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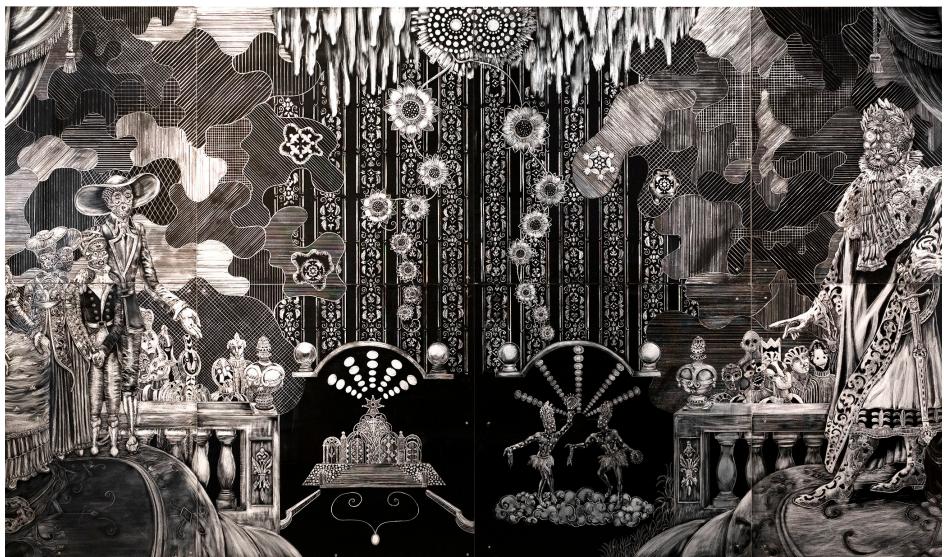
# EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ:

LE ROI HENRI IER ET SA COUR  
*KING HENRI AND HAITI'S ROYAL COURT*

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[ HISTORICAL RETELLING AND THE  
POSTMODERN BAROQUE ]

In *Le roi Henri ier et sa cour* (2020), Edouard Duval-Carrié deploys a postmodern baroque approach to reimagine what has been presented as history through a contemporary lens. Placing all that we think we know of the past into the aesthetic arena for debate, perhaps this is what it means today to be called a history painter. Rather than produce work that re-presents events of the past, Duval-Carrié's art self-reflexively asks those that engage it to interrogate accepted narratives of history and the mechanisms of power, privilege, violence and the visual that crafted them.



To describe Duval-Carrié’s approach to this retelling as *postmodern baroque* recalls a European artistic tradition that thrived in the wake of its Renaissance (1600–1750) and whose opulence, ostentatious decoration and detail, that openly courted drama, the theatrical, the sensuous and the emotional, rose simultaneously with the rise of plantation slavery in Haiti. Behind the glass in Versailles’ resplendent Hall of Mirrors, a castle and room that came to epitomize the grandeur of the French Baroque age, lies Haiti. This room was redesigned by Jules Hardouin Mansart (1678–1684) in tribute to France’s economic, artistic and political success. Though celebrating successes increasingly powered by Saint Domingue, unsurprisingly there is no reference to its tropical landscapes and the brutalities of its plantation slave economy in a single mural or element in the room.

While Louis XIV entertained at Versailles, in Saint Domingue he enact-

ed the infamous Code Noir (1685) that governed slavery and relations between white French people and enslaved Africans in French territories, the year after the Hall of Mirrors was completed. The Code also outlined legal and illegal brutalities against the Black body the crown deemed necessary in order to ensure obedience. It was a central edict of the French Baroque period and lingers in the air surrounding this work.

Here, Duval-Carrié temporally displaces and redeploys the aesthetic traditions of the period to produce a work of art that intentionally works to disassemble and put into question modern traditions in the West that served to re-present and whereby simultaneously erase the inconvenient Other. His work undoes the moral pose of modernism by unmooring epistemes and the production of knowledge and their comingled visual frames.

The subject of this etching (on Plexi-

glas) is an extraordinary group of figures connected to Henri Christophe, King of Haiti who is represented in the right quadrant of the work. In life and in death Christophe has been tried and judged in various courts of public opinion, in Haiti and throughout the transatlantic universe, and has often been found wanting. Rumor, gossip and innuendo describing acts attributed to him or associated with him, have often been regurgitated in scholarship, without reference or eyewitness accounts as historical fact. He has been blamed for acts of extreme violence and deemed a murderer and a tyrant - by those he defeated and battled; by those for whom his very existence challenged their fundamental belief in slavery and hierarchies of humanity; by those who envied him; and at times by those he ruled and conscripted. And yet he remains one of the most fascinating historical figures in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Atlantic world.

