Painting Contradictions in Revolutionary France: Girodet’s Portrait of Citizen Belley

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On June 3rd, 1793, triumphant from the ousting of the Girondins from power, French revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre challenged the nation’s artists to “paint in a noble and energetic manner all that has happened in the last four days” [1]. For a history painter like Anne-Louis Girodet, trained in the academic classical tradition and who constantly attempted to confront and provoke, this challenge was at once exhilarating and daunting. Four years later, Girodet’s response to this challenge encapsulated a larger time-frame in order to represent the issues of liberty and equality that had been very much at hand for the past few decades. He recalled February 4th, 1794 when France granted equal rights to black men. This day was also the day that delegates of the colony Saint-Dominique (now Haiti) first made an appearance at the National Convention. Among these delegates was Jean-Baptiste Belley. Girodet’s Citizen Belley, Ex-Representation of the Colonies from 1797 is more than a mere representation of a black man in French uniform. At times it is praised as a celebration of the abolition of slavery [2], at others it is considered a prejudiced representation of a colonial subject whose French citizenship serves to subdue rather than liberate [3]. Either way, Belley’s portrait is ultimately full of intentional negations that articulated the contradictions at hand in the midst of Revolutionary France.

Girodet faced many complications in representing Belley. The artist had to attempt to create a new colonial subject, one that was declared a free citizen, but
one that would also assure viewers that he was loyal and non-threatening to France’s domination in the colony [4]. Unlike most of the freed black men during this period, Belley represented more of a threat. Originally from Senegal, he was taken as a child slave to Saint-Domingue where in time he gained his freedom, joined the French army and eventually became an infantry captain [5]. He fought with Léger Félicité Sonthonax against General Galbaud in the summer of 1793 when the latter refused to follow Revolutionary legislation from Paris. Le Cap had been burned to the ground, marking the end of white rule in one of France’s most important colonies [6]. This event is evoked in the bottom right hand corner of Girodet’s painting, where one can make out a faint trail of smoke. In a published account of his voyage to France in 1794, Belley defends his superior military rank in the third person, “proslavery assailants insulted him for daring to serve in a line regiment as an officer and commander of whites. Belley responded that he saw in his position only his duties towards France, that he had served for twenty-five years, and besides that when one knows how to save whites and how to defend them, one can very well command them” [7]. Though he employs submissive terms such as “duties” and “serve”, emphasizing his loyalty to France, it is obvious that Belley recognized his necessity and importance in the revolution, a position that was dangerous and threatening for non-abolitionists.

It was not important for white people to recognize their superiority to black people, what was important was that black people recognized their inferiority to white people. In a nation that praised “liberté, égalité et fraternité” it became apparent to both white and black people that the idea of slavery was a contradiction. This was problematic for France, as the country’s economy relied heavily on its five hundred thousand slaves cultivating sugar and coffee in Saint-Dominigue. Thus, the term “race” became much more salient in France’s debate on equality [8]. As Antoine Barnave pointed out, “in order to provide a moral means for thirty-five thousand whites to control five hundred thousand blacks, it is necessary to uphold the immoral prejudice of colour” [9]. Without a moral basis for colonial rule, a fabricated one had to suffice.

Sonthonax and the slaves of Saint-Dominigue, however, refused to step down from their demand for freedom, which they felt was rightly theirs. Shortly after the burning of Le Cap, Sonthonax independently announced the abolition of slavery months before the Revolutionary government did. Ultimately, however, the decision to abolish slavery had little to do with morality or brave actions.
from exceptional individuals but had everything to do with France’s detrimental economical situation. With Spain and British forces threatening France, the Revolutionary government had little choice and began to consider those five hundred thousand slaves as bodies able to fight. The need to protect France’s commercial interest became much more compelling than the rhetoric of race [10]. It was established then, on February 4th 1794, that black men were given equal rights. Belley and two other individuals considered “black” were sent as representatives of Saint-Dominigue to the National Convention, where they were generally treated with hostility and disrespect. The liberation of France’s slaves had nothing to do with liberation at all, it was merely shifting the usage of black people from one sector to another, yet again contradicting the Revolutionary slogan of equality and liberty.

