

Animality and Humanity in French Late Modern Representations of Black Femininity
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ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ART AND RACE



(see Figure 2.2), her brain and genitals conserved in glass jars in their anatomical laboratory (Kirby, 1954, p. 319).⁸ It wasn't until 2002, after much opposition from the French Government, that Baartman found her way back home to the South African town of Hankey, where her remains were finally properly buried on August 9 for National Women's Day.

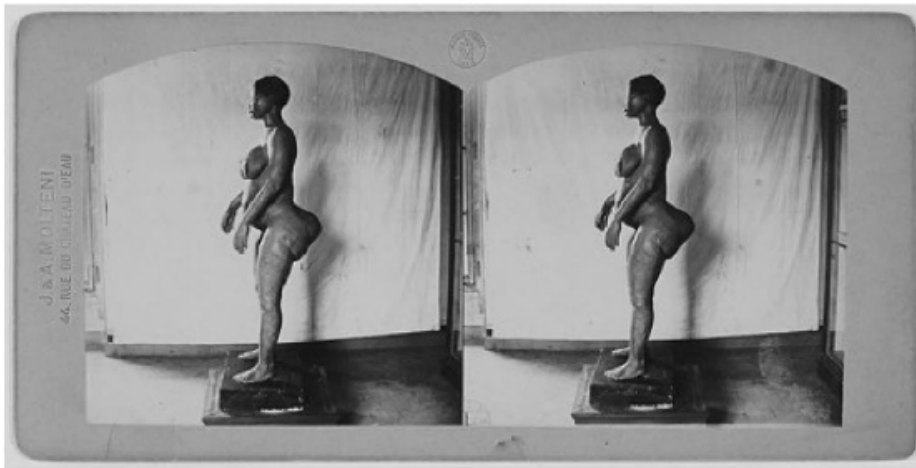


Figure 2.2 Jules and Alfred Molteni, stereoscopic view of Baartman's plaster cast, 1873. Photograph, 8.7 x 17.5 cm.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Drawing on the life of Baartman, in this chapter I delve into the performative display of human and non-human animals in late 18th- and early 19th-century French aristocratic and *bourgeois* interiors. Baartman's mode of exhibition followed the common patterns of exploitation of in-demand non-human animals. Resting was a rare occurrence. The giraffe Zarafa used to spend the day in the company of a popular crown and the evening in high society parties organized in her honor (Baratay, 2017, p. 47). Under the supervision of animal trainer S. Réaux, in 1814 Baartman also began performing in distinguished Parisian salons. Simultaneously, she also performed for the masses at more popular venues. September 22, 1814, *The Journal de Paris* advertised Baartman's show Neuve-des-Petits-Champs Street ("Paris 22 Septembre", 1814, p. 2). For three francs, the public

could discover the “Vénus Hottentote” from London. It was still a fair amount of money considering that on the same day just a few blocks away spectators could attend a concert by Dietz et compagnie at the prestigious Place Vendôme, but still more accessible than her “by invitation” private viewings.⁹

For the same price, Réaux was also exhibiting a five-year-old male rhinoceros (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999, p. 19). Parisians may still have been under the charm of Clara, the female Indian rhinoceros who commenced 12 years of touring Europe in 1746. Orphaned, Clara was adopted by the director of the Dutch East India Company, J. A. Sichterman. Once adult, the cumbersome pet was sold to Dutch showman Douwe Mout van der Meer, who brought her back to Rotterdam. One could only imagine the misery of Clara during the difficult conditions of the trip. Her skin had to be constantly kept moist with fish oil (Bossi, 2020, p. 52). Miss Clara made headlines in 1749 when touring in Reims, Versailles, Paris, and Europe. The city’s fashionable women styled their hair *à la rhinoceros*, “with a ‘horn’ in front and a tail dangling at the neck” (Sund, 2019, p. 9), the same horn Clara knocked off when too frustrated by the abhorrent conditions of her captivity.¹⁰ While the rhino mania that ran from wallpaper to clocks (Bossi, 2020, p. 53) was long gone by 1814, Parisians were still eager to see rhinoceros.

Miss Clara presented as a “real unicorn” (Sund, 2019, p. 9) in 1749 and the “Venus Hottentot” eroticized as a rare sexual specimen because of her perceived protruding buttocks and hypertrophied vaginal labia in 1814 both exemplified Paris’s deep fascination for everything new and exotic. During the slave trade, sailors imported human and non-human animals in trade ships returning from the African continent and the Caribbean colonies to entertain a public hungry for novelties and sensation. The spectacularization and estheticization of exotic fauna and people attested to the greatness and distinctiveness of the French Empire. But beyond these platitudes, what exactly were well-heeled guests paying for when asking to scrutinize Baartman privately? An investigation into the province of the wealthy could be a fruitful framework because of the elite’s

capacity to be arbiters of taste. Pierre Bourdieu's major book *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* [Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste] (1979) is testament to this capacity of the wealthy to naturalize social hierarchies and impede social mobility through strategies of distinction. I am sensitive to the subtle ways the French ruling class have actively conventionalized dominant forms of esthetics, shaped social rituals, and crafted racial fantasies in the collective imagination. Because the notions of "exotic" human and non-human animals have been enmeshed in the development of transcontinental luxury trading in the 18th century, an examination of its operating modes as image producers is a necessary step for the full comprehension of the subject. As we shall see in this section and subsequent chapters, the term has always been in flux. Irrespective of the definition that has evolved across time, the concept of luxury has always involved what society considers to be the "extra-ordinary, that which goes beyond the everyday, the affordable, and the mundane" (McNeil and Riello, 2016, p. 4).

An analysis of a range of visual texts and of a literary description of the private showing of the "Hottentot Venus" published in January 1815 in the fashion magazine the *Journal des dames et des modes* ("La Vénus Hottentote", 1815) will examine both the modes of exhibition of Baartman and the public responses to her performances. I pay special attention to the pictorial strategies in use, and the guests' emotional and sensory responses *in situ*. I am observant to the ways Baartman's staged body revealed ideas of racial and species membership, distinctiveness, and national pride in upper-class sensibilities as did the performing non-human animals traded in the global market.

In closing this introduction, one word of caution is needed. Baartman's anguish has been an international emblem of black struggle in the modern imperial world. The number of fine art artists, writers, and directors worldwide who have tried to solve the enigma of her short life testifies to the collective fascination her *persona* has generated.¹¹ In spite of her heightened presence in the public discourse, Baartman remains an elusive figure,

Sund, Judy, 2019. *Exotic: a fetish for the foreign*. Phaidon

Bossi, Laura. 2020. *Le grand tour du rhinoceros Clara. Les origines du monde: l'invention de la nature au XIX siècle*. Gallimard, pp. 52-59.