The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories

Janell Hobson

The then and now of subjugation and empowerment

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429243578-17
James Smalls
Published online on: 17 Mar 2021

How to cite :- James Smalls. 17 Mar 2021, The then and now of subjugation and empowerment from: The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories Routledge Accessed on: 12 Oct 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429243578-17

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Marie-Guillemine Benoist’s *Portrait d’une nègresse* (1800) complicates matters of race, gender, and class. The portrait not only constructs racial otherness in the historical moment but relates that process to the assumed un-raced white and in this case, female rather than male self. In this undertaking, the Black woman depicted confuses rather than clarifies the expected function of the portrait genre as a marker of a person’s subjectivity, social class standing, and occupation. Benoist’s portrait is a complex painting with serious political implications around not only matters of race, gender, and class but also agency, the circuitry of male and female gazes, allegory, modernity, and exoticism. It is one of those rare images that have far-reaching implications for the past and present cultural histories of Black women and their primacy or impotence in the discourse over visual representation, agency, and cultural value as modernist subjects.

Over the past two decades, art historians and other scholars of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French art have offered varying interpretations of this very complex and ambiguous work. The painting’s subject matter and reception have provoked a variety of responses ranging from Hugh Honour’s praise for it as a “warmly humane and noble image” to Griselda Pollock’s criticism of the painter for shamefully putting her Black model on display, as on a slave auction block, to serve the cause of her own creativity (Honour 1989, 7–9; Pollock 1999, 300). Scholars such as Helen Weston and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, as well as myself, view the image as part of a dehumanizing tendency through the erasure of the sitter’s identity, despite the fact that the Black woman is the primary focus of the painting and that she has been recently identified by her name.¹ It has been argued that dehumanization and objectification are furthered in the work by “the stark exposure of her [the Black woman’s] body, and the deliberate emphasis on her skin color.” As such, the painting “deprives the sitter of her individuality and reduces her to a generic, racial, and sexualized category – ‘a negress’” (Bishop 2019, 2).

The Black woman in Benoist’s painting can be taken as a symbol of modernity; a visible sign of simultaneous empowerment and subjugation. As David Theo Goldberg has pointed out, definitions of race and gender, along with their representational forms, emerge, develop, and change within the institution of modernity (Goldberg 1993, 1). Benoist’s portrait demonstrates the extent to which gender, race, and class were significant to the articulation of the artist’s...
The then and now of subjugation and empowerment

subjectivity in the historical moment of French entry into the modern world. Through the image, we as viewers are forced to question these matters as defining aspects of the collective body politic in the building of French nationhood, in which women and Blacks were to be included in the abstract ideals of revolutionary liberation.

This chapter constitutes a rumination over the historical, aesthetic, and conceptual “then and now” of the painting in matters of race, gender, class, aesthetics, and the gaze. I want to consider the representation of the Black woman in Benoist’s portrait as simultaneously empowered and subjugated — locked into an ambiguous state of affairs that confounds and disrupts while lending productive meaning to the image.

Due to the absence of firsthand accounts of art and writing by Black women from this period, it becomes necessary to analyze the conditions of the sitter’s existence and the cultural ideologies surrounding the portrait, and to undertake a critical examination of the subject matter and style of the visual image itself. Many scholars who have examined this portrait tend to argue either pro or against its sympathetic portrayal. Either way, one must concede that the overwhelming context for considering the work is the phenomena of slavery and antislavery. In this instance, the conscientious representation of a Black figure by any artist would constitute a political and politicizing site/sight. I have contended, and continue to contend, that there is no such thing as a politically neutral representation of an esclave (slave), nègre/nègresse (Negro/Negress), or noir (Black), even though aesthetics and classicizing language often attempt to convince us otherwise. Both the Black presence and absence in visual and literary representation speak to the political volatility Black people embody in the visual register, past and present. Benoist’s portrait is no exception. With it, the artist scrutinizes a racialized sitter “to create an accurate likeness, [while] complicating the dynamics of agency, traditionally held by white male portraitists over their female sitters of any race” (Cresseveur 2015, 2).

