Cordier and Fromentin: Against the Empire of Beauty?

Little explored in the argument about the ability of European artists to accurately portray the beauty of world peoples is the art of the ethnographic sculptor Charles Cordier. Cordier believed that every race had its own beauty, and during his career he would sculpt Chinese, Indian, and Mexican people, but primarily a host of different racial types from North Africa. His 1860 exhibition “Galerie anthropologique et ethnographique” was significant both for being the first concerted attempt to meld anthropology and sculpture within plain view of the Salon and also for being unapologetic in its presentation of world peoples as beautiful. Cordier’s aesthetics gains partial support and revealing contrast through the art theory of his contemporary Eugène Fromentin. Fromentin wrote extensively about the conundrum presented by Orientalist art. The problem for Fromentin was the following: How can a European aesthetics demanding the universalization of beauty extend to geographical areas beyond Europe where the objects, textures, and colors of artistic depiction do not already exist within the pre-formed catalogue of European tradition? By putting Cordier and Fromentin together, this essay hopes to articulate the problem that they faced during an important era for the racialization of the world’s peoples.

Cordier’s art was unapologetic in its interests and ambitions from its very beginnings, namely, his 1848 Salon bust “Saïd Abdalla de la tribu de Mayac, royaume de Darfour.” When Du Camp wrote in his 1857 Salon review that Cordier’s polychrome statues were “curieux, surtout au point de vue ethnographique,”¹ this reception at the bounds of art and science was what the artist was already accustomed to receiving. But he was no art theorist.

Fromentin, a popular artist and writer, had the disposition of a theorist. Introspective, careful, and given to pestering self-doubts, Fromentin produced crucial passages in *Une année dans le Sahel* (1859) that deal with the construction and reception of Orientalist art. To appreciate Fromentin’s important theorization of the intersection of art and science, it is necessary neither to exaggerate nor to diminish the ambivalence of these passages. These passages are characterized as much by their almost avant-garde awareness of the emergence of a new form of ethnographic, documentary art as by their reactionary rejection of the same. They show Fromentin struggling with his interest in the emergent social science of ethnography. In my reading, Fromentin emerges as the first theorist in French letters of ethnographic, documentary art.

To put Fromentin side by side with Cordier is both a natural and odd pairing: natural because both deal in theory or in practice with ethnographic art; odd because of their difference of character. Yet the years of the ferment of their ethnographic interest are similar—1859 and 1860 are crucial years, here—and the two together serve as a joint case study that illuminates the influence of ethnography in French arts and letters. Their interest in world peoples is substantial, and, to use a favorite term of Fromentin’s, sincere. While their general stance toward art is that the natural world must be transformed, idealized, or universalized to make art, nevertheless it is to the physical world—physical reality, *tout court*—to which they pay heed and homage. In this sincere and documentary interest in the world’s peoples, we can begin to see a shift in the horizon of French aesthetics. That the title of this paper contains a question mark, then, is illustrative of the fact that these two artists worked at the beginning of a new era. That is, geographical expansion under imperialism
meant that previously unforeseen cultural contact proved the inspiration for new thinking about art and the usage of new materials, methods, and practices in art. Simultaneous to the socio-political empire’s expansion, then, the empire of European aesthetics began to weaken. Cordier and Fromentin’s joint case begins a conversation about the limits of European aesthetics; their ethnographic art and art theory, respectively, points in different but compelling ways to mid-nineteenth-century art’s limitations, as well as to the limitations of the intellectual climate in which ethnographic art was first conceived.

_The Racialization of the World’s Peoples_

From the first pages of _Une année dans le Sahel_, Fromentin acknowledges that science and technology have already begun to dominate the age. The effect of this domination is the recession of poetry and mythology from experience: “Les choses restent, mais la mythologie des voyages a disparu. [...] La vitesse a supprimé jusqu’aux aventures [...] La science a détrôné la poésie [...] nous voyageons [...] dans la prose.” ² Like with many such statements in Fromentin, this one too is wracked by ambivalence. At once, there is a sense of nostalgia for the past, when a wind could be called a “zephyr” and so conjure up the rich cultural allusions of mythology; or when islands off the coast of Spain could feasibly spur the imagination to think of Geryon instead of being, disappointingly, three islands off the coast of Spain. Yet, if this first evocation of the voyage in his travelogue acknowledges regret in respect to the passing of the past, this sentiment is short-lived and relatively sober when compared, for example, to Baudelaire’s almost unhinged disregard for photography in “Le public moderne

---

et la photographie” and his broadsides against scientific progress in *Exposition universelle* (1855).

