

# Theatricalizing (and Marketing) Race in Sicardi's "Mirate che bel visino" – by Marika Takanishi Knowles

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23 October 2023

In August 2022, while visiting the new permanent exhibition "Bordeaux au XVIIIe siècle, le commerce atlantique et l'esclavage" at the Musée d'Aquitaine, I encountered a viscerally racist image (**Fig. 1**). I say that I "encountered" it because the print stages itself as a meeting between the subject and the viewer by hailing the viewer with the instruction to look: "*Mirate che bel visino*," which can be loosely translated as "Look at this cute little face."<sup>[1]</sup> The stipple etching, made by Joseph André Mécou after a drawing by Louis-Marie Sicardi and published in Paris in 1803, shows two figures, a white woman and a Black woman, behind a wooden table fitted with a folding mirror.<sup>[2]</sup> The intended content of the composition was made explicit in the sale advertisements printed in December of 1803 in *Le Moniteur universel* and *Le Journal de Paris*.<sup>[3]</sup> In the former, the description read:

This composition, full of grace and originality, presents a young woman showing to her mirror the head of her *négresse*, and smiling at the idea of this piquant opposition.<sup>[4]</sup>

This text makes the underlying racism of the print quite clear—unfortunately, there is nothing very unexpected in the contrast between a white woman who is idealized according to period standards of beauty and the caricatural representation of a Black woman who is further subjugated by the white woman's controlling embrace. The offensiveness of this image means that I have hesitated to write about it because in showing it to readers, I am in fact, replicating the central gesture of the composition, with which one woman presents a Black woman to be looked at. However, I have persisted because, on consideration, this presentational gesture is at the heart of the significance of this image: not in terms of its artistic quality, but in terms of the construction of Blackness in transatlantic culture.<sup>[5]</sup> The presentational gesture both theatricalizes Blackness in a comic mode and offers this comic performance of race for consumption in the marketplace. By situating this print in the context of Sicardi's oeuvre as well as the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary marketplace for prints, its theatrical nature becomes clear.

There are surprisingly few accounts of this print, and none that discuss it within the context of its creation by a French miniaturist turned print designer in 1803.<sup>[6]</sup> This is especially intriguing given that the print would appear to have been a rip-roaring success, so much so that it was bought and reprinted by several editors. What is more, the circulation of the print resulted in at least three painted copies: a watercolor miniature on ivory (Royal Museums Greenwich), an oil on tin painting by the American artist Harriet

Cany Peale, and an oil painting attributed to Sicardi himself (Musée Marmottan Monet). The diversity of supports, as well as the geographical spread of the extant copies (England, United States, France), suggests that there were likely many more copies.

Widely disseminated, this print is a commercial venture that offers race as a comic spectacle. Although such unions would become commonplace in the nineteenth century—the minstrel show and its visual representations, the exhibition and the depiction of Sarah Baartman—Sicardi's print lies at a relatively early point in this tradition while also showing that this theatricalization evolved through the well-known portrait iconography of the white woman paired with a Black servant, in which racial difference was used to justify hereditary social privilege.[7] By transforming this pairing into a pantomime addressed to an audience of consumers, Sicardi's print marks a crucial hinge towards the theatricalization of race in the field of mass culture.



Fig. 1. André Joseph Mécou after Louis Marie Sicardi, *Mirate che bel visino*, 1803. Stipple etching, 31.4 x 24.3 cm. The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

## Sicardi: A Miniaturist in Search of a New Market

Prior to moving to Paris in the mid-1770s, Louis-Marie Sicardi lived and worked in Bordeaux, where he was a member of the Academy. [8] In the bustling port of Bordeaux, where merchants outfitted and financed ships and cargoes destined for transatlantic commerce, Sicardi was close to the heart of the transatlantic trade in enslaved persons. [9] Upon arriving in Paris, Sicardi became one of the court's favourite miniaturists. He worked for the Menus Plaisirs, making miniatures to be set into bejewelled *tabatières* or brooches. [10] During the Revolution, however, he struggled to find a new clientele, even though portraiture, including miniatures, continued to thrive as a Revolutionary art. As a result, during the 1790s, Sicardi began to explore new genres and mediums, including drawings and paintings to be engraved as prints. He entered a market that was already populated by the rage for *manière noire* etchings, also known as stipple prints.[11] These prints were sold in fashionable locales like the Palais du Tribunat (once the Palais Royal), a centre of modish Parisian consumption where shoppers sought ribbons, gloves, trimmings, books and prints, as well as theatrical entertainment. Sex workers also

solicited in the galleries of the Palais. For Sicardi, accustomed to producing miniatures for a tiny and elite group of patrons, this was quite a turn, but his financial circumstances forced him to follow where the market led. As a result, his style and subject matter changed.