As I have pointed out elsewhere, Portrait d’une négresse is less a likeness of the Black woman depicted and more a representational act of self-reflection by the artist on her own status and condition as a woman in early nineteenth-century France. Benoist’s painting is powerful in its dual function as a focus of the simultaneous empowerment and subjugation of Black women; of the exploitive use of a Black woman by a white female artist to speak to the deplorable condition of women as enslaved in society. By virtue of its subject and the time period in which it was produced, the painting combines the volatile contemporary debates over slavery, antislavery, and the social status of women. Thus, the work is unquestionably political and politicizing, intentionally or not, if we accept the idea that fundamentally, “politics is about relationships among people and how they intersect with and are informed by dominant ideologies and systems of authority in the real world” (Amin 2014, 255).

In addition to race as a topic of consideration, Benoist’s portrait can be viewed as a work of both consensus-building and “feminist” protest. In its thematic strategies, the portrait closely relates to early nineteenth-century feminism and the writings of women authors of the period, such as Olympe de Gouges (1748–93), Germaine de Staël (1766–1814), and Claire de Duras (1777–1828), all of whom wrote about slavery in relation to the oppression of women in society. Indeed, many of the processes and motivations of Benoist as a painter parallel the complications, ambiguities, contradictions, and ambivalences found in the written works of these antislavery authors.

Portrait d’une négresse is unusual in many respects. For one, it deviates from standard representations of Blacks in European art, which typically show them as exotic additions to a portrait or a narrative scene in which a white master or mistress is the intended primary focus. Based on the physiognomic detailing of the model and the high degree of finish, Benoist’s portrait was not a study for a larger project, as was the case with the majority of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century works in which Black women appeared and were typically shown in
their expected roles as attending servants and exoticized complements to a white mistress. By depicting a Black woman in the traditional pose and situation of white women in portraiture, Benoist has turned the *Portrait d’une nègresse* into something of an allegory of her own condition of subservience to patriarchy, thereby simultaneously empathizing with the oppressed condition of her sitter while subjugating her.

Clearly, in choosing to paint a woman of color as the sole rather than ancillary subject of the composition, Benoist embraced an unusual subject and knowingly engaged in intersecting and politically contentious issues (e.g. race, gender, class, slavery/antislavery). The only other portrait of an independent Black subject to be publicly exhibited around the same period was Anne-Louis Girodet’s *Portrait of Citizen Belley, Ex-Representative of the Colonies* (Salon of 1798). Girodet’s work is a visualized manifesto for Black emancipation and was undoubtedly received in that way by visitors to the Salon (Waller 2018). It has been suggested, based on the fact that not only were Girodet and Benoist acquainted but the former was the teacher of Marie-Guillemin’s sister, that Benoist’s *Portrait* may have been not only inspired by Girodet’s *Belley* but perhaps even a conscious response to it (Grigsby 2002, 57). Both works are similar in that they were produced during a period in which the slavery/antislavery debate remained at the core of determining who was and who was not to become a member of the French nation; who was to be a citizen and who was not worthy of that status.

Although both portraits are unusual in that they are not stereotypical images of Blacks, they differ in that the *Belley* is a large canvas depicting a recognizable historical male figure in the grand manner of portraiture (containing public and lofty ideas promoting the revolutionary democratic principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood), while the *Portrait d’une nègresse* is of modest size, intended for private consumption/contemplation, and showcases a Black female sitter used to communicate ideas about race, bondage, and liberation in a less demonstrative and more generalized manner. As is also the case with Girodet’s image, Benoist’s figure constitutes a combined allegorical and straightforward portrait containing elements of idealization and historical “truth” (Weston 1994, 98–99).

Benoist’s portrait contains ambiguities and contradictions that are exacerbated by the biography of the artist and the historical context in which the work was painted. Ironically, the biographical details of the assumed focus of the painting, the Black woman, remain a mystery.

**A painting, a history, and a life**

Benoist’s portrait shows a young Black woman seated in an armchair in a three-quarter position (see Figure 14.1). Her face is turned to the viewer with a facial expression described as “somewhere between defiance and melancholy” (Bishop 2019, 1). The treatment of her face suggests that this is a likeness of a particular individual rather than the representation of a generic racial type. She wears an elaborate white and crisply laundered headwrap along with a white garment and red sash, the former of which slips from her shoulders, exposing her right breast. The background is plain, and the chair in which she sits suggests that she is in a privileged domestic space. The work is mostly monochromatic with hints of bright red and blue. It has been proposed by several scholars that the red, white, and blue palette is conscientiously suggestive of the democratic tricolors of the French revolutionary flag.