Fromentin reveals his awareness of science as not just a killer of myths and the heady sensation of the pre-modern traveler experiencing the world as a hero of legend. Rather, science plays a productive role in the overhaul of life and lifestyle. An increase in the possibilities for travel and the emergence of science as part of French intellectual life come hand in hand. He notes that the need for adventure and the taste for traveling come from a broader prizing of diversity in nature: “Or notez bien qu’on voyage du moment qu’on s’attache aux diversités de la nature.”

Travel represents a change in bourgeois aspiration, but travel is also a part of the time’s revolutions in the arts and sciences. Fromentin is conscious of this: “Les voyages lointains ont tenté les peintres et changé bien des choses à la peinture. [...] C’est aussi le contrecoup de certaines études scientifiques dont les progrès ne s’obtiennent que par des courses autour du globe, autour des climats, autour des races.”

Here, then, is a key passage that reveals critical phrasing for mid-nineteenth-century conversations about art and emergent sciences.

The collection of emergent sciences that Fromentin groups as those of climate and race might be called the human-geographical sciences. These include the modern sciences and academic disciplines of anthropology and geography and the now discredited nineteenth-century discipline of race science. (Darwin’s publication of *On the Origins of Species* is also 1859, and so biology obtains in this list as well.) To understand how this large group of sciences might be conceived under the same general label, it is necessary to realize

---

3 Ibid., 180.
that practically speaking no modern science was yet a distinct discipline. Ethnography, for instance, though a word that appears in Fromentin and elsewhere in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, would not become fully scientific until the opening of the Institut d’Ethnologie in January 1926, the subsequent influence of Marcel Mauss’s courses there, and the prominent example of the fieldwork of Marcel Griaule in the 1920s and 1930s.\footnote{Alice L. Conklin, \textit{In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 87-8, 237.} Alice Conklin writes that the words designating tendencies in anthropological sciences—anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography—existed as enmeshed signifiers in mid-nineteenth century discourse. Conklin notes that French contemporary scholars refer to the overtly racist varieties of these studies as “raciologie,” so as to remain distinct from the traditions of today’s legitimate social sciences.\footnote{Ibid., 21.} Stephen Jay Gould refers to the men who practiced “raciologie” as “scientific racists,” a term that I will take up.\footnote{Stephen Jay Gould, \textit{The Mismeasure of Man} (New York: Norton, 1981), 81.} Chief among these was Paul Broca, who founded in 1859 the Société anthropologique de Paris to promote the practice of anthropometry and the pseudo-science of craniology. Broca’s aim lay in the ranking of human races so as to “determine the relative position of races in the human series.”\footnote{Ibid., 86.}

Scholars have pointed out the polyvalence of the word “race” during its emergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In writing about nineteenth-century definitions of race in the context of nationalism, Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin expresses the general frustration with the diffuse meanings of the word: “In the end, the concept of race is difficult to fix due to how it rarely produces, in historical texts in which it can be found, clear
theoretic points tying to a precise definition.”

The confluence of climate and race together could be read through contemporary eyes as something akin to geography and people, but it is also important that Buffon, the first French intellectual to develop race as a physical concept, saw race as a factor of climate. Claude Blanckaert writes, “According to Buffon, race isn’t a genealogical taxonomy but the effect of a convergence that is established among human groups that live in the same climate and a similar lifestyle”:

le climat où ils s’habitueront influera si fort à la longue sur leur premier état de nature, qu’après un certain nombre de générations tous ces hommes se ressembleront, quand même ils seroient arrivés de différentes contrées fort éloignées les unes des autres, et que primitivement ils eussent été très dissemblables entre eux.

Blanckaert writes that migration, bad food, and hostile climates impinge upon “noble types.” These types might be said still to exist, but they are “disfigured” by the ravages of climate so that after many generations whichever people, noble or not, share the same climate, begin to resemble one another.