Girodet, then, had to represent Belley as a responsible French leader due to the uncertainty of France’s position in Saint-Dominigue while sustaining a condescending tone in his work. Similar to the position of France in the colony, he had to elevate Belley to a certain status without making him an equal. He appears to be a civilized French gentleman, yet still presented in such a way that conveys barbarianism or a lack of civilization [11]. As Homi Bhabha, post-colonial theorist, has pointed out, it is as if Belley is represented as a “mimic man… almost the same but not white” [12]. His bright and overly polished clothing alludes to indulgence, referring to the new bourgeoisie, often called the Merveilleuses and the Incroyables, who were seen as social pretenders and sexually debauched [13]. Though his face is lined with age, referring to wisdom, and his expression is one of thoughtful seriousness, there is a sharp contrast when comparing him to other portraits done of white Revolutionary figures in the same era.

If one looks at Jean-Louis Laneuville’s Portrait of Bertrand Braère de Vieuzac from 1793, we find a calm and restrained man addressing the National Convention, wearing simple garments and who is juxtaposed against an empty background. Both elements refer to Rousseau’s discourse of truth, which argued that man is at his best when in his most natural state and not when faced with the ills of sophisticated civilization [14]. Though Belley shares his calm features, it could be said that his luxurious, almost over-the-Painting Contradictions in Revolutionary France top clothing and what could be considered obnoxious facial features (a snarled nose and indifferent gaze purposely not meeting the eyes of the viewer) take away the necessary heroic and humble features of a
true Revolutionary idol. Furthermore, 18th century ideas of physiognomy endorsed by philosophers such as Johann Kaspar Lavater did not help Belley’s case. Lavater held that white men were autonomous, self-defined individual beings, as we can see in Bertrand Braère’s portrait, whereas the black man’s personality and features have been determined a priori [15] and are therefore anonymous and unanimous at the same time. Marie-Benoit Gouly, one of Belley’s opponents, argued that on the contrary, black people had no physiognomy at all and were therefore tragically incapable of communicating internal states to others, in fact, she claims that he raises doubts as to whether black people had internal states at all [16]. Therefore, based on 18th century thought, Belley would have had no personality and no individuality, and therefore no internal state.

However, through closer observation of the portrait, it seems that this previous statement could easily be rebutted. His greying hair denotes seniority, signalling a personal feature over a typological one. His high forehead and furrowed brow insinuates superior intelligence. His facial expression suggest anything but anonymous with emotions ranging from homesickness and pessimism to intellectual gravity and seriousness. Girodet is not trying to prove the existence of the internal state of Belley but rather what is beneath the surface. Belley replies to Gouly’s remark,

...this man is not insensible; his blighted soul, dead to hope, has long experienced the discouragement inspired by happy and cruel tyrants. Very often I shed bitter tears of unhappiness in secret because the flight of energetic thought would surely lead to the death of the slave who dared to exhale it!... and yet their oppressors liken them here to brutes and reproach them for having souls without physiognomies...Ah! Gouli you who dare thus to profane nature, you well prove that it is your physiognomy which is without a soul. [17]

It is clear that while Belley must maintain an impression of having a sense of self in order to break from the anonymous stereotype, he still cannot exhibit too much emotion at risk of being likened to an animal. Without possession of self, ultimately one is a slave. He must also remain self-contained and seemingly emotionless in order to be seen as respectable and calm like a proper Revolutionary politician should. Girodet manages to reflect Belley’s contradicting duality, whether this coexistence be imposed by Belley himself or by 18th century French society.
Another element that denotes Belley’s sense of self is his highly emphasized genitalia. Some claim that this and his overtly sensuous pose threaten to subordinate Belley to racial typology [18], though one must not forget Girodet’s own sensuality. Taking other sensuous, homoerotic paintings from the artist’s oeuvre into account, it could be said that Girodet was attracted to Belley. The folds multiplying around the genitalia and his elegant large hand pointing towards it only emphasize his sex even further, hinting a sexual power. Though it was common to read of sexual black bodies in text, 18th century images usually represented black male bodies as asexualized, dependent on the white body to the extent of being infantilized. Belley’s sexuality can be seen as empowering, but moreover, it represents his own volition and self-control.