Both the biographical details of Benoist and the historical context in which the portrait was painted are critical to the work’s actual and potential meaning. *Portrait d’une nègresse* was painted between 1794 and 1802, during a time in which the transatlantic slave trade was thriving, even though France had (temporarily) abolished slavery in its colonies in 1794, only to have it reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802.
The painting reveals much about the life and career of Benoist but uncovers nothing about those of the Black sitter, thereby leaving her subjectivity to speculation. Benoist’s biographical details provide some clues as to why she chose to paint this subject. Marie-Guillemine Benoist, born Marie-Guillemine de Laville-Leroulx in 1768 (died 1826), was from a middle-class family. She and her sister, Elisabeth de Laville-Leroulx, first studied painting with Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842) and later were among a handful of women artists whom the famed neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) took into his studio in the Louvre. Before she married, Marie-Guillemine made her debut at the Salon of 1791, when the revolutionary government opened the exhibition to women and non-French artists for the first time. She was ambitious and exhibited history paintings, which were considered at the time beyond women’s capacities and not a suitable pursuit. In 1793, during the most violent phase of the French Revolution, she married Pierre-Vincent Benoist (1758–1834), a lawyer of noble birth who fostered connections with the royal family (Ballot 83, note 2). He was from Angers and an avowed monarchist. The political circumstances of the period forced the couple into hiding until moderate revolutionaries overthrew the government in 1794, the same year that slavery was temporarily abolished in the colonies (Weston 2000, 56). By 1800, however, Napoleon had staged a coup d’état and installed himself as First Consul of the Directory. With the change of government, Benoist continued to work as a professional artist for much of her marriage. She used her contacts in the art world to assist her husband’s rise in status during the Consulate, First Empire, and Bourbon Restoration. In 1814, Louis XVIII appointed her husband to the position...
of Conseiller d’État, a position that provided him with a substantial income (Cresseveur 2015, 8). During the period, it was frowned upon for wealthy women to hold paid employment in the public sphere. As a result, Benoist was forced to forego her career as a painter in deference to her husband and to societal norms.

It has been pointed out that although Benoist’s husband had royalist connections, “we cannot determine the artist’s political sympathies by considering those of her husband.” However, “we can conclude that her role in his rise in status necessitated her conformity to contemporary political conventions, which would foreclose any attempts to effect social change” (Cresseveur 2015, 8–9). This state of affairs bears strongly on Benoist’s representation of the Black sitter. It is my contention that Benoist’s portrait was an aesthetically sanctioned attempt by the artist to effect social change as far as the status of women was concerned. The painting manifests the artist’s endeavor to exercise as much agency as she could get away with in the face of insurmountable odds that restricted her actions because of her gender. The portrait speaks powerfully to the artist’s desire to assert her own agency as a woman and professional artist in contemporary patriarchal society and debatably, that of her Black sitter as well.

Available documents reveal that Benoist’s Black sitter was a formerly enslaved woman brought to France in 1794 from the island of Guadeloupe by Benoist’s brother-in-law, Auguste Benoist-Cavay, a ship’s purser and civil servant (Ballot 1914, 151). Whether she was brought to France under enslaved or servant status, she, unlike fashionable women who commissioned their portraits, would have had little influence or say in how she was depicted (Smalls 2004; Waller 2018). Nevertheless, it is true that “portraits of ‘free’ Black servants were [often] used as status symbols for wealthy and haut bourgeois families at the time” (Pollock 1999, 287; Cresseveur 2015, 10–11). Portrait d’une négresse may well have served this purpose.