---


10 Historians agree that Buffon furnished the first attempts to explain a physical concept of race. From “Variétés dans l’espèce humaine” of 1749 to “Suppléments” in the 1770s, the “seeds” of the classificatory era and the division of humans in distinct groups were being laid. See Claude Blanckaert, “Les conditions d’émergence de la science des races au début du XIXe siècle,” in L’idée de “race” dans les sciences humaines et la littérature (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles), edited by Sarga Moussa (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), 135.

11 Ibid., 136.

Fromentin’s comments reflect a common mid-nineteenth-century belief about how climate affects all aspects of physical appearance and culture. Théophile Gautier’s “Du beau dans l’art” also exemplifies this thinking. There, Gautier quotes Rodolphe Töpffer’s position that the variety found in the history of art stems from the conventional nature of the “signes de représentation” that vary “perpétuellement avec les époques, avec les nations, avec les écoles, avec les individus.” Töpffer’s statement would seem to prophesize the possibility of non-European aesthetics, and thus, of non-Eurocentric beauty. Forms of beauty are “conventionnels à un haut degré,” and thus are neither eternal nor universal. But Gautier rejects this proto-democratic notion of art. Instead, he argues along the lines of scientific racism. He explains the differences between Teniers and de Vinci as arising from “la dissemblance des types modifiés par le climat, le temps, le costume, les mœurs [...].” This ontology of types refers back to pre-scientific notions of humanity. Just three years before Gautier’s writing, Gobineau proposed three basic types of human races—white, yellow, and black—what he understood to be the three “grandes races primitives qui formaient l’humanité à ses débuts.” These types became the world’s diverse races through migration and the effects of local climate. The belief in the “dégénérescence” of modern times can be traced as far back as Buffon’s comments on race, and, as Amos Morris-Reich notes, “there is a structural relationship between the belief in the natural division of the human species into

---

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
races and the belief that modern conditions increasingly undermine and erode that boundary.”

Saminadayar-Perrin writes that race’s popularity with historians in the nineteenth century coincided with their projects aimed toward creating versions of “authentic national history.” In the 1830s, “the principles of a “racial nationality” were set down. With this came a need for “new scientific rigor.” This became so decisive in historiography that in his address to the Sorbonne in 1882, Ernest Renan argued in “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” against the growing ethnographic imperative that threatened to overwhelm his desired value-oriented nationalism: “On crée ainsi une sorte de droit primordial analogue à celui des rois de droit divin; au principe des nations on substitute celui de l’ethnographie.” For Renan, just as monarchy debilitated progress, so too would the “first right of races.” Laudyce Rétat writes that for Renan, “race signals a complex cultural unity that is constructed through the effort of human groups for making clear the world and their relation to it. Every culture can assimilate, through time, people from any area. Race isn’t a genetic filiation but a vision of the world.” Morris-Reich notes the same competition between scientific racists and Renan’s value-oriented idealists of national history, as “[f]or race theorists, European states were inauthentic collectivities, racial ties being deeper and stronger.”

19 Ibid., 391.
22 Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography*, 22
Yet Fromentin was neither a scientific racist nor a national historian. In fact, several advantages recommend Fromentin as a theorist of ethnographic art: his self-doubt and his distance from institutions of official knowledge and the professional viewpoints they enforced. Fromentin was an artist. He may have aspired to be a sort of historian—an art historian, as *Les maîtres d’autrefois* suggests; but his character traits and his independence from official organs of knowledge and power lead to his perceptive but balanced and non-ideological views. If we look for other paradigms to contextualize the word “ethnography” when it appears in Fromentin’s writing, there are those that reflect Fromentin’s more moderate scientific sense of the word. For instance, Ernest-Théodore Hamy, the first curator of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, believed that “good ethnography” was “proper identification and classification of objects.” For him, the classification of objects moved ethnography toward “full scienticity.” Fromentin’s exposition of the peoples of Algiers in *Une année dans le Sahel* stands, then, as a protracted example of this classificatory interest.

