

## Notes for the Kenshur Prize Colloquium

MEREDITH MARTIN AND GILLIAN WEISS

Gillian Weiss (GW): We want to start out by saying that we're both thrilled to be here and deeply honored to have been awarded this prize. For their efforts in organizing our visit today, we'd like to single out Barbara Truesdell and Jesse Molesworth. Since there are two of us, and we wrote *The Sun King at Sea* together, we're going to divide our presentation into two parts. We'll start by explaining first how we came to this topic and talk a bit about our process of collaboration. Then we'll follow your prompt and read a passage from Page 99 of our book and discuss how it relates to some of the larger points we make.

Meredith Martin (MM): About ten years ago, I was preparing an undergraduate art history lecture on Versailles, frantically searching Google at the last minute to find images of the Hall of Mirrors for my PowerPoint, when a painting I hadn't seen before (which became the image on our book cover) popped up on my screen (**fig. 1**).

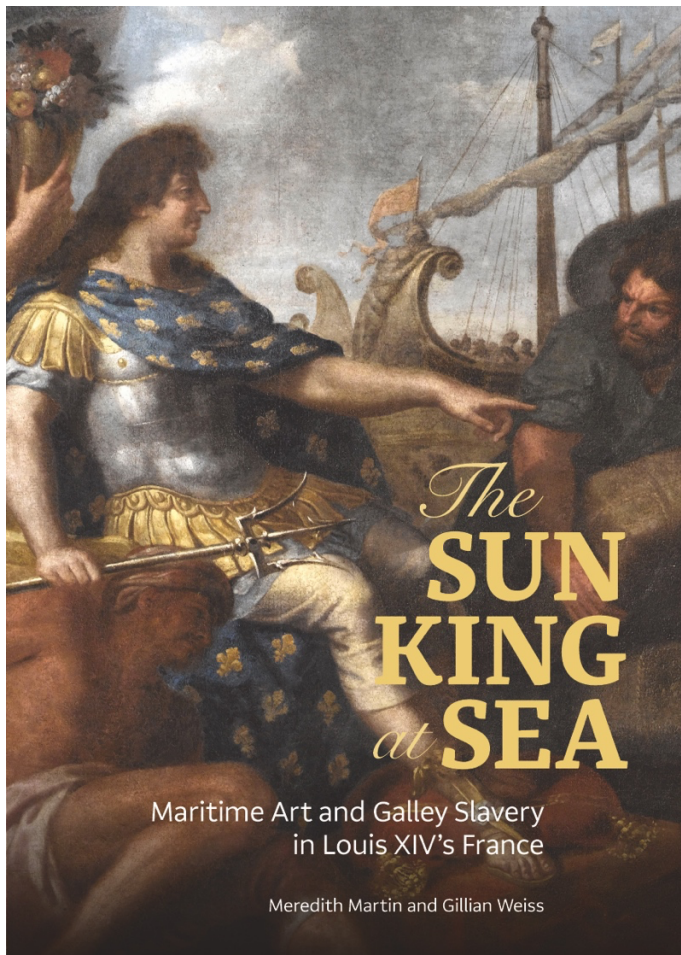


Fig. 1. *The Sun King at Sea* book cover with detail of Charles Le Brun (French, 1619–90), *The Reestablishment of Navigation, 1663, 1678–84*. Painted medallion for the Hall of Mirrors ceiling. Versailles, Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, inv2921.

I was familiar with the paintings that surrounded it on the room's ceiling, but not this particular image, and I could tell it was some kind of port scene – with ships in the background, cargo being unloaded, and France's King Louis XIV subjugating three chained, dark-skinned figures

wearing turbans. So, I decided to contact my friend Gillian, who had published a book about the enslavement of Frenchmen by so-called “Barbary” corsairs from North Africa. I sent her the picture by email, and asked what she thought it was. She hadn’t seen it before either, but immediately suggested that it depicted victims of the reverse phenomenon, that is, Muslim galley slaves in France who were known as “enslaved Turks” (*esclaves turcs*) or simply “Turks” (*Turcs*), even though most were not actually “Turkish” but hailed from Morocco as well as Ottoman-controlled territories in North Africa, Asia, and Europe.