Accessible sources also confirm that Benoist “never travelled outside Paris and never witnessed the conditions [that] slaves were forced to endure in French and other European colonies” (Cresseveur 2015, 10; Cameron 1997, 245). There are scholars who suspect that the male members of Benoist’s family, namely her husband and brother-in-law, held abolitionist sentiments that Benoist shared. Unfortunately, there is no credible evidence to support this claim. The historian Helen Weston has categorically ruled out abolitionist intentions on the part of the artist, noting that it was Benoist’s connections with Napoleon’s brother, Lucien, that guaranteed Benoist’s husband a coveted government position and that socially, the families of both the artist and her spouse were deeply imbricated in Napoleonic circles of influence and power. Thus, Weston concludes, and I fully concur, that

[i]t is out of the question that she [Benoist] would have exhibited or been allowed to exhibit a painting of a black woman which celebrated liberty and equality when the men in power in the circles in which she and her husband moved were actively ordering the suppression of slave rebellion, and setting in motion the mechanisms to reintroduce slavery.

(Weston 2000, 57)

I do not, however, doubt the conscientiously political implications of Benoist’s painting. I believe that the artist was cautious yet savvy enough to use the portrait as subtle protest and that its original title, Portrait d’une négresse, was intended to guarantee that the Black woman would remain an anonymous, innocuous type and not a named, identifiable threat. As the portrait suggests, the Black woman is locked into a state of “objecthood” as enslaved/servant, forever subordinated within bourgeois domestic space. The portrait, however, whether considered in its own historical context or in ours today, remains an ambiguous and complicated image in its capacity to elicit intersectional readings and meanings, be they actual or implied. It is the
painting’s productive ambiguity that constitutes the attraction and power of the portrait, regardless of whether the subject is designated a “negress” or Madeleine.

The painting can be viewed as “an antithesis of the artist” in which the representation is simultaneously empathetic and elitist (Cresseveur 2015, 11–12). As such, Portrait complicates, that is, it makes more ambiguous, the aspects of gender and race embodied in the image. I contend that for Benoist, the Black woman served as a reflection of the artist’s own disempowered status as a woman and an artist in a patriarchal culture. Such a condition did not allow the painter “to change her sitter’s situation” but afforded an opportunity “to create her sitter’s likeness in her own image as an unconscious attempt to empathize” (Cresseveur 2015, 12). There is irony here when taking into account that Benoist may have intended her portrait to serve as an allegory of freedom, a possibility suggested both by the obvious reference to abolition connoted by the Black woman’s racial identity and by the blue, white, and red pattern of colors used throughout the painting. The image remains intriguing because on the one hand, it speaks to emancipation and gives a nod to recognizing this Black woman’s individuality, while on the other, it exploits the sitter’s condition of servitude. So, “what emerges is not a relation of opposition between freedom and enslavement, or between subjecthood and objecthood, but rather one of complementarity and interdependence” (Bishop 2019, 8). The portrait offers a vision in which enslavement and emancipation coexist, merge, and become inextricably linked, producing ambiguous and unfixed meaning around matters of race, gender, class, and nationhood (Bishop 2019, 8–9).

Disrupting portraiture

Benoist’s image adheres to the stylistic and compositional conventions of neoclassical portraiture in 1800. However, it is Black woman as subject matter that undermines those codes. The contrast of colors, fabric, and skin is consistent with protocols of European portraiture of the period, in which the convincing rendering of flesh tones was crucial. In painting the portrait, one of Benoist’s goals was to demonstrate her technical prowess as a painter with an accurate rendering of likeness and skin tone. She did not set out “to revolutionize portraiture”; rather, it was ambiguity that was the best choice for a woman portraitist of an exotic sitter to take when navigating the cultural and political norms of the early nineteenth century (Cresseveur 2015, 31).

It was during this period that portraiture, along with still life and decorative painting, was deemed a pastime best suited for women, as opposed to history painting, which was considered a male pursuit. Jean-Baptiste Boutard (1771–1838), a conservative critic for the Journal des débats and hostile toward Benoist’s portrait, held a widespread chauvinistic opinion that art was the purview of males and that women should pursue painting as a hobby, not a profession. As well, he dismissed finding attraction in a Black subject, believing black skin color to be anathema to Western aesthetics of beauty (Weston 2000, 57).