Garcin de Tassy, the noted French philologist of South Asia, supplies another moderate scientific example of the sort that best characterizes Fromentin. Tassy was a linguist. The credibility that he sought to build in his scholarly documents came from his prodigious talent for deciphering the languages of primary-source texts. *Mémoire sur les particularités de la religion musulmane dans l’Inde* (1831) seeks to rectify the oversight of travelers to India who have omitted mention of Indian Islam. This intervention mounts a

---

24 Ibid., 37.
25 Tassy writes circumspectly about the tendency to minimize Islam’s role in India because of its atypicality for colonial comparative religious conversations that hope to define world religions through the rubrics of “pure types”: “Les savants on en peu parlé; aussi ignore-t-on généralement quel y est précisément l’état de cette religion, quelles en sont les particularités.” See *Mémoire sur les*
strong critique of the dominant trend of colonial comparative religion in which world religions were assigned to an original geographic area in an overdetermined fashion. India had been given over to Hinduism in a form of religious essentialism not unlike the argument of racist scientists about the connection between races and geography: Indian Islam was a “degenerate” “race” because not located at the geographical origins of Islam. But Tassy’s perspective was subtler. He emphasizes how Indian Islam takes on Hindu characteristics—the extravagant taziya processions of Muharram, for instance—without diminishing its fecundity or essential characterization as Islam. This ability to see the enmeshed reality of religious practice contradicts essentializing forms of religious ethnography and points to the reality of Lévi-Strauss’ statement that “[l]es sociétés humaines ne sont jamais seules.” That is, as we can see now, all cultural phenomena are of a decidedly mixed nature. Fromentin’s understanding of ethnography, then, tends toward the pole of Hamy and Tassy. Fromentin too would define ethnography as a science of the collection and classification of objects, customs, and the cultural practices of non-European people in which race appears as a factor but does not play a central, determining role.

Fromentin, Theorist, and Cordier, Practitioner

While Fromentin and Cordier arrived at a similar place where science and art could be articulated in one breath, in many respects they make an odd pair: the first, thoughtful but wracked by doubts, innovative and perceptive in this thinking, but at times conservative in his art and lifestyle; the second, tremendously productive in sculpture, blunt in his


26 Lévi-Strauss, Race et histoire, 14.
thinking—unapologetic and simplistic. Other contrasts exist: Fromentin’s ideas about art are integral to practically all his writing (Dominique is the only text that excludes tracts of art criticism) contrasts with the paucity of extant documents for Cordier and their dearth of art commentary. Then there is the issue of travel: Fromentin was a reluctant traveler who discovered his art’s theme—Algeria—“par hasard”27 whereas Cordier was a lifelong traveler who lived the last fifteen years of his life in Algiers and who had a preternaturally clear sense of his art’s subject matter, as he began sculpting ethnographic subjects by the time he was twenty-one years old. Yet when in Algiers, both established unconventional locales as their bases: Fromentin chose the outskirts of Algiers—Mustapha d’Alger—for his solitary observational post, and Cordier chose the Casbah where he “soon entertained quite a crowd of visitors.”28 Through putting them together as theorist and practitioner we can see the emergence of a new possibility within French arts and letters. The name of this new possibility is several: at the imbrication of the emergent social sciences and art there stands an ethnographic, documentary art that, at least in the case of Cordier, we could also label a racial art.

To excavate this possibility, some background on Fromentin is needed. Scholarship on Fromentin evinces a characteristic ellipsis that speaks subtly of his thinking’s non-typicity. Sarga Moussa excludes Fromentin’s travelogues from his study of the Romantic


Orientalist voyage because the Maghreb was not a normal part of those narratives.  

Lise Schreier’s study of nineteenth-century travel literature of “quatre pieds” mentions Fromentin as one possible textual source but ultimately eschews his travelogues because they do not produce the discourse of the authors she covers—Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval, Du Camp, and Flaubert—all who “espèrent pouvoir retrouver par-delà la Méditerranée un paradis perdu.” Vladimir Kapor and Véronique Magri begin to articulate more precisely Fromentin’s difference: the first defines his aesthetics against the time’s conventions, calling it an aesthetics of “anti-local color”; the second documents how his travelogues lack the “xénismes,” or foreign-language loan words, used to exoticize the non-European world in the typical Romantic Oriental tale. Roger Benjamin cites the statements of Léonce Bénédite, the founder of the French Society of Orientalist Painters, from the end of the century that identify Fromentin as the single-most important voice on the question of Orientalist aesthetics for later French Orientalist artists and thinkers. “Fromentin was the most influential voice on [Orientalist art theory] in the nineteenth century,” Benjamin writes, adding that Fromentin’s role as a theorist of Orientalism, “has yet to be given its due.”