In 1790, Sicardi advertised what appears to have been his first venture in a new genre, "*Oh! Che boccone!*," a stipple print etched in London (**Fig. 2**). The composition shows the commedia dell'arte character Pierrot marvelling at a young woman sleeping, her chemise arranged to show her breast. Pierrot clutches the end of the curtain he has pulled back in order to reveal the woman, while exclaiming: "Oh, what a tasty morsel!"[12] In 1792, Sicardi published a sequel, *Oh! Che Gusto!* in which a young woman admires a sausage Pierrot holds on a plate (the bawdy iconography could not be more painfully explicit).

A stock character in the *Comédie Italienne* and the *Opéra Comique*, Pierrot was also an extremely popular figure in the repertoire of Rococo decorative art. Pierrot's theatrical milieu, as well as his visual instantiations, were deeply embedded in the marketplace and its practices. [13] The characters of the *Comédie Italienne* had performed for many years at the Parisian fairs, annual markets that resembled the Palais du Tribunat in their mixture of sideshow-style entertainment and retail attached to the garment trade. At the fairs, both actors and retailers cultivated a mode of direct address—the hailing of the viewer or customer through exhibitionism. Fair plays often revolved around social disguises enabled by costume, a suggestive subject for a place in which such costumes were also available for sale. Pierrot played the role of a naïve, bumbling body servant, whose duties could include preparing his mistress's clothes and cosmetics.

The inclusion of a theatrical character in Sicardi's prints signalled that these compositions were meant to be read as little pantomimes centered around the dramatic revelation of a human figure. In 1793, Sicardi expanded his repertoire to show a Black man wearing a slave collar unveiling a dark-haired white woman who wears an Ottoman-inspired dress



Fig. 2. Thomas Burke after Louis Marie Sicardi, *Oh! Che Boccone!*, 1789. Stipple etching, 41.1 x 29.2 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

(Fig. 3). Once again, an advertisement for the print in *Le Moniteur universel* makes the content explicit: the man reveals the woman in order to present her for sale, while asking the intended client “*Come la trovate?*” or “How do you find her?”[14]

This sequence of publications suggests that Sicardi had discovered a commercially successful format for the presentation of paired figures in which one figure theatrically reveals another, whether by drawing back a curtain or lifting a cloth. In “*Come la trovate?*,” he both sexualizes and racializes the discovery. The text in *Le Moniteur universel*, however, made it quite clear that miscegenation was not on the horizon, assuring the reader that “if *le nègre* admires her beauty, it is not for his own sake, and he does not want others to envy him for her, but to buy him from her.”[15] Perhaps the success of Sicardi’s new formula had to do with the way that the content of the print is run through with the site of its marketing, so that the window-shopper in the Palais Royal might conflate the purchase of the print with the purchase of a beautiful woman.



Fig. 3. Jacques-Louis Copia after Louis Marie Sicardi, *Come la trovate!*, 1793. Stipple etching, 32.4 x 26.5 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. © BNF.

## **Comptoir in the Boudoir**

“*Mirate che bel visino*” continues this presentational format while nuancing, but not jettisoning the thematization of salesmanship. While the Black woman is not explicitly for sale, the white woman sets her forth to be evaluated across a table that functions in the manner of a shop counter, the wooden bank (*banc*) that was a defining feature of retail spaces and which was used to dramatize the transaction as a distance to be crossed—money or credit on one side, the desired object on the other side. Canny shopkeepers helped this dramatization along by hiring attractive women to serve at their counters (*femmes de comptoir*), so that buying a length of cloth could be experienced as buying the beautiful woman who sold it. In Sicardi’s composition, the table de toilette as counter establishes the encounter between viewer and subject as potentially transactional. This is the *comptoir* in the boudoir, the internalization of modes of exchange within the new spaces of intimacy.

The presentational gesture of countering situates the print within the marketplace both for the bodies of Black people as well as the luxury commodities that their labor produced. In its focus on dressing up and making up, the composition resonates within the eighteenth-century mania for toilette scenes, which depicted women as ravenous consumers of ribbons, lace, and jewels, as well as cosmetics contained in exquisite porcelain, lacquer, and silver vessels.[16] The toilette needed anxieties surrounding commodities and artifice: a woman at her toilette performed the tantalizing madeness of appearance, including the ability to create skin color.[17] Of course, the toilette was also a place for social performance, a carefully staged scene.