With the comfort of time, space and circumstances away from chattel slavery, many contemporary artists and scholars have also judged his reported actions through a lens of moral purity that requires one to set aside any accountability for the fundamental inhumanity and violence of the world of plantation slavery into which Christophe was born and to which he committed his life to destroying. To not only expect, but to insist on a kinder gentler revolution by Haitians traumatized by the violence of their untenable world; to question their actions towards freedom at all, exhibits a critique grounded in *drapetomania*, a condi-

tion where efforts by enslaved people to escape slavery were deemed as a sign of mental illness on their part. In this arena, what might a kinder gentler war against slavery look like?

The Haitian Revolution, in which Christophe played a major role, was a subaltern revolution that killed and defeated those who for more than a century at the time, had enslaved, degraded, violated, killed and disposed people that looked like him. For Black Haitians, the choice of death rather than submission once more to re-enslavement represented no choice at all. After tasting the freedom and the restoration of their humanity, death became their only alternative.

On its surface, the work presents a moment just beyond the shadow of revolution, the coronation of King Henri Christophe in 1811, after the murder of Dessalines in 1806 and his subsequent rise to leadership first as President and then as King of the young nation. Christophe was a man who in the midst of rumors about him in Haiti and beyond, conscripted workers to get his architectural and defense projects completed; became a leader who ordered Haitians to return to the fields to secure the economy and established the first art school in the Americas. With Baron de Vastéy, he established a printing press at Sans Souci to counter narratives being deployed against him and the Kingdom. He showed himself to be a man who having led a war that resulted in death of thousands for the freedom of all, believed unquestionably in the humanity and



brilliance of Black people and the education of all Haitians. Rather than exhibiting a one-dimensional character, a persona that settled into simplistic contemporary markers of good or evil, or indexical readings of Black manhood and leadership, Christophe insisted on the recognition of his humanity and by extension that of the Haitian people.

On the left of the composition is a group of individuals anchored by the King's wife, the fascinating Queen Marie-Louise Coidavid. She is accompanied by her two daughters Princess Françoise-Améthyste and Princess Anne-Athénaïre, their son, the Prince Royal Victor Jacques and the King's secretary, the brilliant Baron de Västéy. The ensemble shares the same coronation platform as Christophe and below them all, throngs of people whose faces are represented by masks and headresses drawn from the Americas and the length and breadth of the African continent, stare up at the

central figures in supplication, awe and desire. The setting is shaped by heavy velvet brocaded curtains, a signature element in baroque paintings. Each figure is opulently attired and presented in hierarchic order.

The Queen dominates the left side of the work while seated on a low throne. She is attired as if the women that dominate Agostino Brunias' paintings were her personal handmaidens. Her European dress is paired with a head wrap in a style known in the eighteenth century French Caribbean and used by freewomen of color and creoles to demonstrate the relative wealth of the wearer in the amount of cloth (a valuable commodity in plantation economies) this wrap required. Headwraps in this style were also used to signal mixed race ancestry, and at times one's freedom. A fascinating figure from a prominent, distinctly Haitian family, one of the Queen's sisters Louisa was the wife of Jean Louis Pierrot, seventh leader of an independent Haiti though in office for a mere 342 days. The Queen was also believed to be the younger sister of Cecile Fatima, the mambo who conducted the Vodoun ceremony with Boukman at Bois Caïman to signal the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Duval-Carrié has added the extra flourishes of a straw hat, hat pin and a finial of feathers to her trousseau. A boa resembling the snake Lwa Damballah is tossed carelessly at her feet and the ground beneath her throne is decorated with sacred Vodoun veve writings honoring the Lwas and perhaps indicating the Queen's devotion and thankfulness to her gods for this moment.

In the composition, she is mirrored by the image of Christophe. Between them, an architectural rendering of the Queen's Pavilion and a pair of dancing Taíno men, the inhabitants Columbus met on the island of Hayti are represented. The artist drew Christophe's pose and dress from an infamous print entitled *Cristoforo Enrico I Rei de Hayti* (1811), representing him in European styled royal wear and furs, inappropriate for Hayti's tropical climate. The work pictures him as an emotionally distant leader and a racially ambiguous mimic man detached from his people. While none of these qualities hold up under historical scrutiny in relation to Christophe himself, the visual discourse in which the print participated, saw "royalty" in a European context had come to be viewed as an inherent characteristic and not just a title conferred and often self-conferred to the victor of a battle – which it was. Nevertheless, the notion of a possible slave becoming king was untenable and the print was intended to portray the King as a fraud. It was distributed as a propaganda image throughout the Atlantic world during Christophe's reign and he along with de Västéy worked tirelessly to provide a counter narrative by extolling in image and text what Marlene Daut has described as a black Atlantic humanism.