A focus on ethnography, science, and the documentary will push this line of scholarship further.

---

30 Lise Schreier, Ecriture à quatre pieds: L’écrivain français et son compagnon de voyage en Orient au dix-neuvième siècle, volume 1, PhD dissertation (NYU, 2002), 3, 10.
Cordier’s reception was been more limited but more focused upon the enmeshing of science, race, and art. *Facing the Other: Charles Cordier (1827-1905): Ethnographic Sculptor* stands as the only volume of art criticism dedicated to his work, buttressed by Christine Peltre’s mention of his retrospective at the Musée d’Orsay. This lack of reception is due undoubtedly to Cordier’s single-minded pursuit of ethnographic sculpture and the eccentricity of this art for both the conventions of his day and the routines by which art history continues to be taught. Peltre acknowledges the liminal place that sculpture has traditionally had in the annals of Orientalism, but she argues as well, through the example of Cordier, for more importance to be given to sculpture, as “il est difficile aujourd’hui de limiter l’orientalisme à la peinture. Le rôle de la sculpture s’est imposé [...].” But the explanation for Cordier’s relative absence from art historical conversations about Orientalism, Romanticism, or nineteenth-century French arts and letters can be found simply in Cordier’s eccentricity. Laure de Margerie, co-editor of *Facing the Other*, makes it clear that Cordier was not a representative example of his time. He was “far outside the mainstream,” and it is only when one searches out “a time when the ties between art and science were still very strong” that one finds his work to provide “eloquent testimony.” It is in pushing the initiative shown in Cordier’s ethnographic art up against Fromentin’s art critical and theoretical writing that Fromentin’s own—and perhaps unexpected—eccentricity becomes more clearly visible.

---


34 Peltre, *Orientalisme*, 76.

35 Margerie, “The Most Beautiful,” 13, 29. Margerie might like to emend these comments to point to Cordier’s time as one time in which science and art comingled. The history of this interaction would have to be said to extend to the contemporary time.
Cordier’s interest in science was integral to his art. He was a member of Broca’s Société d’anthropologie de Paris. In 1862, he presented three busts to this society, representing, as he said, the three principal types of humankind, “le type nègre ou éthyopien [sic], le type mongolique, et le type caucasique.” He described his technique as involving “un procédé géométrique qui assure l’exactitude de la reproduction.” Two words here are revelatory of Cordier’s commitment to art imbricated in science: “geometry” and “exactitude.” The scientification of measurement was, after all, a founding doctrine of Broca’s anthropometrical methods. These two words also echo Fromentin. Fromentin’s most detailed explanation of the conundrum of ethnography comes in Une année dans le Sahel. It is couched as a dialogue between Fromentin as the narrator and his friend Vandell, a geologist. Fromentin’s description of Vandell’s sketches focuses on their non-artistic quality, their “cold” “geometry” and “absolute exactness”:

Il a rapporté de sa dernière course une foule de petits dessins fort curieux [...] Rien n’est plus exact, ni plus net, ni plus minutieux [...] C’est froid et démonstratif comme une figure de géométrie. [...] Il s’étonne pourtant quelquefois, si j’hésite à reconnaître les lieux, de m’en voir contester l’exactitude absolue.

Fromentin gives consideration to the type of “art” that Vandell produces. While he rejects a geological sketch or “plan” as art (as all would, I assume—even Vandell does), this passage

36 Ibid., 20.
38 Ibid.
39 Fromentin, Une année dans le Sahel, 176.
doesn’t merely serve to illustrate Fromentin’s rejection of one end of a possible bipolar spectrum of science and art. It is more that Vandell serves as a doppelganger for Fromentin. Elisabeth Cardonne writes that “[l]e narrateur est en effet doublé,” and, indeed, Fromentin postulates the existence of a “voyageur né,”\textsuperscript{40} claiming that he is not one but that this person is a scientist. It is rather the character Vandell, then, the “explorateur positiviste,”\textsuperscript{41} who represents the scientific example for processes of observation and documentation (whether in visual texts or not), a character that fascinates Fromentin for what he represents.