During Louis XIV’s reign from 1660-1715, thousands of presumed Muslims “Turks” were captured and purchased for a new royal galley fleet that the Sun King had established in Marseille as a way of combating pirates and dominating trade in the Mediterranean – while also promoting himself as a global conqueror in the mold of Christian medieval crusaders and ancient rulers like Caesar. This medallion for the Hall of Mirrors ceiling, designed by the king’s chief painter Charles Le Brun, depicts the “reestablishment of navigation” in 1663 after the monarchy supposedly cleansed the Mediterranean Sea of infidel corsairs (**fig. 1**). Its prominent position, plus the fact that we could find virtually nothing written about it, made us want to explore how galley slavery and its representation served the Sun King’s agenda.

We realized, first off, that this sort of enslavement was represented and circulated in a wide range of media – including French royal medals and almanac prints, like this one celebrating the monarchy’s bombardment of Algiers that we will return to in a minute (**fig. 2**), as well as ship decoration.



Fig. 2. François-Gérard Jollain (French, 1641–1704). *Les corsaires de la mer Méditerranée reprimés par les armes victorieuses de sa majesté...*

(Mediterranean Corsairs Suppressed by the Victorious Arms of his Majesty...), 1683, etching and engraving. Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Institut, FOLAA66P-T1-page90. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

In a drawing for a royal warship illustrated in our book, Charles Le Brun again showed Louis XIV subjugating an enslaved Turk, recognizable by his topknot, on the prow. Turks additionally appeared on the knobs of French naval canons, and it's likely that a real-life galley slave posed for this portrayal (**fig. 3**), just as Le Brun likely used two live enslaved models named Candie and Mustapha for his ship design. Enslaved Turks were also forced to work in dockyard studios for artists like Pierre Puget, who was head of the sculpture workshop at the royal arsenal but who also fabricated marble sculptures intended for Versailles.



Fig. 3. Jean Baubé (French, ?–1681). Thirty-six-pound cannon decorated with the head of a Turk, 1680, bronze, length: 327 cm. Brest, Musée national de la Marine, 2012.105.1. Photo by authors.

Yet despite this wealth of material, it turned out that French enslavement of Ottoman and Moroccan subjects had been largely overlooked in both historical and art historical scholarship. For the most part, historians had assumed that the maxim “there are no slaves in France” (meaning that slavery could exist in the colonies, but not the metropole) was literally true, and hadn’t paid attention to documentary evidence of enslaved rowers during the reign of Louis XIV. Art historians, meanwhile, despite the field’s “global turn,” had continued to focus on Paris and Versailles, privileging the study of France’s center over its periphery; or, if drawn to the sea, they had studied the luxury goods carried by ships (porcelain, textiles, lacquer) and their global consumption more than the vessels themselves, their multiethnic personnel, and the labor and violence that made luxury consumption possible. Finally, there’s the issue that much maritime art is ephemeral, and doesn’t survive as a visual or material artifact to study. In any case, we got excited about the topic of enslaved Turks, ended up writing an article together, and then applied for an ACLS collaborative research fellowship (unfortunately no longer in existence), which made it possible for us to write *The Sun King at Sea*.

GW: Early on, one of our key insights was the fact that the phenomenon of French galley slavery had left uneven visual and textual traces – and that only by looking at them together could we decipher meaning and draw conclusions, which we wouldn’t have been able to do on our own. When we juxtaposed, for example, a c. 1682 naval register listing the names and details

of *esclaves turcs* with a c. 1680 maritime manual flaunting their subjugation (figs. 4 & 5), the effect was stomach-churning and eye-opening.

