

The *pendule au nègre* of the Bern Historical Museum

The nineteenth century figure clock at the Bern Historical Museum (Fig. 1) presents a stalwart, sculptured black young man archetypically represented with garish fleshy red lips and those round and always amazed eyes, who is surrounded by an imagined absence of colonialist violence and slavery. For a current bystander, all his attention may be attracted by the elegant and simple contrast between the bright ormolu and the obscured patinated bronze getting into friction with our rejective sensibility against racism. For the contemporary eyes, the clock's figure could be a material oxymoron, whose internal coherence have to be deciphered. I would like to present here some clues.

The clock's pedestal emphasizes even more the lack of a conflictive environment through its decorative motifs. A monkey playing on a rope over a mirror-composition of palms is flanked on both sides by the same representation of an antithetic couple of birds presumably eating from woven baskets with bows. Through them, the pedestal is offering a geographical and fantastic context. It would be misleading to identify the monkey and birds, as long as they represent a faraway and uncertain land.

Nevertheless, in the foreground, exactly over the monkey's head, and in the middle of the composition, as a significant and formal link between the pedestal and the black figure, a sugar cane is been showed serving as a walking stick. The imagined scenography turns out to be the Caribbean islands; the economic-political status, the French colonies and its sugar industry; and the historical contingency, the development



Fig. 1. Louis-Martin Froidevaux and unknown French bronze caster, *Pendule au nègre*, 1805 ca., Gilded bronze, 36cm high. Bern Historical Museum, Switzerland. Provenance: Graffenried family, possibly from the Burgistein Castle, Bern.

of the slave insurgencies and the debates around their freedom.¹ A complex context reduced to its most pleasant aspect, where everything is nuanced by an exotic fantasy of a hard-working black peasant carrying on his back the clock wrapped by a cotton bundle's representation, and being comfortable with his half nudity and poverty.

Interesting is to notice that the figure's body forms an uninterrupted diagonal from the left foot to the head, and that the walking stick and the letter it holds follow the composition as a parallel line. But the most important fact is the letter leading the action. Being in front of the figure's posture, and being partnered with its eyes, the letter opens the structure toward a future scene where it would finally be delivered. The journey seems to be long and arduous, due to the water bottle on the hips and the hat on the head to be protected against the sun. And with a big load on the back! To be occupied in several tasks is the main black figure's attribute. In allegorical terms, labor and fortitude may be here the bucolic concepts, directly opposed to the idea of a corrupted modern civilization. This all recalls the literary characters such as Domingo, the good and loyal slave from Bernardin Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginia* novel of 1787. He plants "cotton-trees on heights, sugar-canes on strong land; coffee plants on the hills [...]"² and so on with several other works. He, as the clock's figure, is a *bon nègre*, who "performed all these labours with intelligence and activity, because he performed them with zeal".³

But from who is the letter's owner? Regarding the clock's materiality, it was made to be a decorative mobile object. The pedestal not only facilitates the placement, but its formal configuration also suggests a specific topography, if I may use the term, in which the owner could have lived. Harmonizing with the whole, the pedestal is made of gilded bronze; and while it is marking the symmetry of the set with its vertical axis represented in its center by a circular floral motif, its oval form denotes motion and reinforces the walking attitude of the supported figure above. This pedestal's symmetry, added to a geometrical and smooth architectural outline, frames the figure's motion, being it a characteristic of the Empire style (1803-1821), which finds its origins in the Directoire style (1795-1799) and Consulat (1799-1803) styles. One can now imagine the mentioned

¹ For further discussion of the mentioned problems, see Manuel Covo, "Race, Slavery, and Colonies in the French Revolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Bernardin Saint-Pierre, *Paul and Virginia* (Baltimore: Bonsal & Niles, 1800), 14.

³ Saint-Pierre, *Paul and Virginia*, 14. I chose this rough American translation because I could not find any other eighteenth century British edition that included this specific sentence.

topography as a sumptuous room decorated under the spell of the Pompeian archeological discoveries, or as an austere saloon with early neoclassical forms (Fig. 2). But, instead of that, according to the clock's mobile constitution, it must be seen as a voyager because it was made for the Swiss patrician Graffenried family.

The dial's clock has a signature: "Froidevaux à Berne", which stands for Louis-Martin Froidevaux (1766-1813) resident in Bern.⁴ Working since 1793, the clock was surely made after 1801, when he received on September 7 a watchmaker's patent.⁵ Claudine Ammann-Buri *et al.* have suggested that the clock was made around 1805 and classified it as a chimney's clock (as it can be seen in the figure 2).⁶ Due to his commercial relationship with Paris,⁷ Froidevaux surely facilitates the black figure's commission. It was one of many designs now known as *pendules au nègre*, manufactured in series by French bronze casters, among which has been highlighted since a few years the Deverberie & Cie.'s firm,⁸ although there are many copies unsigned, like the one here in question, still able to find in current art auctions.