Cordier’s partial rejection of traditional European aesthetic values comes through most clearly in the same presentation to the Société d’anthropologie. He states that all races have their own beauty. That is, beauty is not codified officially or perpetually by a European standard. Europe does not “own” beauty, but rather beauty is variegated throughout humankind: “Car le beau n’est pas propre à une race privilégiée; j’ai émis dans le monde artistique l’idée de l’ubiquité du beau. Toute race a sa beauté qui diffère de celle des autres races.”\textsuperscript{42} Such a brash statement would have taken courage—or indifference to rebuke—to utter in 1862 and for many years following, Cordier suffered for his brashness, and while he presented work in the Salon, his art was presented largely in non-aesthetic settings. His contribution of forty-nine sculptures, mostly ethnographic, to the 1860 Exhibition of Algerian Products at the Palais d’industrie stands as the representative act of ethnographic art. It was named “Galerie anthropologique et ethnographique.”\textsuperscript{43} By 1867, the Paris-Guide notes that Cordier’s ethnographic sculptures were to be found only in the Muséum de

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{42} Cordier, “Séance du 6 février 1862,” 66.
\textsuperscript{43} Margerie and Papet, editors, Facing the Other, 230.
\end{flushright}
l’histoire naturelle, hidden away in the dingy confines of its anthropology gallery.\footnote{Margerie, “The Most Beautiful,” 29.} Only now that history has been partially reversed, as museums as central to French cultural history as the Musée d’Orsay collect his best work, in this case holding “Nègre du Soudan,” “Capresse des colonies,” “Nègre en costume algérien,” and “Arabe d’El Aghouat en burnous.”\footnote{Charles Cordier, Musée d’Orsay, www.musee-orsay.fr.}

Cordier found some support, sense of community, and encouragement from the Société d’anthropologie and more generally from nineteenth-century social scientific belief and practice. This allowed him to practice art without apparent misgivings. Fromentin saw how difficult, however, it would be for the French public to accept art of any sort whose subject matter or theme was non-European life:

Le difficile est, je le répète, d’intéresser notre public européen à des lieux qu’il ignore; le difficile est de montrer ces lieux pour les faire connaître, et cependant, dans l’acception commune aux objets déjà familiers, de dégager ainsi le beau du bizarre et l’impression de la mise en scène, qui presque toujours est accablante [...] Or, je vous l’ai dit, l’Orient est extraordinaire, et je prends le mot dans son sens grammatical. Il échappe aux conventions, il est hors de toute discipline; il transpose, il intervertit tout; il renverse les harmonies dont le paysage a vécu depuis des siècles.\footnote{Fromentin, Une année dans le Sahel, 186-7.}

The principal difficulty is the following: Orientalist art must conform to the tradition of European (and Eurocentric) aesthetics that has a codified subject matter for its “signes de
représentation,” while at the same time Orientalist art has to teach European audiences about new subject matter while managing not to overwhelm the spectator through the difference that this new subject matter presents. This is the hinge upon which Fromentin’s Orientalist art theory hangs. The newness of subject matter and painterly treatment that this newness demands are nearly insurmountable challenges. Beyond a pedagogic function (“faire connaître”) foreign to art, Orientalist art puts interpretation—the central act of the artist—in doubt: “La question se réduit à savoir si l’Orient se prête à l’interprétation, dans quelle mesure il l’admet, et si l’interpréter n’est pas le détruire. Je ne fais point de paradoxe; j’examine.”

The interest for us lies in the fact that he produced Orientalist art and art theory despite his well-articulated doubts. Similarly, despite his doubts about ethnographic, documentary art, he articulates a valid theory of representation that would justify it as art.

For Fromentin, the Orient must be addressed in its entirety, and, moreover, with the motivation—and method—of being “true”: “Il faut donc l’admettre en son entier, et je défie qu’on échappe à cette nécessité d’être vrai [...]” He sees this full depiction as incumbent upon artists. The logic of sincerity, a quality of contemplation and spirit important to him, leads him to this conclusion. Sincerity is a commitment to a more objective art. It is coeval to the desire within emergent sciences to achieve greater objectivity, whether Hamy’s imperative to collect and classify objects, or Broca’s strict reliance upon tools of measurement. Fromentin announces a new type of painter who heeds this call for the total inclusion of Algerian peoples and their cultures, including “la singularité de ses costumes,

47 Ibid., 184.
48 Ibid., 185.
l’originalité de ses types.” This new painter will courageously take upon himself “le parti de se montrer vériédique à tout prix.” This artist will stand in contrast to those who choose whimsically from the Baudelarian “dictionary of nature.” This new artist will mark a turn in art; he will bring back “de ses voyages quelque chose de tellement inédit, de si difficile à déterminer” that there is no vocabulary to account for it. Fromentin names this new art as that of “documents.”

