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Review

## Painting the Unpaintable

By [Richard Dorment](#)

*Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940*

by Guy C. McElroy, with an essay by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Bedford Arts/The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 190 pp., \$50.00

*The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*

by Albert Boime

Smithsonian Institution Press, 256 pp., \$24.95 (paper)

In 1778 a prosperous London merchant named Brook Watson commissioned John Singleton Copley to illustrate a traumatic incident in his youth. While swimming in Havana harbor in 1749, the young man was mauled by a shark and lost his leg. The story of his rescue, which Watson must have relived in his mind every day of his life and retold almost as often, is the subject of the picture now known as *Watson and the Shark*, which, for reasons that will soon be clear, is discussed at length in Albert Boime's *The Art of Exclusion*.

No wonder Watson needed to exorcise his obsession by seeing it again: the picture is the stuff of nightmares. A terrified boy flails in the water just out of the reach of two of the sailors straining to rescue him. He is not quite able to grasp a lifeline thrown to him by a third. Meanwhile, a harpoonist lunges at the shark from the rowboat, as much to distract the creature as to kill it. If he succeeds, Watson may in the next instant seize the rope and be hauled on board.

Or he may not. When Copley sent the picture to the Royal Academy in 1778 its title was A boy attacked by a shark, and rescued by some seamen in a boat; founded on a fact which happened in the harbour of the Havannah. There was no mention of Brook Watson. While the title tells us the final outcome of the drama, the picture itself offers no relief from tension.

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Only one of the boy's legs is fully visible. There is blood in the water, so the shark has already attacked once and returned. At the center of the composition is a black man who has done all he can to help Watson by throwing him the length of rope. Now, like us, he must stand back helplessly and watch.

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We need just an instant for our eye to take in the action, but much longer to understand its symbolic content. This would have been clearer to an English audience in 1778 than it is to us now. *A boy attacked by a shark* should be compared to a famous English picture painted and engraved ten years earlier. Both in size and theme it has much in common with Joseph Wright of Derby's masterpiece, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* of 1768.

This picture also tells a good story. An amateur scientist has invited his family and friends into his study to watch him demonstrate the existence of the vacuum in nature, a question debated at this time as much for its theological implications as for its scientific validity. The scientist has placed a white dove in a glass bowl from which he is now pumping the air. The frightened bird sinks to the bottom of the bowl, helplessly beating its wings as the vacuum begins to crush its lungs. Unless the scientist readmits oxygen, it will convulse and die.

All those gathered around the dove react in different ways to the sacrifice of the bird's life in the interests of scientific progress: a young man, a product of the Enlightenment, approves; an old philosopher broods on the moral consequences of what is happening; one little girl hides her eyes; another cannot help but look. The scientist is indifferent to questions of life and death, good and evil.

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In their different ways Copley's and Wright's paintings lead the viewer to ponder the existence of a benevolent God. The second asks whether the Deity would permit the existence of a vacuum in nature and whether there is a purpose in God's seemingly arbitrary command over life and death. The first questions whether the Being who created the young man also created the shark. Its theme is the coexistence of good and evil in the universe.

Both pictures draw on traditional religious imagery only to subvert it. Wright refers to the Holy Spirit in the use of a dove (and not some other animal). Copley emphasizes the snow-white nudity of Watson's body, who is like a soul on the Day of Judgment yearning for salvation but menaced by the devouring jaws of hell. Above, the harpoonist looms like a medieval carving of Saint Michael smiting Satan; two of the sailors are quotations from Raphael's tapestry cartoon showing the fishermen hauling in the nets, whom Christ would make fishers of men. The twin towers of a church on the shore remind us of the picture's underlying religious dimension.

When commissioning the canvas from Copley, Watson gave detailed instructions on how the drama should be represented. At a late stage in the evolution of the composition, he told Copley to substitute a black man in place of the white sailor originally standing in the rowboat. There was nothing portentous about this change.

Watson wanted a black man to be present because one had been there at the time, and Copley took a favorite family servant for his model.

From their costumes, one would guess that Watson's rescuers are all sailors from the ship that flies the British flag just behind them to the left. Particularly well dressed in a clean smock and flowing scarf is the solitary negro. He is not necessarily a slave, indeed from the neatness of his dress and the dignity of his bearing he might well be intended for a freeborn black sailor. Alone of the men in the boat he is temporarily disengaged from the drama and able to question its metaphysical implications. One might see him as the incarnation of Christian charity, the Samaritan who helps a soul in need.