Now preserved at the Bern Historical Museum, the clock was legated in 1963 by Marie Juliette Graffenried-Favarger. Since the donor's family were from Neuchâtel, and since her husband's parents were second cousins (according to an old endogamic



Fig. 2. Consulat style's French salon with a *pendule au nègre* over the chimney representing the allegory of America, 1790s. From: Olivier Quéant, *Styles de France. Muebles et ensembles de 1610 à 1920*. Paris: Le Rayonnement Français, 1955. Page 133.

⁴ Georg von Holtey, Ursula Bischof Scherer, and Albert Kägi, *Deutscheschweizer Uhrmachermeister und ihre Werke vom 14. Bis 19. Jahrhundert* (Switzerland: Chronométriphilia, 2006), 99.

⁵ Bernard Froidevaux, "Les Franches-Montagnes, terre féconde," *Actes de la Société Jurassienne d'Émulation* 92 (1989), 214-220.

⁶ Claudine Ammann-Buri, Ursula Bischof Scherer, Heinrich Scherer, *Vo Zyt zu Zyt. Bernische Uhren im Laufe der Jahrhunderte* (Jegenstorf: Stiftung und Verein Schloss jegenstorf, 1992), 49. Nevertheless, they did not present an argumentation in defense of the date.

⁷ Froidevaux, "Les Franches-Montagnes," 214.

⁸ Charlotte Vignon, "Deverberie & Cie: Drawings, Models and Works in Bronze," *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 8 (2003).

tradition),⁹ the clock was probably bought by her husband's grandfather Carl Emanuel von Graffenried (1762-1842). As one of the most important Bernese families, from 1352 to the French invasion in Switzerland on 1798, "no less than eighty-six [...] Graffenrieds are recorded as members of the House of Representatives [*Grosser Rat*] and very closely connected with the history of Bern".¹⁰ So, if he was the buyer, then the clock's original environment could have been one of the interiors of the Bernese Burgistein Castle, in possession of the Graffenried family from 1714/15¹¹ until today.¹² Built in the 13th century, the castle passed through a complete renovation in a late Renaissance style around 1570; and by the end of the eighteenth century, some rooms were renewed with a sober décor,¹³ approaching to the prevailing fashions.

Literature

Ammann-Buri, Claudine, Ursula Bischof Scherer, Heinrich Scherer. *Vo Zyt zu Zyt. Bernische Uhren im Laufe der Jahrhunderte*. Jegenstorf: Stiftung und Verein Schloss jegenstorf, 1992.

Braun, Hans. *Notabeln, Patrizier, Bürger: Geschichte der Familie von Graffenried*. Bern: Stämpfli, 2012.

Covo, Manuel. "Race, Slavery, and Colonies in the French Revolution." In *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, edited by David Andress, 290-308. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

DeGraffenried, Thomas P. *History of the deGraffenried Family*. New York: Published by the Author, 1925.

⁹ Hans Braun, *Notabeln, Patrizier, Bürger: Geschichte der Familie von Graffenried* (Bern: Stämpfli, 2012), 90-100.

¹⁰ Thomas P. deGraffenried, *History of the deGraffenried Family* (New York: Published by the Author, 1925), 18.

¹¹ Peter Honegger, "Das Intériur," in *Schloss Burgistein. Hinten im Gürbetal und mitten in Europa. Eine Dokumentation*, ed. André von Graffenried (Bern, Burgistein: Published by the Editor, 2018), 156.

¹² Braun, *Notabeln*, 131-132.

¹³ Jürg Schweizer, "Baugeschichte – Baubeschreibung – Würdigung," in *Schloss Burgistein. Hinten im Gürbetal und mitten in Europa. Eine Dokumentation*, ed. André von Graffenried (Bern, Burgistein: Published by the Editor, 2018), 62-104; Honegger, "Das Intériur," 156-182.

- Froidevaux, Bernard. "Les Franches-Montagnes, terre féconde." *Actes de la Société Jurassienne d'Émulation* 92 (1989): 209-234.
- Honegger, Peter. "Das Intérieur." In *Schloss Burgstein. Hinten im Gürbetal und mitten in Europa. Eine Dokumentation*, edited by André von Graffenried, 156-187. Bern, Burgstein: Published by the Editor, 2018.
- Quéant, Olivier. *Styles de France. Muebles et ensembles de 1610 à 1920*. Paris: Le Rayonnement Français, 1955.
- Saint-Pierre, Bernardin. *Paul and Virginia*. Baltimore: Bonsal & Niles, 1800.
- Schweizer, Jürg. "Baugeschichte – Baubeschreibung – Würdigung." In *Schloss Burgstein. Hinten im Gürbetal und mitten in Europa. Eine Dokumentation*, edited by André von Graffenried, 62-131. Bern, Burgstein: Published by the Editor, 2018.
- Vignon, Charlotte. "Deverberie & Cie: Drawings, Models and Works in Bronze." *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 8 (2003): 170-187.
- Von Holtey, Georg, Ursula Bischof Scherer, and Albert Kägi. *Deutscheschweizer Uhrmachermeister und ihre Werke vom 14. Bis 19. Jahrhundert*. Switzerland: Chronométriphilia, 2006.