What the courageous artist creates is not a genre but rather a new “ordre de sujets,” truly, a new type of art—an art based on a fully mimetic principle. Yet a problem arises. When this resolutely truthful and sincere approach intersects with the growing French curiosity for world peoples, the “documentary” artist will be pushed into rendering “images minutieuses copiées avec la scrupuleuse authenticité d’un portrait.” These will be ethnographic portraits from which it will become absolutely clear “comment le peuple d’outre-mer s’habille, comment il se coiffe, comment il se chausse.” Yet to Fromentin these objective, ethnographic depictions are the fatal flaw of this new art of the document. This documentary art will incite further curiosity, which he denigrated as an unrestrained and unintelligent fervor, similar to Baudelaire’s criticism of artists who search “à étonner par des moyens d’étonnement étrangers à l’art.” This overwhelming interest in the “inédit” will lead to art becoming lost in the balance, and “[beaucoup de gens] vouldront des tableaux

---

49 Ibid., 184-5.
51 Fromentin, Une année dans le Sahel, 185. These are Fromentin’s italics.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
composés comme un inventaire, et le goût d’ethnographie finira par se confondre avec le sentiment du beau.”

This is a classic Fromentinian passage. It is full of insight, and, if each step of the argument is convincingly argued, then nevertheless the passage as a whole hangs precariously close to self-contradiction. His overt appeal for artists to follow the logic of sincerity in regard to depictions of Algeria dovetails into an equally strong condemnation of that proposed new documentary art. Today we would point out the false fear that the spirit of beauty could be eroded and the false perception that beauty resides wholly in the object of representation. Rather, beauty, we would say, is located as well in the mind of the spectator whose education creates the sense of beauty that the spectator then “finds” in the art. Fromentin argues for the extension of European aesthetics to include new subject matter, techniques, and artistic treatments, and yet he cannot admit that beauty is not universal. To argue for a fully ethnographic art, Fromentin would have had to understand beauty to be a perceptual ability formed through the subject’s pedagogy in beauty.

The lasting irony is that imperialism exposed the empire of European beauty to be incompletely theorized. Baudelaire’s *Exposition universelle (1855)* exemplifies how much mid-nineteenth-century discourse on the nation and art is given to self-contradiction. Unlike racist scientists, Baudelaire sees the great and diverse array of national products on display in the exhibition not as proof of a hierarchy of cultural value, but rather he sees how this diversity speaks to the each culture’s “égale utilité [...] dans l’harmonie de l’univers.”

While arguing against science and technology’s hold over the public’s imagination, Baudelaire could

---

55 Fromentin, *Une année dans le Sahel*, 186.
be said to argue as well against the premise of the universality of beauty. This takes place through the terms of human-geographical sciences while he searches to place the role of the “bizarre” in art. The bizarre, he says, is art’s productive germ. It is a form of individuation necessary for the great artist, and the bizarre comes about through the conditioning “des milieux, des climats, des mœurs, de la race, de la religion et du tempérament de l’artiste.”

He means only to show that there is much to art that remains outside the ability of science to explain, and yet the language of climates, customs, and race are also those of Fromentin and those of the practitioners of the emergent social sciences. Nevertheless, it is not Baudelaire who conceives of a documentary or ethnographic art, which would have struck him as much too banal—“tâchez de concevoir un beau banal!” he writes with scorn.

It is in Fromentin’s theorization of a documentary, ethnographic art of Algeria—of all of Algeria—that moves the conversation from European aesthetics and its conservative tradition of “signes de représentation” toward a more fluid, more varied, and less Eurocentric—and it must be said—less uniformly “white” art.

