

ART @ BAINBRIDGE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Elizabeth Colomba: Repainting the Story

March 12 – May 8, 2022



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A strong commitment to the figurative tradition defines the provocative narratives of Elizabeth Colomba, a French citizen of Martinican descent. After graduating from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Colomba lived in Los Angeles before moving to New York City in 2011. Drawing on her classical training, Colomba creates meticulous, multilayered paintings that place Black individuals—primarily women—in spaces from which they have been erased or in which they have often been assigned subservient roles. In addition to lavish costumes and opulent settings, Colomba employs motifs from classical mythology, cultural history, and religious narratives to empower her protagonists, thereby reclaiming for them, in her words, “an egalitarian existence in a story from which the Black body is almost always absent.” Colomba’s radical correctives of established themes in Western art and culture present her historical and fictional heroines as central and universal figures, for which the colonial-era interiors of Bainbridge House provide an eloquent foil.

Laura M. Giles

Heather and Paul G. Haaga Jr., Class of 1970, Curator of Prints and Drawings

Gallery 1

Laure (Portrait of a Negress) represents the Black model who posed as the maid in Édouard Manet's celebrated *Olympia* (1863; Musée d'Orsay, Paris). That work caused a scandal at the 1865 Paris Salon for its raw and unidealized representation of a nude prostitute lying on a bed. Colomba's painting removes *Laure* from the confines of the artist's studio and foregrounds her as an independent woman on a rainy Parisian street. The work is emblematic of the artist's mission to transform the role of Black women in historical paintings from secondary and subservient participant to lead protagonist.



Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 130.5 × 191 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The model, of whom no photographs are known, is referred to in one of Manet's notebooks as, "Laure . . . très belle négresse" [Laure . . . very beautiful negress], which is jotted next to her address "11, Rue de Vintimille"—only a short walk from the artist's studio in northern Paris. This area was home to a growing Black community after France's final abolition of territorial and domestic slavery in 1848. Colomba amplifies the suggested narrative—*Laure* on her way to Manet's studio—by planting topographical and historical markers: the gates to the Parc Monceau

near Manet's studio and, on the right, a glimpse of Cora Pearl, a famous British courtesan based in Paris who would dye her pug's fur the color of her outfit. The artist refers to *Olympia* with the bouquet held by the gentleman in the carriage, and the painting's composition recalls another celebrated scene of modern life in Paris: Gustave Caillebotte's panoramic *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877; Art Institute of Chicago).



Laure (Portrait of a Negress), 2018
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Gallery 2

Many of the paintings in this gallery depict or allude to women in the Bible. Two of the women portrayed, Eve and Delilah, are traditionally represented by white models in Western art and are often shown as predators and temptresses in the company of their victims, Adam and Samson. In Colomba's interpretation, Eve is shown half-nude in an austere bedroom, surrounded by references to the story of the Temptation in the Garden of Eden—a painted fruit still life, a half-eaten apple, and a slithering snake. By contrast, Delilah is voluptuous and reposes in an elaborate interior.

The most complex of what the artist has termed her "Feminine Sacred" paintings is *The Denial of Saint Peter*, which refers to a nocturnal episode from the Passion of Christ when the Apostle Peter denies his knowledge of Christ three times before a rooster crows, as Christ had predicted would happen. This scene and

that of Peter's subsequent remorse are shown in the two seventeenth-century candlelit scenes by Rembrandt and Georges de La Tour that Colomba paints against the spotlighted gold-leaf wall. The servant from the biblical story, usually shown confronting Peter, has been displaced by a regal Black woman clutching a dead rooster. In the artist's restaging, the servant has become the Virgin Mary, signified by the sumptuous red and blue gown often worn by the Virgin in Italian Renaissance paintings. She has killed the rooster before it could crow, thereby interceding in her son's fate and preventing his arrest and crucifixion. She walks toward the empty frame on the wall, going back in time to reclaim her power and rewrite the story.

Elizabeth Colomba on *Phillis*:

Phillis is an allegorical portrayal of Phillis Wheatley Peters, the first published African American female poet. Although she was an enslaved person, Wheatley was one of the best-known poets in eighteenth-century America. Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), her first volume of poetry, was initially published in London; the first American edition was published in 1886, two years after Wheatley's death. In 1778, Wheatley married John Peters and took his name. John was improvident and imprisoned for debt in 1784, the year Phillis Wheatley died, uncared for and alone. Her last surviving child died soon after and was buried with his mother.

In the painting, Phillis's dark, spare quarters indicate her hardship. The cats are embodiments of Wheatley's two children. The ink, books, and leaflets reveal that Wheatley continued to write and publish her poems throughout her lean financial years. The vibrant red dress she wears is a symbol of Phillis's achievements, her international fame, and the powerful legacy that shines through despite the suffering and adversity she faced.



