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## Beautiful People

Marcus Wood

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Anglo-American historical tradition of 'the Enlightenment' derived from Gay, thus against a somewhat monolithic model of the 'typical' *philosophe* (radical, theologically heterodox) which is not really representative of current work in the field. At the same time, he is reticent about interpreting certain materials which point strongly to Calvet's own heterodoxy within the framework laid down by Darnton or Jacob. All this is by no means to sanction a history-of-ideas approach to 'the' Enlightenment, for Brockliss's main point about the complex and still poorly-understood map of the learned life is very timely. It is merely to emphasize that 'Enlightenment' as an actor's category and as a historiographical issue is in reality enriched, rather than effaced, by Brockliss's study.

## Beautiful People by *Marcus Wood*

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**David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Reaktion Books, 2002; 264 pp.; £25 hbk; ISBN 1861891407.**

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*Ape to Apollo* contributes to the recent and growing body of work that sets out to interrogate Europe's cultural construction of non-Europeans during the long eighteenth century. What the book in the end teaches us is the political nature of all theories of beauty, both artistic or sexual, and the dangers of forgetting this connection in addressing the discourse of racialism. The book's very existence, it turns out, is fortuitous. Bindman tells us how it developed almost by chance out of an earlier project, namely the 'abortive' eighteenth-century volume for the Menil Foundation's *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. The Foundation decided that this volume couldn't sit alongside published contributions by Jean Devisse, Michel Mollat and Hugh Honour, so refused to proceed with publication. The Foundation's recalcitrance reveals the limits of 'official' Art History, reluctant to address the role of aesthetics within imperial culture. Paradoxically, however, the Menil 'abortion' has resulted in a highly-significant new birth. In his preface to *Ape to Apollo* Bindman confesses that he had long been uneasy with the assumptions which underpinned the Menil Foundation's long-running enterprise. Working on a volume entitled *The Image of the Black*, he tells us, 'raised doubts about the intellectual basis for isolating in the context of the eighteenth century one 'race' from wider attitudes to non-Europeans in general, and indeed the word itself from other apparent synonyms'. This is a crucial statement which forces us to acknowledge the extent to which work on race and representation has moved forward since the publication of Hugh Honour's beautifully-produced but ideologically-circumscribed *The Image of the Black in Western Art from the American Revolution to World War 1* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

Honour's two volumes usefully made available for the first time a well-selected, hitherto ignored, and (for the most part) chronologically-arranged sample of

representations of blacks in European 'high art' from the Enlightenment to the World War II. As an accessible scholarly archive, reproduced to high technical standards, the work maintains its value. Yet Bindman is right to ask tough questions about the rationale underpinning Honour's enterprise, and to ponder the theoretical and methodological agenda for the series as a whole. I have used many examples drawn from the *Image of the Black in Western Art* series in my own work; its scholarship will doubtless remain important for future studies in the field. Yet just how and why the Menil volumes were conceived and put together are important, and certainly not innocent, questions. It might be the case that in the end they exemplify a form of art historical 'cherry picking' which goes like this: scholars go out and hunt down images of black bodies within Western archives, and choosing the most aesthetically-edifying instances of sculpture, painting and engraving they then collate, reproduce and analyse these images according to criteria based on the 'old school' style of connoisseurship. With the publication of *Ape to Apollo*, however, we are suddenly asked some very big questions about how we decide what is beautiful and what is not in the context of discourses of race. Aesthetic theories appear unstable and dangerously manipulative when viewed in this critical light: time-bombs capable of wreaking terrible damage when they are distorted and reformulated outside the contexts of their original invention.

The fields of slavery, diaspora and cultural studies have developed spectacularly since 1989: Bindman's book is one of the first serious art-historical studies both to benefit from, and to interrogate, recent work on race and post-coloniality. His project engages aesthetic and race theory with each other in a variety of intricate scenarios, without enforcing interpretative frameworks for thinking about empire which reside in privileged notions of art. Bindman's work does something very different, and insists upon scrutinizing not only *how*, but *why* the West has developed its theories conjoining race and beauty within the visual arts. *Ape to Apollo* doesn't always completely succeed in its avowed policy of avoiding 'retrospective moral judgements' in order to 'maintain a dispassionate tone'. The languages and semiotics of racism are slippery, potent, and still very much alive in Anglo-American cultures. The final legacy of this book is to provide clinical interpretations that explain the moves, particularly within aesthetic theory, which enabled the Enlightenment to evolve languages of racism across a terrifying cultural range.

*Ape to Apollo* takes its place alongside a series of recent challenging works in post-colonial, slavery and cultural studies which demonstrate the complexity of the visual codes operating within the arts and literatures of empire in the eighteenth century. Amongst these are Srinivas Aravamudan's *Tropicopolitans*, Roxann Wheeler's wonderful *The Complexion of Race*, Diane Kris and Geoff Quilley's edited volume *An Economy of Colour*, and my own *Blind Memory*. Wheeler's work in particular has been instrumental in making us think about the problematic and shifting impact of skin colour as an element within the constructions of racial and national identities. Wheeler has shown that within the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century skin colour was only one factor in a nexus of power relations in which religion, sexuality, dress codes and economic-exchange markets all operated to describe the beauty or value of a given human type. She has effectively argued that the black/white oppositions, still generally seen to lie at the heart of race theory, only emerged as primary determinants of racial categorization in the late eighteenth century. Wheeler also argues that even at this date they remain fluid, and certainly

exist outside the monolithic binarisms which came to distinguish nineteenth and twentieth-century popular race discourse. Bindman's work is similarly concerned to take us back to a set of precisely-excavated cultural environments, in which colour and physical form operate within unstable artistic contexts. The major development which this work accomplishes is the injection of aesthetics into the analysis. The complicated relations between race theory and aesthetics, amounting at points to a theoretical symbiosis, has not previously been given sufficient attention.