Conclusion

In the art of Cordier we find the first, best example of a French artist dedicated to ethnographic, documentary art that can also be labeled racial. His method for representing the racial types he cast represents a variation upon a scientific process contemporary to him, that of anthropometry. His commitment to casting racial types marks his career from its outset to its conclusion. In Fromentin’s ruminations about art, though never presented in

---

57 Ibid., 238-9.
58 Ibid., 238.
the fully rigorous context of philosophical or aesthetic theory for its own sake, we find the thinking that could support such art. Fromentin’s visual art remains an ambiguous example of his predilections and concerns. His travelogues provide more obvious—though still ambivalent—examples of how he thought race, as an index of ethnographic reality, fit into literature. His extensive racial portraiture of the two parts of Algiers, the European and Arab quarters, strikes a balance between race conceived as no more than a physical marker of difference and race as a marker of character as well. But his extended portraits of Arabs, Jews, Blacks (“Nègre” or “Maure”), and Mzabites do not present these races as part of a titillating, exotic literary project or with the heavy encumbrances of the worst inherited prejudices. Fromentin’s interest traces the middle ground of ethnographic, racial art, the type that from early ethnographic representations in painting and writing noted for their “descriptive quality” and their “interest in types and customs” of foreign lands to more contemporary characterizations of ethnographic art, such as that which the critic Emile Galichon offered in 1868 for Jean-Léon Gérôme, whom he labeled a painter-ethnographer due to how his paintings were composed “d’une netteté et d’une exactitude qui excluent tout subterfuge et toute réticence.” In Une année dans le Sahel, Fromentin may have first renounced ethnographic, documentary art. But the force of this rejection is annulled when he admits at the end of his monologue to Vandell that “[i]l est possible aussi que, par une contradiction


60 Peltre, Orientalisme, 107, 108, 113.
trop commune à beaucoup d’esprits, je sois entraîné précisément vers les curiosités que je condamne.\textsuperscript{61}

One last thing must be said. The dual example of Fromentin and Cordier reconstructs a theoretical proposition and practical application of an ethnographic and documentary art that grew from their awareness of new peoples, their sincere interest in those peoples, and in popular and pseudo-scientific notions of race. Why this partnership was never realized in artistic collaboration or friendship during their lifetimes seems one implicit, lingering question. One reason for their distance may lie in the split that existed in the mid-nineteenth century over studies of non-European peoples: on the one hand, studies that were cultural in character, such as would birth in time French ethnology, and, on the other hand, false notions of racial hierarchy promulgated by Broca and practiced through anthropometry. Though race functions in Fromentin’s writing as part of the discourse of ethnographic description, nevertheless it doesn’t occupy a central position. Rather, descriptions of comportment, culture, and religion dominate. These descriptions follow in line with the first type of ethnographic inquiry, that focused on culture, that of ethnology.

Cordier’s statement that each race has its own beauty, though it might sound egalitarian today, nevertheless was based upon the time’s racist science. Lévi-Strauss reminds us that the original sin of anthropology was to confuse biological notions of race (if that term has any objective validity)\textsuperscript{62} with “les productions sociologiques et psychologiques des cultures humaines.”\textsuperscript{63} When Cordier presented his three busts to the Société d’anthropologie,

\textsuperscript{61} Fromentin, \textit{Une année dans le Sahel}, 191.

\textsuperscript{62} Contemporary physical anthropology proposes an alternative that dispenses entirely with the notion of race: clinal variation.

\textsuperscript{63} Lévi-Strauss, \textit{Race et histoire}, 8.
he made clear that race and character are linked. He states that his bust of the “black” type can be said to be beautiful not because it most resembles European beauty, and not because it presents a prototypical form of black beauty, but because it reunites “des formes, des traits et un physionomie où se reflètent, en un équilibre harmonique, les caractères essentiels, moraux et intellectuels de la race éthiopienne.”64 Cordier links race and character. Even if his aim is neither demeaning nor explicitly geared to fashion a racial hierarchy in line with what nationalist historians produced while aided and abetted by scientific racists, this statement speaks to assumptions held at the time and that continue to underwrite racism today. Fromentin’s ambivalence about the theoretical possibility of an ethnographic, documentary art is equaled, then, by the ambivalence that Cordier’s art ultimately presents. This pair furnishes a useful example of art and art theory that speaks against the empire of European aesthetics, but it remains true that they present a first expression of this possibility, limited by the times, and limited by the personalities of the two artists in particular and yet revealing ways.