”.²⁸ Furthermore, artist and writer Mark Graham explains that Wilson’s work “uses the unique history of the museum’s collection to create new understanding of the museum’s relationship to the community that surrounds it”.²⁹ Because of this, Wilson’s interventions would greatly benefit the Venier collection at the Ca' Rezzonico. He would not serve to change the complex meaning of the Brustolon furniture but would rather intervene in ways which proposed alternative ways that visitors could understand these subjects. He would be able to convey a message which shows why the history of eighteenth-century Venice is important in understanding the way contemporary Venice, and the rest of the world, runs.

Wilson is no stranger to the history of objects within Venice: his 2003 installation for the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, *Speak of Me as I Am*, focused on the historical and contemporary presence of black people in Venice and issues of their representation.³⁰ In this multi-media installation, Wilson challenges visitors to contemplate the experience of blacks within Venetian

²⁶ Mark A. Graham, “An Interview with Artist Fred Wilson,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 32.3 (Fall 2007): 211.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁸ Graham, “Fred Wilson,” 211.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Marla C. Berns, “Africa at the Venice Biennale,” *African Arts* 36.3 (Autumn 2003): 91.

history. Nods to contemporary Venetian race relations include the presence of an actor who represents the Senegalese men who frequent the city, selling knockoff bags on the streets. The façade of the US pavilion is decorated with two large banners of the Ottoman sailors who support the tomb of Giovanni Pesaro at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. Other pieces show black mannequins dressed in period-costumes, representing the Moors shown in historical paintings by Carpaccio and Veronese, and black Murano glass chandeliers and mirrors allude to the tourist economy of the small town in the Veneto. But the pieces which would be best suited for the Ca' Rezzonico are the glass reproductions of blackamoor candleholders, and crouching Moors who hold up reproductions of antique busts.³¹

These objects, which are prime examples of the subordinate objects typical of black iconography, are present all over the Veneto. Wilson explains, “they are in hotels everywhere in Venice [...] which is great, because of all of a sudden you see them everywhere. I wanted it to be visible, this whole world which sort of just blew up for me”.³² Wilson changes the meanings of these candleholders by having them hold torches and fire extinguishers instead of candlesticks. He serves to disrupt the commonality of these objects, all while commenting on the historical realities of their meanings and the contemporary reality of their continued use by Venetians. He both contextualizes and then recontextualizes these works within contemporary society, and this is an intervention which could serve to benefit the Venier collection at Ca' Rezzonico.

The Venier collection at the Ca' Rezzonico is a vast collection of over seventy pieces, including chairs, display stands, and examples of Asian porcelain. While these works present a rich example of the historical realities of eighteenth-century Venice, the way they are currently displayed within the Museum of Eighteenth-Century Venice at Ca' Rezzonico has led to the entire collection being decontextualized and therefore misinterpreted or ignored by visitors. The figures on the furniture by

³¹ Marla C Berns, “Africa at the Venice Biennale,” 91.

³² Phoebe Hoban, “The Shock of the Familiar.” Entertainment, *New York Magazine*, July 28, 2003, http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/n_9014/.

Andrea Brustolon highlight issues of racial discrimination and European elitism and combined with the porcelain they create an image of the Venetian assertion of dominance within a global context. With critical curatorial interventions, or by supporting and exhibiting works by artists like Fred Wilson, the Ca' Rezzonico can change its curatorial methods to present the Venier collection in a way which highlights the historical significance while placing the pieces within the context of the twenty-first century.

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