In Sicardi's version of the toilette scene, the Black woman has been dressed in her mistress's clothes, which suggests a direct relationship to the dressing of Black enslaved people in "fancy clothes" when presented to be sold, as Anna Arabindan-Kesson has shown.[18] This practice, which became widespread at nineteenth-century American auctions of enslaved people, performed the commodification of the enslaved person by packaging them in cotton textiles—the same goods that drove the transatlantic slave trade. It is also a reminder that the violence of slavery was perpetuated through acts of theatrical marketing: enslaved people were exhibited, as on a stage, with the intent of inspiring the desire to consume. Unsurprisingly, the association of Black people and fancy goods, constructed by enslavers, would be used to accuse Black people of being inherently frivolous. In mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia, when Harriet Cany Peale copied Sicardi's print, freed Blacks were criticized for forms of dress perceived as excessive and dandyish of "display and vainglory." [19] Yet the "bibelotization" of Black bodies can be traced back further, as Anne Lafont has argued.[20] By dressing Black people in the textiles, metals, and gems that their labor afforded to enslavers, exploitative economies could be transformed into decorative fetishes.

Sicardi's composition follows the bibelotization of race to its logical conclusion: a return address to the marketplace.[21] The print transforms an existing tradition—the elite white woman and her Black servant—into a backstory for the presentation of Blackness as a comic grotesque. Although the tone is utterly different, the nearest precedent for the presentational gesture is the *Portrait of Madeleine*, by Marie-Guillemine Benoist, exhibited at the Salon in 1800, two years before the Napoleonic reinstatement of slavery in 1802. Benoist does not include herself in the painting, yet Helen Weston has argued that Benoist's intention was to use a Black figure to draw attention to herself (the artist) as a white woman—indeed, contemporary critics expressed the wish that Benoist had painted herself instead of Madeleine.[22] In 1803, Sicardi made explicit what Weston has characterized as Benoist's implicit yet "deliberate opposing of the two identities, artist and sitter," by picturing the white woman and the Black woman together. He has even made the white woman into an artist of sorts—an artist of the *toilette*, whose medium is the body of her servant.

In the end, Sicardi created a horrific pastiche. From portraiture, he took the well-known pairing of a white woman and a Black servant, which he set within the genre of the toilette picture as a commentary on the theatrical staging of appearance. Driven by an obligation

to appeal to the marketplace, he turned to the comic theater, from which he took the strategy of direct address, as well as the comic derision that was the servant's eternal lot in this theatrical style. The result is an image that lies at the intersection between the making of race, the making of women, and the sideshow antics of the marketplace address. At the end of the eighteenth century, this blatant address to the marketplace hailed the triumphant union of racism and mass culture.

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[1] Versions of the print bear the French translation “*voyez le joli minois*,” which can be loosely translated as “look at this cute little face,” *minois* being a familiar, diminutive, and sometimes patronizing way of describing a young woman who is “more pretty than beautiful.”

[2] The medium of stipple etching, also called *manière noire* or *manière anglaise*, invites a consideration of the process described by Mechthild Fend and Jennifer Chuong, whereby understandings of the significance of skin color were mediated through artistic techniques for representing it. Mechthild Fend, “Flesh-Tones, Skin Color and the Eighteenth-Century Color Print,” in *Aesthetics of the Flesh*, ed. Felix Ensslin and Charlotte Klink (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 202-29; Jennifer Y. Chuong, “Engraving's ‘Immoveable Veil’: Phillis Wheatley's Portrait and the Politics of Technique,” *The Art Bulletin* 104, no. 2(2022): 63-88. *Manière noire* prints enabled deep, velvety blacks, against which white bodies (they were usually white) radiated forth, a “contrastive logic” that contributed to the construction of Black and white as fundamentally oppositional. “Contrastive logic” is the term used by my colleague Stephanie O'Rourke, who I thank for her comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

[3] *Le Journal de Paris*, 28 December 1803, 2.

[4] *Le Moniteur universel*, 23 December 1803, 4.

[5] The most recent, most compelling account of this iconography in the years preceding and contemporaneous with Sicardi's print is Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race, L'Africain (tout) contre l'oeil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2019).