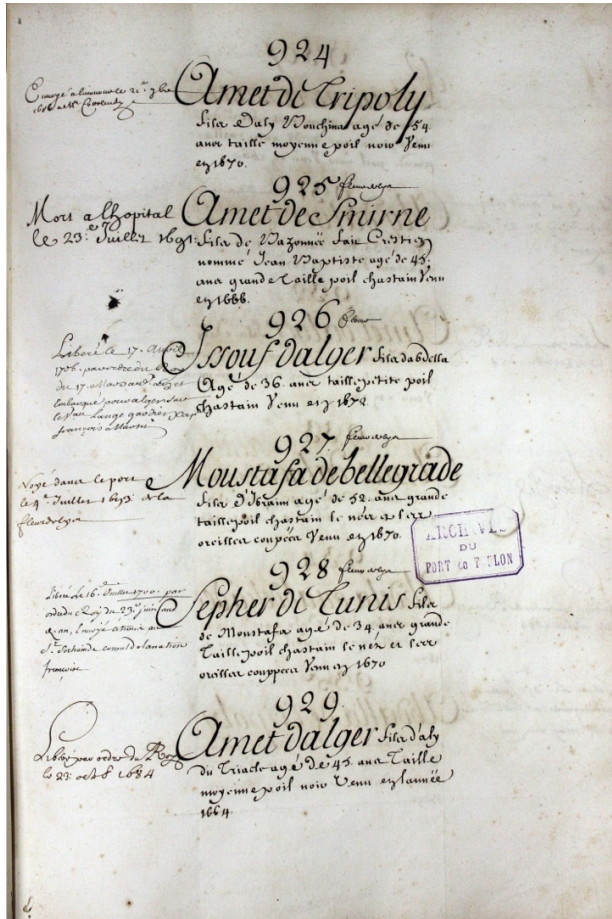


Fig. 4. Page from a naval register of enslaved rowers, ca. 1682. Toulon, Service historique de la Défense, Toulon 1 O 106 bis. © Service historique de la Défense.

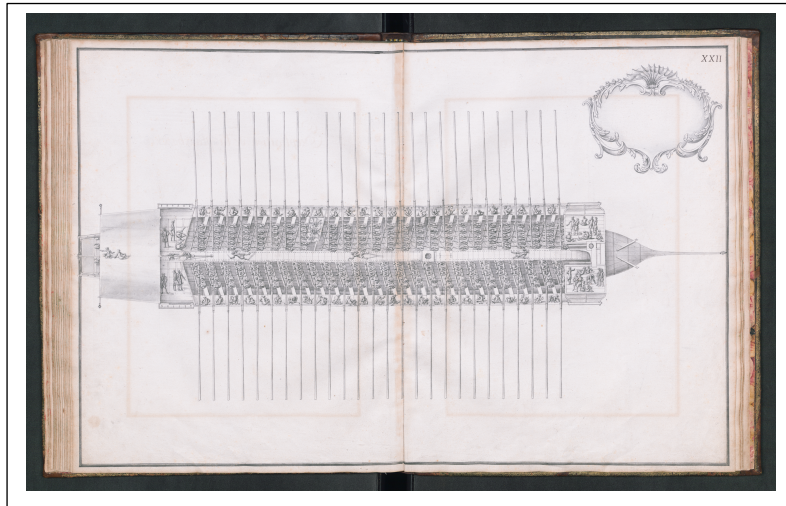


Fig. 5. Attributed to Jean-Antoine de Barras de la Penne (French, 1650–1730). Aerial view of a galley with enslaved rowers, pen, ink and wash, 59.5 x 45.5 cm. From *Album des galères*, ca. 1680, plate 19 (labeled “XXII”). Vincennes, Service historique de la Défense, SH 137. © Service historique de la Défense.

We realized that we were looking at two carefully crafted products of royal training and state bureaucracy that celebrated enslavement, belying the notion – furthered by Louis XIV’s own promoters – that the king always preferred to efface signs of labor, coerced or otherwise, from representations of his rule. It was only when we put the written ledger and the pictorial manual together and considered their conceptual and aesthetic similarities that we began to understand their full significance. It led us to realize that building up the royal galley fleet and procuring enslaved labor to operate it was not only a significant real-life (as opposed to allegorical) phenomenon, but that it was also a major aspect of royal image-making that enabled Louis XIV to tout his commitment to Catholicism and claim Mediterranean dominance. In both the register and the manual, you can see the names and bodies of actual enslaved Muslims who lived and died and who, in various ways, resisted being made pawns in a spectacle for the king of France.

