

The Exploitation of Black Women's Bodies Throughout Art History

A look at the history of the exploitation of Black women's bodies through the life of Sara Baartman, Marie Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait of Madeleine*, Carrie Mae Weem's work, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried", which uses Louis Agassiz's daguerreotypes from Harvard's archives, and Tschabalala Self's "Love to Saartjie".

Sara Baartman

Baartman was married to a Khoikhoi man at a young age, whom she had a child with. Their child died soon after birth, and when she was sixteen her husband died too. Her husband's murder resulted in Baartman being sold into slavery to a trader named Pieter Willem Cezar. Cezar took Baartman to Cape Town, where she became a slave to his brother.²

1789

Sara Baartman was born in South Africa. She grew up on a colonial farm and belonged to the Gonaquasub group of the Khoikhoi. Both of her parents died when she was young.

1805

It was at this time that Sara Baartman was given the nickname "Saartjie", which means Sara in Dutch



George Cuvier & Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire
Femme de race Bochimann, 1824

This marked the beginning of the exploitation of Baartman's body for entertainment purposes. She was told she would receive a portion of her earnings and return home after 5 years, however this was not the case.

1810

On October 29, 1810, despite not being able to read, Baartman signed a contract with William Dunlop who was also a friend of Cezar and his brother Hendrik. Under the terms of this contract, Baartman was forced to travel to England and Ireland to work as a servant.

On November 24, 1810, Sara was put on display in London in the Egyptian Hall at Piccadilly Circus. Both men and women paid to see Baartman's half naked body displayed in a cage. They began profiting off of the fetishization, exploitation and objectification of Baartman's body.

British abolitionists became aware of Baartman's public treatment and put Dunlop and the Cezar's on trial. The court ruled against Baartman, and she remained enslaved. Her contract however, was amended.



William Heath
A Pair of Broad Bottoms, 1810

Following the ruling of the court trial, Baartman's popularity only increased. She was taken on tour throughout England and Ireland as she became more and more of an attraction.¹

1812

Under the ownership of Reaux, Baartman was placed in a cage alongside animals. She was given a trainer who treated her as if she was an animal in the circus.² She was given the nickname "Hottentot Venus", which basically symbolizes the exploitation of black women.

1814

After spending 4 years in London, Baartman was sold to a French animal exhibiter by the name of S. Reaux who put her on display in Paris. He also allowed her to be sexually abused for his selfish personal financial gain.¹



George Loftus
La Venus Hottentote, 1814

1815

A naturalist by the name of George Cuvier became aware of Baartman's attraction and received approval from Reaux to study her. She was used as a science experiment for zoologists, physiologists, and anatomists. These studies concluded that she was somewhere between animal and human which furthered the harmful stereotypes that Black people are animals, fueling the dehumanization of them.



Christopher Crupper Rumford
Love and Beauty - Sartjee the Hotentot Venus, 1810

Sara Baartman died in Paris on December 29, 1815 when she was only 26. Her cause of death is unknown. Cuvier obtained Baartman's body and made a plaster cast of her. He also placed her brain and genitalia into jars which were put on display at the Musée de l'Homme until 1974. Even after death Sara Baartman did not have ownership of her own body.¹

Sara Baartman continues to inspire artists to create pieces that speak out against the historic fetishization and exploitation of Black women's bodies. Baartman was trafficked, enslaved, put on display, and treated as a circus animal. Her story must be heard.