What he is *not* is a symbol either of the outcast or of the slave: from everything we know about Copley or Watson the moral issue of slavery did not concern them. Forty years later Géricault would rewrite historical fact by placing a black man at the top of the *Raft of the Medusa*, representing in this single figure the suffering dregs of humanity. At the date when Copley painted *A boy attacked by a shark* such empathy with the plight of the negro simply did not exist in art, for the very good reason that it did not fully exist as a social issue.

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Géricault's picture is one of a handful of paintings which, taken in sequence, might serve to trace the history of the negro race in art from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. George Morland's *Execrable Human Traffick* is usually cited as the first painting to treat slavery as a subject in art. It was shown at the Royal Academy as late as 1788. From that moment on, painters who attempted to address the theme of slavery found themselves in an impossible dilemma.

By depicting the brutal realities of human bondage, the artist instantly lost an audience who wished to be entertained, not repelled or disgusted. An artist like Morland could clean up and sentimentalize the truth. Or he could tell the truth and risk keeping his picture unseen and unsold in his studio. When Ingres's pupil Marcel Verdier submitted to the Salon jury of 1845 a picture that graphically depicted the flogging of a black, it was rejected on the grounds that it would excite "the hatred of the populace against our unhappy colonies."

Any direct attempt at the representation of slavery was almost bound to fail. The very illustration of nudity and torture, which was often necessary for accuracy, turned the picture into a form of pornography. To take just one example, that in Françoise Auguste Biard's *The Slave Trade* of 1840, we are apparently meant to linger over glossily painted passages in which beautiful, bare-breasted black women are chained and branded by sadistic white slavers.

Painters could avoid the problem altogether by strategies that have been made explicit in the work of recent conceptual artists. An engraving showing the diagrammatic plan

of a slave ship, for example, with a sober written description of what actually happens when seven hundred men and women are manacled together in an airless hold, could be hung with impunity in a Quaker parlor because it described nauseating details without allowing the viewer to see them.

By the simple device of raising a black man on the shoulders of the other outcasts to wave the signal of distress in *The Raft of the Medusa*, Géricault referred covertly to the continued existence of the slave trade in France. The ship that passes obliviously in the distance across the horizon could be seen as a symbol of government indifference to the suffering of its citizens, and yet the allusion is so subtle that the picture was not banned by the authorities.

But the most profound statement on the evil of slavery ever painted is Turner's *The Slave Ship or Slaves Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On* of 1840. Turner based his painting on a real incident, when in 1780 the slaver *Zong* cast its cargo of sick slaves overboard in order to claim insurance. The last to die jumped of their own accord rather than allow their white captors to touch them.

Turner realized that such a subject cannot be illustrated. He therefore used the seascape to embody most of the horror of the murders. The blood-red sunset stains the swollen seas. Only in the foreground do we glimpse the sharks feeding upon the manacled limb of a dead slave. Like *A boy attacked by a shark* the picture is about evil, but unlike Copley's picture it is also about guilt and judgment. This time man and shark are one in the eyes of an outraged God. All nature rises up against them.

The painting succeeds in combining traditional concepts of beauty with horrific subject matter. Using much the same strategy in our own time, Anselm Kiefer has treated the unpaintable subjects of German militarism and the Holocaust through symbolic landscapes.

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The association of the black man with sharks and the sea continues with Winslow Homer's *Gulf Stream*. Painted in 1899, it shows a negro in his sailboat which has lost its mast and spar in a hurricane. He drifts in turbulent seas, surrounded by hungry sharks. One, its jaws wide open in the foreground of the picture, might have been lifted directly out of *A boy attacked by a shark*. In the distance a typhoon approaches—the situation, exactly, in Turner's *Slave Ship*. And finally, unseen by the black castaway, a three-masted ship passes by on the horizon, a mirror image of the vessel in the *Raft of the Medusa*.

Homer deliberately quoted from each of these earlier masters, drawing not on the history of the negro race, but on a parallel visual history of the black man with which an artist of Homer's sophistication could not help but be familiar. This history encompassed the nobility and generosity of his nature (Copley), his enslavement (Turner), and vain hopes for release (Géricault).

*The Gulf Stream* shows the condition of American negroes on the eve of the twentieth century, when the Thirteenth Amendment had freed them from slavery but reactionary laws impeded their every attempt to enter into American life. We must therefore look again at how the black castaway in *The Gulf Stream* is shown. What is new and shocking is the look on his face of sullen rage. In *The Art of Exclusion* Albert Boime describes the figure as "a powerfully condensed metaphor of implicit power blocked on all sides." That seems right. Gone is the fantasy of the benevolent black man in Copley's painting, gone the helpless victim in Turner's picture, and gone Géricault's hope for release.