[6] Geoff Quilley, “Of Sailors and Slaves: Portraiture, Property, and the Trials of Circum-Atlantic Subjectivities, ca. 1750-1830,” in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 170-99, here 195-6; Elizabeth O'Leary, *At Beck and Call: The Representation of Domestic Servants in Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 139-43. Both Quilley and O'Leary are writing about later versions of the composition (the Greenwich miniature and the oil-on-tin copy, see below). At the time of writing, neither author knew of the existence of Sicardi's print. After the

publication of Quilley's essay, the entry on the Royal Museums Greenwich site was updated to refer to a print upon which the miniature was based. Sicardi's name is not mentioned.

[7] For reasons of space, on these figural tropes, I refer to the bibliography in my article in this journal: Marika Takanishi Knowles, "Making Whiteness: Art, Luxury, and Race in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal18*, Issue 13 *Race* (Spring 2022), <https://www.journal18.org/6214>, n1, n3, n12.

[8] Other miniaturists had no problem finding a clientele during the revolution. See Cyril Lécosse, *Jean-Baptiste Isabey: Petits portraits et grands desseins* (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 2018), 46-52.

[9] On Bordeaux's role in the triangular trade, see Perry Viles, "The Slaving Interest in the Atlantic Ports, 1763-1792," *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 4 (1972): 529-43; Sylvia Marzagalli, "Opportunités et contraintes du commerce colonial dans l'Atlantique français au XVIIIe siècle: le cas de la maison Gradis de Bordeaux," *Outre-mers* 96, no. 362-363 (2009): 87-110.

[10] There have been two studies of Sicardi, whose name is sometimes spelled Sicard or Sicardy. Jules Belleudy, "Louis Sicardi, Miniaturiste," *Bulletin de la Société de l'art français* (1931): 239-309; Michel Lauraine, *Louis Marie Sicard, dit Sicardi (1743-1825), peintre miniaturiste* (Paris: Michel Laurane, 2005).

[11] On the rage for stipple prints or *manière anglaise*, see Philippe Bordes, "Un graveur disponible, Jacques-Louis Copia," in *Pierre-Paul Prud'hon*, ed. Sylvain Laveissière (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2001), 105-17.

[12] The print was advertised in *Le Journal de Paris*, 25 January 1790, 4.

[13] On these relationships, see my forthcoming book: Marika Takanishi Knowles, *Pierrot and His World: Art, Theatricality, and the Marketplace in France 1697-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024). When embarking upon the present research, I had no knowledge of Sicardi's Pierrots.

[14] *Le Moniteur universel*, 19 May 1793, 2.

[15] *Le Moniteur universel*, 19 May 1793, 2.

[16] See the recent article in this journal, as well as its comprehensive bibliography, Dani Ezor, "'White when Polished': Race, Gender, and the Materiality of Silver at the Toilette," *Journal18*, Issue 14 *Silver* (Fall 2022), <https://www.journal18.org/6447>. On the toilette and "making up" more generally, see the classic study, Melissa Hyde, *Making up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005).

[17] Even more disturbingly, the composition seems to belong to a category of toilette scene that presents animals—monkeys or little dogs—mimicking their mistresses at their dressing table. See Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, "Beauty and the Beast: Animals in the Visual and Material Culture of the Toilette," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 42 (2013): 147-70.

[18] Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 97-101.

[19] O'Leary, *At Beck and Call*, 141. Peale likely encountered the print through her abolitionist husband Rembrandt Peale, who had spent time in France during the First Empire. See Lafont, *L'art et la race*, 200-3.

[20] Lafont, *L'art et la race*, 160-3, 260-71.

[21] For an account of another eighteenth-century project to theatricalize an "exotic" commodity, see Meredith Martin, "Once upon a Time at the Château de Morville: Commerce, Colonialism, and Chinoiserie in the *Ballet des Porcelaines*," in *Reimagining the Ballet des Porcelaines: A Tale of Magic, Desire, and Exotic Entanglement*, ed. Meredith Martin (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2022), 14-53.

[22] Helen Weston, "'The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover': La Ville-Leroulx's *Portrait d'une négresse* and the Signs of Misrecognition," in *Work and the Image*, ed. Valerie Mainz and Griselda Pollock (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 53-73, here 62-4.

**Cite this note as:** Marika Takanishi Knowles, "Theatricalizing (and Marketing) Race in Sicardi's 'Mirate che bel visino'," *Journal18* (June 2023), <https://www.journal18.org/6997>.

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