That a black man be made approachable sexually, or at least hinted as such, could be read as a statement of equality. Girodet referred to Belley as “citizen,” indicating respect, though the piece had initially been titled Portrait d’un nègre, as most portraits of black men were called. Though it had been accepted into the Salon of 1798, there was great debate as to whether they would allow it to be hung next to the likes of Endymion. Girodet wrote an infuriated letter to the Salon, describing Belley as beautiful and demanding that other Frenchmen call him beautiful as well. His biographer has stated that Girodet adored being around foreign bodies and thought them to be a different, more interesting kind of beauty [19]. This work was most likely a private study on Girodet’s part to satisfy his taste for foreign or rather exotic bodies [20]. Such an urge in itself is derogatory when looked upon from today’s modern view, however, interpreting such a painting through a modern lens is problematic on its own. We must remove ourselves from our modernized notions of equality in order to understand how this might have been an important step towards it. Could it not be suggested that Girodet painted Belley to contradict the Academies idealized white European figure? Girodet turned away from this ideal and fulfilled the task Robespierre had summoned French artists to complete. However derogatory our modern eyes may perceive it to be, this pictorial and political accomplishment was an important one.

The most obvious and perhaps most important contradiction in Belley’s portrait is the striking contrast between philosopher l’Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal’s white marble bust and Belley’s black figure. Raynal himself was quite a contradiction. As he is prominently known as an abolitionist and activist, viewers are lead to assume that the work’s subject is the celebration of abolitionism.
The fact of the matter is, however, Raynal was more in line with the philanthropists, who wished to improve the living conditions of slaves without perceiving them as equals [21]. *L'Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, written in 1770 with the aid of Denis Diderot, was what labelled Raynal as an abolitionist. In it, pleas are made to eliminate the practice of slavery. It was repeatedly edited for over a decade since Raynal frequently opposed Diderot’s strong words and ideas. In fact, his work *The Administration of St-Dominigue*, written in 1785, dealt with the poverty of the slaves, not with the issue of cruelty in slavery, and maintains the inability of Africans to take care of themselves [22]. On May 31st 1891, Raynal accused the assembly of losing control and allowing notions of liberty to hinder other perspectives [23]. Though he frequently contradicted his own notions of equality and liberty, Raynal is generally seen as a pioneer in raising awareness of injustice towards black people. He remained a controversial figure in France until his death in 1896, a year before the making of Belley’s portrait. This gives critics strong reason to believe that the work was a commemoration of Raynal’s achievements as opposed to a commemoration of Belley, as the size of his bust is completely overbearing. Raynal’s bust is reminiscent of Roman style, signifying politics, whereas Belley’s pose quotes Greek statues, therefore signifying an aesthetic but non-political appeal [24]. It is argued that Raynal’s bust completely eclipses Belley’s authorship and agency, suggesting that his very state of being was produced by France [25]. Raynal’s critical eyes looking on also suggest France’s responsibility to continue leading the “lesser races” into civilization.

It must, however, be pointed out that both their heads and phallic symbols are at the same level, which on Raynal can be found on the decorative marble frieze [26]. Furthermore, we could easily argue that Belley situates Raynal’s bust as much as Raynal’s bust situates Belley. By 1797, Raynal’s ideas had become anachronistic. Belley, on the other hand, representing the later days of the Revolution, evokes the earlier steps made by pioneers like Raynal. One could argue that the portrait does not celebrate abolitionism but rather provides a narrative for its evolution. We are presented with two very different figures whose interests in the issues of liberty and freedom were driven by different motives. Belley does not have the subservient, grateful black slave style that we so often see in 18th century images. He turns his head away from the outdated Raynal, looking on towards St-Dominigue, towards the future.

This portrait was painted in a time of contrasts, of tensions between ideas and
races, at a time where prejudice was at its most intense. Was this narrative fu-
elling these tensions, or was it an attempt to dismantle them, by acknowledging 
human differences as well as a shared concern for human rights? Only five 
years later, slavery would be re-instilled by Bonaparte, the shared celebration 
being short-lived. Belley’s worried expression warns us that the road to equality 
was still far ahead.

Endnotes
1. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary 
2. Sylvia Musto, “Portraiture, Revolutionary Identity and Subjugation: Anne-
3. Ibid, p. 66.
   86.
6. Ibid.
7. Grigsby, p. 27.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 41.
10. Weston, p. 91.
11. Musto, p. 66.
12. Ibid., p. 62.
13. Ibid.,p. 66.
14. Ibid., p. 64.
15. Grigsby, p. 80.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 92.
18. Ibid., 89.
19. Ibid.
20. Weston, p. 84.
21. Ibid., 95.
25. Grigsby, p. 94.