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1800

Marie-Guillemine Benoist was a French neoclassical painter who belonged to a circle of professional women painters. Although most of her work depicts white people, she painted the "Portrait de Madeleine" (shown right), which portrays a black woman as the subject. Art historians speculate the motivation and intention of the portrait, but regardless, it was an early representation of a Black womanhood. Madeleine sits with her hand resting upon her chest, looking powerful and noble. ³



Marie Guillemine Benoist
Portrait de Madeleine, 1800

This portrait followed the first abolition of slavery post French Revolution, and became very controversial. The Black woman, now known to be Madeleine, is partially nude, which alludes to the exploitation of the Black women's body. ⁴

1807-1846

Louis Agassiz was born in 1807 in Switzerland. He received doctorates in natural philosophy and medicine from the University of Munich. He soon moved to Paris, where he met George Cuvier, the scientist who "studied" Baartman, and Alexander von Humboldt, both whom he looked up to. In 1846, Agassiz moved to the U.S. and became a professor at Harvard University's new Lawrence Scientific School. ⁶



"Delia"
Commissioned by Louis Agassiz, 1850

1850's

Among all the outrageous, racist claims made by Louis Agassiz, possibly the worst was when he stated, "the brain of the Negro is that of the imperfect brain of a seven month's infant in the womb of a White." ⁶

Agassiz constantly shared his fascination with "mysterious creatures", which is where his obsession with race began. He stated that he had never seen a Black person prior to living in the U.S., and began fixating on his racist belief that Black people and White people were entirely two different species. He became known as a scientific racist. ⁵

During his time at Harvard, Agassiz commissioned photographers to take daguerreotypes of pre-Civil War African American slaves who he had seen during his visit to a plantation. He wanted to use these photos to support his polygenism theories. Agassiz explained, "What struck me at first view, in seeing Indians and Negroes together, was the marked difference in the relative proportions of the different parts of the body." ⁶

The Lasting Impact of Sara Baartman on Art History: as shown through recent artists

1995

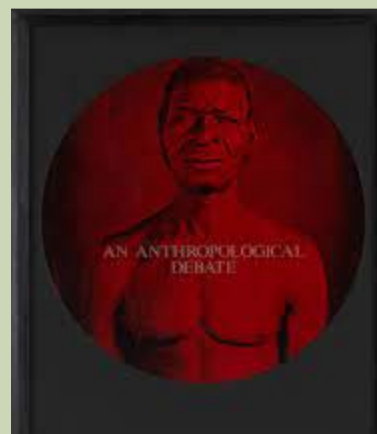
In 1995, an African American artist by the name of Carrie Mae Weems released her installation titled, "From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried". This installation consists of photographs Weems located in museums and university archives. She chose daguerreotypes commissioned in 1850 by Louis Agassiz. ⁸

Weems wanted to portray the historical ways in which photography has perpetuated racism, the exploitation of black people, stereotypes, and injustice.

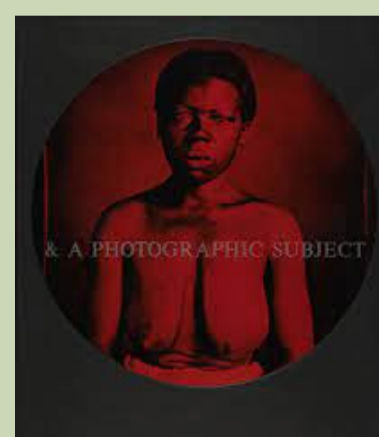


Carrie Mae Weems
From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995

"I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice."
Carrie Mae Weems



Top left: "YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE"
Top Right: "A NEGROID TYPE"
Bottom left: "AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE"
Bottom right: "& A PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECT"



Weems rephotographed, framed, and filtered the original daguerreotypes, then added text over the images. She wanted to give "the subject another level of humanity and another level of dignity that was originally missing in the photograph."

2019

Tschabalala Self, a young artist born in Harlem, New York, debuted her first solo museum exhibition in 2019. Self's work focuses heavily on the depiction of the black women's body. In her 2019 exhibit, she featured a work titled, "Love to Saartjie", as a tribute to the life of Sara Baartman.

Tschabalala Self
Love to Saartjie, 2015
(photo by Jueqian Fang)

Self's use of fabric scraps, acrylic paint, dyes, and oil pastels makes for a very unique, contemporary, textile portrayal of Sara Baartman.



Tschabalala Self
Out of Body, 2020



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