At the Salon, some reviewers read the portrait as a statement on the issue of slavery and liberation, while others, such as Boutard and Charles Thénevin (1764–1838), held some deep-seated racist attitudes and were not impressed. Boutard condemned the painting and its creator in this way: “Whom can one trust in life after such horror! It is a white and pretty hand which has created this black horror (noircœur)” (Boutard 1801; Ballot 1914, 150; Honour 1989, 12). Thévenin referred to the subject of the painting as “a sublime blurred tache (stain)” (Thévenin 1801). Boutard and Thévenin attacked Benoist and her painting based on their opinion that the artist had violated contemporary conventional notions of aesthetic propriety. Both critics held prevalent racist views that Blacks were set apart biologically, racially, culturally, and intellectually from Frenchness and whiteness; unworthy as the primary subject of art. The negative shock of blackness – the stain as visible sign and marker of racial difference, ugliness, and horror – was
set in opposition to the virtuous attributes ascribed to white female purity and beauty. Benoist’s portrait raised the question of not only what subjects were worthy of representation but more specifically, what subjects were appropriate for white women artists of high social standing to engage.

It has been suggested that humanist versus dehumanizing approaches to Benoist’s painting have not only led to “contrasting conclusions” but have too heavily relied on the “structured binaries of subjecthood versus objecthood, agency versus passivity, individual versus racial type” (Bishop 2019, 2). My own 2004 critique of the Black woman’s lack of agency has been recently taken to task for my resting on the assumption that somehow, “portraiture should convey a form of autonomous, individual subjectivity” (Bishop 2019, 2). Cécile Bishop has pointed out that we should not blame Benoist “for offering only a partial, reductive representation of her sitter,” because to do so “implicitly measure(s) the portrait against an ideal of subjectivity, which is in fact a fantasy elicited by the portrait” (Bishop 2019, 2). Instead, it is more productive to view the painting as posing “a deeper structural challenge,” that is, one that counters the very notion and structure of portraiture defined as the privileged form “through which European culture has visualized individual subjectivity,” and that “blackness is the sign through which Europe has identified those it confined to servility and objecthood” (Bishop 2019, 2). In this respect, blackness in European portraiture is technically an aberration, which renders Benoist’s portrait an unusual one for the period as well as an anomaly in the context of her body of works.7

Conclusion: what’s in a name?

What’s in a name? Everything and nothing at all. Taking into account the original title ascribed to Portrait when it was first exhibited, I am interested in how racializing designations such as “négresse” or “femme noire” operate as forms of exercising/exorcizing political and ideological forms of empowerment and subjugation for both the subject depicted and the artist. Benoist’s Portrait is one of a few images that reflect the polarizing dynamic between slavery and antislavery, between investment in racial discourse and strategies of distancing from it.

Although the frequency of employing the term “negress” has diminished in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its potency increases as a term and concept of agency and empowerment by those who were once the “victims” of such racializing schemes. Today, “negress” has become somewhat popular as a term of appropriation by some contemporary artists, who have employed it as a form of empowerment in the act of (re)naming.8 The “negress” as both a term and an idea has, in the contemporary moment, come to signify a fierce Black agency – a recouped designation and notion that catalyzes a probing of the racialized self in relation to history, memory, and the search for identities beyond those dictated solely by skin color and racial typologies.

In providing the name of the Black sitter and the historical context of the representation of Black women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of art when these are known, it becomes clear that “what is at stake is an art-historical discourse, posed as an intervention to the prevailing historical silence” about the “significance of the black female muse to the formation of modernism” (Higonnet in Murrell 2019, xviii). Moreover, the naming and interrogation of the legacy of Black women represented in works such as Portrait d’une négresse allows art history to reimagine the roles played by the Black female figure in the history of art. Benoist’s Portrait may deservedly constitute an important precursor to how elements of race, gender, and class come “to structure our modern lives” (Higonnet in Murrell 2019, xviii).
More than two centuries after Benoist brought her “negress” into the visible world, the experiential and representational complex intersections of race, gender, class, and culture that the painting reflects live on today in the realm of popular culture. In 2018, the entertainer Beyoncé Knowles and her husband, Jay-Z, exploited the ambiguities of race, gender, and culture in a music track and accompanying six-minute video titled *Apeshit* from their first joint album as a married couple, called *Everything Is Love*. The video, characterized as provocative and radical at the level of gender, was filmed in the hallowed cultural space of the Louvre Museum and begins with fragments and close-ups of European paintings, including Benoist’s *Portrait d’une négresse* (King 2018, 14).