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If one imagines for a moment that all the images of black men and women in both of the books under review are one figure in a continuous sequence, like one of those books of drawings where one flips the pages to make the pictures appear to move, a curious thing happens. We realize that throughout the nineteenth century the black man is shown as essentially motionless. He lies down, asleep or dead, leans against walls, is chained, or kneels in gratitude for his freedom.

Then toward the end of the sequence, like a shark suddenly rising up out of the depths to attack the unsuspecting swimmer, the black boxer in George Bellows's *Both Members of this Club* of 1909 lunges up at his white opponent and literally smashes his face in.

It is as though this is the shark the white man has really feared all along; this is why it was so important to keep the black man in chains; here is the reason why white artists must caricature blacks or else displace their fear of them by showing them devoured by the shark. Bellows's painting was originally entitled *A Nigger and a White Man* but it is also worth mentioning that the neighborhood bar where the illegal boxing match took place was called "Sharkeys."

In *The Art of Exclusion* the UCLA art historian Albert Boime examines many of the pictures I have mentioned and it is no exaggeration to say that he misses the point of each and every one. In particular, his lengthy discussion of *A boy attacked by a shark* is irrelevant to everything important about the picture. Boime's research into the sympathies of both Copley and Watson for the British cause during the Revolutionary War leads him to conclude that the picture is "an abstract formulation consciously established to counter and expose colonial hypocrisy" in demanding freedom from England while continuing to countenance slavery at home. To Boime, the picture "demonstrates a Tory attempt to show sympathy for authentically repressed people at the height of Tory antagonism to the American Revolution."

All I can say by way of comment is that if that is what *A boy attacked by a shark* is about, then it is a minor painting, a glorified political cartoon, whereas I see it as a work of art that asks the most profound questions about the nature of the universe.

Nothing the religious overtones of the composition, Boime decides that "Watson had himself represented as a victim of divine wrath for his own involvement in slave trading." But this is a bizarre view. Watson was not a slaver. He merely had business interest in fisheries that sold fish to feed West Indian slaves. Since the events depicted in the painting took place in Spanish-owned Havana, not the British colonies, there are no slaves shown in it, and Watson's name appears nowhere in the title, the theory strikes me a fantasy of the author's.

And by the time Boime brings the currently fashionable subject of the disabled into the question, we have sailed into parody: Watson "was proud of having overcome his disability and wanted to emphasize his understanding of others stigmatized by physical or social handicaps." Now maybe he did and maybe he didn't, but that is not what *A boy attacked by a shark* is about.

In Boime's reading, the black sailor "remains an invisible man whose capacity to act in the real world is blocked;...he functions as a decorative adjunct to the composition...he comes off mainly as an exotic servant who awaits his master's next move." One is tempted to ask: How wrong can you get? except that Boime himself goes on to give an even more wrongheaded discussion of Turner's *Slave Ship*:

Turner focused on an incident that had occurred in the previous century and was familiar to all. As a result, his image reduced to melodrama the tragic circumstances of the *Zong* and allowed the theme to be almost totally lost amid the artifices of pigment.

Apart from asking what the last three words mean, one has to conclude that Boime has never seen the picture. Certainly he does not understand it.

The many pictures showing one of the three Magi at the nativity as black are said by Boime to create negative feelings in black people because in them he kneels in front of the child. But this figure is always shown as a richly dressed king, and it is normally the oldest (white) Magus who kneels. Here is Boime's reading of Richard Caton Woodville's *War News from Mexico* (1848) in which news of the American victory is read out on the porch of a Greek revival structure labeled "America Hotel." The two black people in the picture are described thus: "a man...sits uncomprehendingly on the bottom step of the porch, and a young girl...also wonders what all the excitement is about."

Compare this to full-page color detail of the black man and the girl in Hugh Honour's masterly study of the picture in his recent *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the American Revolution to World War I*<sup>21</sup> and one wonders whether the black man is not all too well aware of what is happening and how it affects his hopes for freedom. He may be illiterate, but the war news is being read out loud, and he can understand English.

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I do not, however, wish to dismiss Boime's book altogether—rambling, ill-written, and badly produced though it is. The author's discussion of William Sydney Mount's *Eel Spearing at Setauket* of 1845 shows real imagination and sensitivity, and his rediscovery of a black art historian named Freeman H.M. Murray, who published an extraordinary study of American sculpture in 1916, is of some value.

Every critic or art historian who writes about *Eel Spearing* comments on its dreamlike imagery. But how did his magical evocation of childhood intimacy between a young white boy and a motherly black woman come to be painted by a man who was a strident racist and a supporter of slavery? Surely Boime is correct to draw on Freudian concepts in approaching the picture.

