

Colonial Exhibition: An alternative colonial interface

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Colonial Exhibition is a project of conservation and restoration, as well as a re-presentation and recontextualization of an existing photographic artifact: an anonymous, undated (although it is unlikely to have originated any later than about 1910) pornographic sheet mounted on linen and entitled *Amours de Bamboula*. The original sheet reproduces 25 miniscule photographs (each approximately 1 cm x 1.5 cm) depicting an African native in sexual congress with a white woman. One hundred years after printing, the material condition of the artifact is considerably degraded.

Amours de Bamboula.



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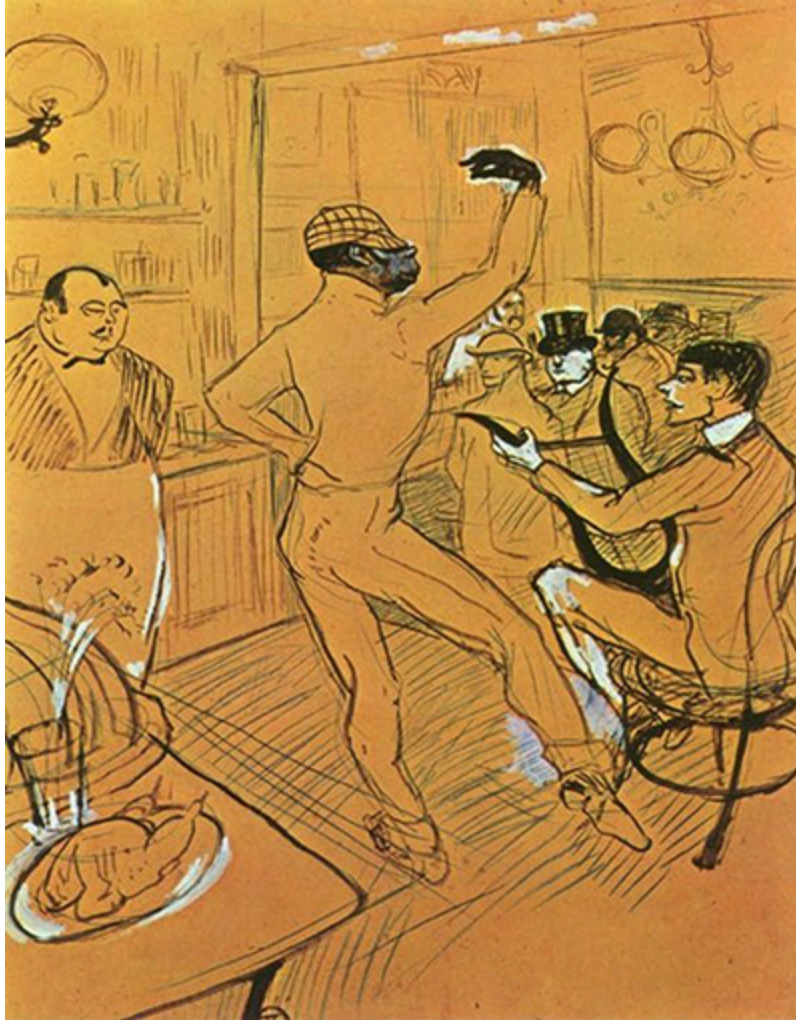
What makes the original sheet such a remarkable and in a sense subversive document is that, while undoubtedly produced with the intention of awakening "prurient interest" in the observer, it escapes the main cliché historically associated with colonial pornography: the representation of the indigenous female - filtered through the male gaze of the photographer-colon - as a manifestation of "savage nature", as a metaphor for Africa herself, her nudity and sexuality the object of both repulsion and fascination. The classic *topos* here is the bare-breasted Moorish woman – one of the most prevalent images of colonialism's erotic imagination – who presents a kind of inverted image of the inaccessible veiled native woman.



'Bare-breasted Moorish women are presented and construed as accessible women, as "purchasable" women,' writes Christelle Taraud ¹. 'The majority of postcards featuring these bare-breasted women have as their premise a sexual invitation, one made even more evident by the disturbing intensity of their gaze, directed not only at the photographer but also at the potential purchaser of the postcard. The relationship established among this trio (the woman, the photographer, the customer) is profoundly conditioned by the

commercialization and trivialization of the exchange. Likewise, the multiplication of the image and the overtly commercial nature of the photographic undertaking undermine what is presented as the romantic uniqueness of the colonial experience. By sexualizing and stripping bare the native women for a mass market, the colonial postcard promotes a dreamlike state in the mind of the viewer. Once enigmatic, the women become, by virtue of their social status (they are often dancers, musicians or singers suspected of being “of easy virtue”) or by the postures they adopt (lying down or propping themselves up in a sort of passive, lazy femininity), objects of temptation, vulgar and often obscene.’

As for the native colonial male, the most common Western representation of him turns him into a clown, devious but incompetent, which for the colonizer is the most efficient way of emasculating him. In the French fable of the colonial period, the success of the black clown Chocolat on the Parisian stage and the brand image of various “colonial” products – especially those derived from cocoa (Banania, etc.) – characterize this reduction of the native male.



If the counterpart of the bare-breasted Moorish or African woman is the veiled woman – an impenetrable mystery who nevertheless generates her own erotic mystique ² – the repressed image of the black male from the point of view of the white colonizer is the one described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*: a hypersexual animal allegedly endowed with a giant member and capable of terrorizing white women with his “weapon”, hence the need to restrain him and curb his sexual “instincts” by all means possible.



In *Colonial Exhibition*, however, the male gaze is neutralized by images that depict an interracial couple interacting in a context of complete sexual equality. The two parties absent from the traditional colonial schema of sexual domination - the indigenous male and the white female - are the protagonists of an inverted *mise-en-scène*. Unlike contemporary pornography with its fetishistic emphasis on isolated and detached body parts, the couple involved here maintain constant visual contact with each

other, betray no hint of being observed by the camera, and in certain poses display an astonishing tenderness and complicity.



The title of the work, *Colonial Exhibition*, explores a play on words denoting (1) the "exhibitionistic" nature of the sexual acts performed; and (2) a reference to the colonial fairs so popular throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alluding to the latter, each of the images selected bears the name in French of a raw material extracted from the colonized land by the colonizer (ebony, ivory, silk, cocoa, vanilla, rubber, etc.).

References

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http://musea.univ-angers.fr/rubriques/elements/popup/popup_esp.php?ref_notice=359

² See the extraordinary photographic work of the French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault (1872-1934).