Although Benoist’s “negress” is a portrait of an enslaved woman-cum-servant, she has nonetheless attained a degree of nobility by virtue of her unique presence in the Louvre specifically and in Western art in general. She holds her own as an independent Black presence among all the other paintings in that hallowed institution. As one commentator has noted, it is for this reason that the Black woman is “[t]he only figure … that can withstand the unstoppable force that is Beyoncé” (Grady 2018). Given the painting’s clear racial presence, the portrait has been reinterpreted, given a new context, and as such, remains relevant to the present. The painted “negress” of subjugation has been upstaged by a contemporary one of assertive presence and star power. In her co-opting of Benoist’s painting, Beyoncé has made some highly selective choices of representation in order to deliver a powerful message about the potential of Black women’s agency in the contemporary world.

As I have tried to make clear throughout this chapter and in previous writings, Benoist’s portrait is a highly complex and ambiguous painting with many things happening in it across the domains of politics, race, gender, and class, and in the formation/deformation of Black subjectivity (Smalls 2004; Smalls 2018). As such, it continues to influence, provoke, and beckon reinterpretation. In the *Apeshit* video, Benoist’s Black woman is not directly visually paired with Beyoncé, but the relationship between that Black woman of the past and this one of the present is implied. Beyoncé’s act of appropriation is put to productive use as a visual and performative means of speaking to the then and now of Black women’s subjugation and empowerment.

**Notes**

1. *Portrait d’une négresse* was exhibited in the Salon of 1800 under the title *Portrait d’une négresse*. In the twentieth century, the work was retitled by the Louvre as *Portrait d’une femme noire* (*Portrait of a Black Woman*). More recently, as a result of art-historical research, the portrait has once again been renamed *Portrait de Madeleine* (*Portrait of Madeleine*), in reference to the uncovered name of the sitter. This discovery has called to task art history’s role in perpetuating a dehumanizing project by using racialized terms such as “négresse” or “noire,” considering the figure only as a racial type and not as an individual. Although I acknowledge this state of affairs and have more to say about it later, I have chosen throughout this chapter to keep the original title, *Portrait d’une négresse*, under which the work was first displayed and critically received.

2. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the definitions of these terms tended to shift according to historical and political circumstances. The words “nègre” and “négresse” were employed with frequency as scientific terms of classification with the development of the African slave trade and the proposition of various racial theories. On the history and French etymology of these racial designations, see Serge Daget, “Les mots esclave, nègre, noir et les jugements de valeur sur la traite négrière dans la littérature abolitionniste française de 1770 à 1845,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 60 (1973): 511–48; Simone Delesalle and Lucette Valensi, “Le mot ‘nègre’ dans les dictionnaires français d’ancien régime: Histoire et lexicographie,” *Langue française* 15 (September 1972): 79–104.

3. The relationship between the literary content and the ideological ambitions of these three women writers has been assessed recently by Stacie Allan. See Allan 2019, 1–15.
4 For a thorough discussion of the unique racial politics and aesthetics of this painting, see Grigsby 2002, 9–63.
5 Slavery on French soil proper had been banned in 1315, per an ordinance issued by Louis X. Colonial slaves who entered the metropole underwent automatic change in status to ‘servant’ and were eligible to petition for emancipation while within the country’s borders. For a critical examination of this law, see Samuel L. Chatman, ‘There Are No Slaves in France: A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth–Century France,’ The Journal of Negro History, vol. 85, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 144–5.
6 This hypothesis was first offered by Ballot in 1914 and has been accepted by most critics. See Ballot 1914, 151.
7 In her early discussion of the painting, Marie-Juliette Ballot, who does not take into account the ideological complexity of race in conjunction with visual representation, describes Benoist’s portrait as unique only in terms of its neoclassical style and Davidian influence. See Ballot 1914, 149.
8 Today, contemporary artists such as Kara Walker and Alison Saar have selectively chosen to use the term ‘negress’ in the titles of some of their works. Likewise, in 2013, a collective of Black women filmmakers banded together in New York City to form the New Negress Film Society. Their choice of name was intended as a riff on the empowering alignment of the New Negro and the negress.

References