One of the major scholarly contributions of *From Ape to Apollo* lies in its rethinking of the full range of aesthetic theory in the second half of the eighteenth century. The publication of Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* is taken to mark a point of emergence for 'aesthetics' as a discreet theoretical discourse. Yet when Bindman goes on to show that Baumgarten defines aesthetics as the '*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*' or 'science of sensory/ sensual understanding' (Bindman, p. 19) it immediately becomes apparent that we are dealing with an infinitely larger, and in many ways more demanding, conceptual phenomenon than that denoted by our current understanding of 'aesthetics'. Eighteenth-century aesthetics is concerned with the entire range of human feeling, in terms of how it bears on perception or consciousness. In this sense aesthetics is about the codification and classification of beauty as a perceptual experience. Obviously when it comes to the question of responding to the bodies of the varieties of human kind, aesthetics is inextricably tied to race theory. The way in which certain bodies, certain faces and certain skin types emerge as more or less beautiful than others is the real subject of Bindman's book. In many ways his central narrative concerns the ways in which race was increasingly and formally written out of aesthetics. Bindman's lucid account of how Kant and Herder (in their different ways) brought about this shift is of particular importance. At one level both philosophers, in dividing aesthetics off from the politics of appearance, drew up the conceptual blue-prints enabling the beautiful to be imagined as a transhistorical and autonomous force.

There are so many major acts of realignment and re-inflection in this book that it is difficult to know where to start in praising its achievement. Lavater's obsessive connection of beauty with virtue is singled out as potentially dangerous. Once the technical criteria defining beauty are established these criteria also establish boundaries for the moral construction of humans. If you are ugly, according to the rules of the Lavaterian theory, then you are also degenerate and morally bad. Conversely if you are beautiful you are good, so the beautiful become a sort of philosophical equivalent of Calvinist Election. Of course the theory has great potential when it comes to demonizing one's enemies, whether individuals or entire ethnic minorities. Bindman shows how effectively and rapidly James Gillray was able to parody Lavater's theory in order to attack Jacobin sympathizers amongst the Whigs in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the French Revolution. The story is however a shocking one which ends in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and the anti-semitic caricatures of the *Stürmer* provide the low water-mark in terms of how Lavater's theory was to be exploited by racist propaganda.

Of equal value is the analysis of Winckelmann which shows how his championing of Greek art is achieved through an aesthetic system that is comparative, competitive and dangerously distorting. Greece is mythologized in an idealising manner which prioritises not only Greek art but an elaborate climatic determinism. Yet Winckelmann's work is not a static or controllable inheritance. His theory works out its effects in British culture of the nineteenth century, whether in the crazy life-plans

of the public schools, or in Pater's works (particularly the Winckelmann essay in *The Renaissance*). For Winckelmann's myth of Greek aesthetic supremacy can only be legitimized by means of an equally extreme negative fantasy modelled on ancient Egypt, set up as dark, enslaved, and anti-aesthetic. It is only when we come to the end of the book that the sinister potential of Winckelmann's utopianism becomes apparent. In his analysis of the sequences of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, in which stills of Greek athletic statuary bleed into portraits of Nazi athletes performing, Bindman reveals what can happen when a government commits itself to the creation of an aesthetics of race. The Nazis appear to have taken up Winckelmann's implied critique of German degeneracy, and transformed it into an argument for eugenic 'improvement' of the race. This is perhaps an ultimate demonstration of how the experimental fusions of race and aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century were to be perverted into a set of insanely-brutal racist fantasies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The lesson to take away from this excellent, in the end disturbing, study is that we shouldn't accept the cultural autonomy of 'aesthetics' on trust, and that the radical 'cleaning up operation' which the Enlightenment enforced under the name of aesthetics was achieved at a high cost. It may be consoling to believe that aesthetic judgement operates in a pure perceptual space outside the pressures of history and discrimination, but the evidence of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory so carefully laid out for us here refuses such consolation.

## Invisible Hands

by *Elizabeth Lunbeck*

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**Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: a Cultural History of Masturbation*, Zone Books, New York, 2003; 501 pp.; \$34.00; 9 781890951320.**

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Masturbation, at least in the United States, is back atop the social conservatives' agenda, classified along with bigamy, prostitution, adultery, obscenity, bestiality – or, more colourfully, 'man on dog' sex, as the Republican senator Rick Santorum infamously termed the practice in a recent interview – and, most pressing, same-sex marriage as offences against morality, threats to the existence of what the right likes to call 'strong, healthy families'. Conservative Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia, dissenting from the majority opinion in the landmark case of *Lawrence v. Texas* (decided in June 2003), which overturned a lower court's conviction of two men for engaging in consensual sex in their home and established for the first time a broadly-defined right to sexual privacy, pointedly included masturbation on his personal list of proscribed sexual practices. As a consequence of the decision, Scalia warned, 'every single one' of the many state laws 'based on moral choices' was now 'called into question' – 'the courts will be very busy indeed', he predicted, unintentionally nurturing hope among progressives across the land. Notwithstanding one