Mount himself referred to the picture as "Recollections of early days. Fishing along shore—with a view of the Honorable Selah B. Strong's residence in the distance during a drought at Setauket, Long Island." In one of the most beautiful descriptions by an artist of the origins of a picture known to me, he wrote to a friend:

An old Negro by the name of Hector gave me the first lesson in spearing flat-fish and eels. Early one morning we were along shore according to appointment, it was calm, and the water was as clear as a mirror, every object perfectly distinct to the depth from one to twelve feet, now and then could be seen an eel darting through the seaweed or a flat-fish shifting his place and throwing the sand over his body for safety. "Steady there at the stern," said Hector, as he stood at the bow (with his spear held ready) looking into the element with all the philosophy of a crane, while I would watch his motions, and move the boat according to the direction of his spear. "Slow now, we are coming on the ground," on sandy and gravelly bottoms are found the best fish—"look out for the eyes" observes Hector, as he hauls in a flat-fish, out of his bed or gravel, "he will grease my pan, my boy," as the fish makes the water fly about in the boat.... "Now creep—in fishing you must learn to creep," as he kept hauling in the flat-fish and eels, right and left, with his quick and unerring hand—"Stop the boat," shouts Hector, "shove a little back, more to the left, the sun bothers me, that will do—now young Master step this way. I will learn you to see and catch flat-fish—There," pointing with his spear, "don't you see those eyes, how they shine like diamonds."—"very good now," says he, "I will strike it in the head," and away went his iron and the clear bottom was nothing but a cloud of moving sand, caused by the death struggle....

It is not difficult to see that this powerfully described memory touched upon a deep and protected part of Mount's unconscious. Fatherless at an early age himself, young Mount took the slave Hector as his mentor. (One wonders whether that was the slave's real name, or whether it is not the story of the warrior Hector bidding his son goodbye that Mount unconsciously remembered.)

Why did Mount not give Hector his rightful place in the boat, instead of substituting for him a mature, over-weight black mammy? He himself claimed that to have shown a black man "armed" with a spear in so prominent position in a painting would not have been acceptable to his white audience. But this is nonsense: the one thing white artists have no trouble doing is rendering black men harmless through caricaturing them as old or comical.

What Mount could not have shown was his intimate attachment to a black teacher and substitute father. The child Mount could safely love a black mammy, whereas his feelings about black men were far more ambivalent.

That Mount repressed his attraction to black men is very clear in his *Farmers Noonning* of 1836. Here the sleeping black laborer is given the pose of the frankly erotic Barberini Faun, and the young white boy tickles his ear with hay, just as in eighteenth-century Venetian art sleeping maidens are disturbed by amorous shepherds. For Mount this laborer seems associated with Hector, or at least the child Mount's fantasies about him.

In 1867 Mount painted *Dawn of Day*, the sketch for which he had labeled *Politically Dead*, an image of a cock crowing over the body of a dead negro man. Though intended as an emblem signifying the dead issue of slavery, the image strikes us today as mainly interesting for its blatant Freudian symbolism.

One can see from all this the importance for Mount of keeping blacks "in their place." Out of that place they seem to have disturbed a part of himself he did not understand or want to understand. Mount had to caricature black people because he needed to protect himself by freezing them in the past of his childhood.

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Reading some of the pages of Boime's book I thought I would suffocate under the accumulated weight of his padded prose. A little black boy dancing in an enchanting picture by Thomas Eakins is described as "practicing his motor skills," and we are told that the designer of New York's Central Park, Frederick Law Olmstead, was renowned for "planning and constructing major urban recreation areas."

That is why, whenever he quotes the no-nonsense prose and good sense of Freeman Murray on the subject of the depiction of blacks in American sculpture, one feels a sense of relief. It is a great pity that Boime did not devote his energies to bringing out a new edition of Murray's masterpiece, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, which was privately published in 1916 and which deserves to be better known. The chapter Boime devotes to Freeman's work is much the best in his own book, in part because he is much more at ease arguing with another art historian than he is when actually confronted by a work of art.

To judge by the catalog, the exhibition *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710–1940* takes us over much the same ground covered first by Hugh Honour in his book *The Image of the Black in Western Art* although it includes work from the twentieth century. The catalog by Guy C. McElroy and others adds nothing important to the subject. The exhibition stops in 1940, which means that few significant works actually painted by black artists are included. To limit the subject in this way is to keep at arm's length some of the most interesting painting in recent years. I am thinking particularly of the work of the late Jean-Michel Basquiat.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Harvard University Press, 1989.

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## Letters

December 6, 1990: Albert Boime, ['THE ART OF EXCLUSION'](#)