Phillis, 2010
Oil on canvas
Collection of the artist



The Denial of Saint Peter, 2017
Oil and gold leaf on canvas
Collection of the Nwabuzor Family



Eve, 2007
Oil on canvas
Collection of Fredrick C. Harris



Delilah, 2008
Oil on canvas
Collection of Marsha E. Simms



The Candle, 2004
Oil on canvas
Collection of the Nwabuzor Family

Gallery 3

Colomba addresses issues of race and gender in her reinterpretations of allegorical symbolism and classical mythology. In *Four Elements, Five Senses*, she surrounds her regal protagonist with an array of nine allegorical concepts, ranging from the bowl of fruits signifying Earth to the bird nestled in the woman's hand, which symbolizes both the element Air and the sense of Touch. Colomba also seeks to show the woman in a moment of leisure, or what she calls "timeless lightness," which renders her attuned to her senses and absorbed in her surroundings.

Colomba's elaborate settings are also emotionally charged for the Black female characters who are her subjects. In *Clytie*, the mythological nymph's cowering stance denotes trauma after Helios, god of the sun, betrayed and abandoned her. Subsequently, she wasted away while gazing at his chariot as it traversed the sky; Helios (often interchanged with Apollo) then transformed her into a flower that always turns toward the sun. In Colomba's interpretation, Clytie turns away from both the god himself—represented as Apollo in the painting above the mantel behind her—and a group of sunflowers arranged in the much-copied ancient Roman Portland Vase (1st century AD; British Museum, London), with its enigmatic vignettes of white figures on a black ground. Colomba's Clytie recoils from the rejection and exclusion imposed on her by entrenched Western story lines.

Monique Long on 1492:

Colomba has developed her own visual language by mixing classical painting with inherently Black signifiers, including references to her Caribbean heritage, and conventional art historical iconography. The painting 1492 is an allegory in which the artist depicts the effect that the European exploration of the "New World" had on the ecology of the West Indies and its Indigenous population. Colomba

created the painting for inclusion in an international biennial of contemporary art in her ancestral Martinique. As in most allegorical paintings, the elements are symbolic; here, they are meant to convey how European imperialism impacted the region. The flowers in the arrangement to the right of the woman are wilted and dying. The Dutch-made delftware bowl suspended in midair has a relationship to colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. The stain that Elizabeth paints on the dress from the explosion of flour is in the abstracted shape of Spain and Portugal. The theatrical appearance of the entire scene—how the curtains frame the subject and the wooden floor planks—heightens the drama of the impending calamity.



Four Elements, Five Senses, 2018
Oil and gold leaf on canvas
Collection of Jennifer Hardy



Clytie, 2008
Watercolor and gouache over graphite
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of the PECO Foundation (2017-1)



John Northwood
1836–1902; born Wordsley, Staffordshire, England
Manufactured by Josiah Wedgwood and Sons
established 1759, Staffordshire, England
Copy of the Portland Vase 1870–85
Black and white jasper ware
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of George Packer Berry, Class of 1921 (y1981-41)



Danae, 2020
Oil on canvas
Collection of Dawanna Williams



1492, 2013
Oil on canvas
Collection of Edward Gelmann, MD

Gallery 4

Colomba's short film *Cendrillon* follows the character Cinderella, played by model and actor Grace Bol, as she prepares for the royal ball. With the help of the fairy godmother, performed by Colomba herself, Bol wears an iridescent, plush gown designed by Lashun Costor. Colomba redefines what Cinderella should look like as Bol primps and poses against the backdrop of a lavishly ornamented building. The crenellated, castle-like Park Avenue Armory of New York, where Colomba shot the film, was dedicated in 1880 as the meeting house for the socially elite Seventh Regiment militia and is now a major center for art installations.

Cendrillon showcases the central themes of Colomba's work, foregrounding Black womanhood in fictional and historical narratives. Colomba's film was screened during the live transmission of the 2018 Metropolitan Opera production of the French composer Jules Massenet's opera *Cendrillon* (1899), based on the Cinderella fairy tale as adapted by the seventeenth-century French author Charles Perrault.



Cendrillon, 2018

Digital video

Courtesy of the artist and the Metropolitan Opera, New York

Cast

Grace Bol as Cendrillon

Elizabeth Colomba as Fairy Godmother

Director

Elizabeth Colomba

Producer

Dodie Kazanjian

Line producer

Monique Long

Costume designer

Lashun Costor

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Elizabeth Colomba (born 1976, Épinay-sur-Seine, France; active New York, NY) and are © Elizabeth Colomba / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Elizabeth Colomba: Repainting the Story is curated by Laura M. Giles, Heather and Paul G. Haaga Jr., Class of 1970, Curator of Prints and Drawings, with Monique Long, independent curator and writer.

Art@Bainbridge is made possible through the generous support of the Kathleen C. Sherrerd Program Fund for American Art; the Virginia and Bagley Wright, Class of 1946, Program Fund for Modern and Contemporary Art; Barbara and Gerald Essig; and Joshua R. Slocum, Class of 1998, and Sara Slocum. Additional support is provided by Stacey Roth Goergen, Class of 1990, and Robert B. Goergen.

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