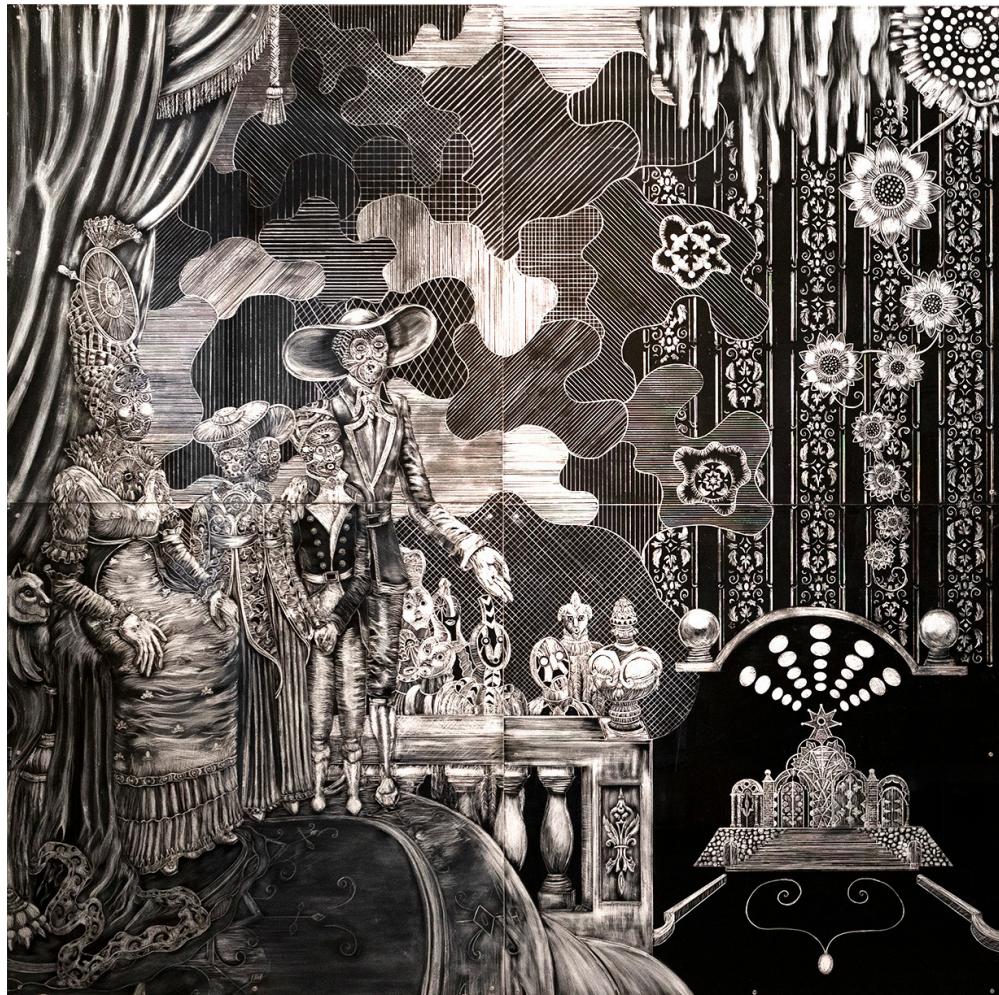
Here, Duval-Carrié in true Baroque fashion, heightens the surreal and distorted nature of Haitian history in the work. The faces of the figures are fantastic in ways that recall the vegetable portraits by the Italian Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, often cited as an inspira-

tion for Surrealism, a movement in intimate partnership with the Haitian artistic renaissance of the 1940s. In process, the work performs an epistemological mashup in the realm of the visual capable of blunting the veracity of the historical record and reorienting skewed dimensions of our world continually reflected in the mirrors of Versailles.



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#### Images

Edouard Duval-Carrié, *King Henri and Haiti's Royal Court*, 2019.  
Image courtesy the artist.



MIAMI BEACH



Text by Erica Moiah James, PhD.

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