In sum, deep archival research has informed our interpretation of visual material, and detailed analysis of maritime art has helped reconstruct a story about the French past. Interdisciplinary collaboration has yielded a book that neither an art historian nor a historian could have written alone, a book we feel is more than the sum of its parts.

Page 99 of *The Sun King at Sea* comprises a full page of text, which faces a full-page reproduction of this almanac print for the year 1683 (**fig. 2**). Almanac prints were waist-high broadsheets printed annually and circulated widely to proclaim the monarchy's exploits of the past year. This one celebrates the first of three bombardments campaigns that France carried out against Algiers during the 1680s and – in an early instance of “fake news” – exaggerates the number of Muslims who were captured or killed.

MM: The passage I'm going to read comes from our second chapter, entitled “Port to Palace,” which focuses on the ways enslaved Turks, both in representation and in real life, circulated from the Mediterranean coast to the French capital. Here, we're describing the arrival of an Algerian ambassador to Versailles, who had traveled there to pay homage to the Sun King, confirm the terms of a new peace treaty, and – supposedly – apologize on behalf of his compatriots for having murdered the French consul by stuffing his body into a canon and blowing it into the sea:

Louis XIV had his trusted Arabic interpreter escort the Algerian emissary, whose name was Hajj Ja'far Agha, and a dozen attendants to Paris. “There, they were received with traditional pomp, lodged at the rue de Tournon hotel for foreign ambassadors, and taken by carriage to Versailles. During his official audience on 4 July, according to one panegyric account, the Algerian ambassador again professed awe before the Sun King's sovereignty, while his son remarked on the incomparable beauty of the Hall of Mirrors. The envoys also toured the Ambassadors' Staircase, where [Charles] Le Brun showed up to greet them, and the *petit appartement* of the king, where they must have visited the brand-new *cabinet des médailles* (medal room) decorated by [Jean] Bérain. On the ceiling of the salon that served as the room's entrance, trompe l'oeil paintings of global exotica, continental allegories, and nautical references presaged the contents of the cases beyond. Among their wonders were freshly struck gold versions of the medals touting the attacks on Algiers, exhibited alongside ancient Roman coins that inserted Louis XIV into a historic lineage of imperial conquest. The collection had been partially assembled and cataloged by Jean Foy-Vaillant, a royal numismatist who a decade earlier had been captured at sea by future Algerian dey Mezzomorto during a scouting trip for the French king. Although Foy-Vaillant's detention in Algiers lasted only a few months, he achieved lasting renown for swallowing twenty gold medals in case of seizure on his return voyage, and then expelling them with a spinach laxative. If he, like Le Brun, was on hand to greet Mezzomorto's emissaries, he probably relished the opportunity to put the Algerians in their place.

We're happy to talk more during the Q&A, but for now there are three quick points we'd like to make. First, although most of our book makes a deliberate effort to focus not on Paris or Versailles but rather on the Mediterranean periphery, in this chapter we do show how coastal productions made their way to the capital and were prominently featured there in court decoration, propaganda, and performances. Actual enslaved rowers were present at the palace too. In 1680, for instance, the crown purchased forty-five men, most likely from West Africa, to

row a model galley, part of an entire miniature flotilla that Louis XIV had commissioned for the Grand Canal. These captives were also forced to perform in court balls and possibly to model for portraits where they were depicted as subservient attendants to royal women and men.

GW: Second, the experience of people like Vaillant captured by corsairs and carried off to North Africa has been extensively studied, but the enslavement of Muslims on French soil has long been overlooked by scholars and the public. Mediterranean slavery was a reciprocal phenomenon. Third, the passage highlights the centrality of medals as a mode of royal representation that imitated the ancient Romans and showed royal concern with preserving Louis XIV's image for posterity and projecting power for audiences at home and abroad.

Medals circulated easily in different materials and could be sold at different price points to reach different audiences. And they were also an easy medium to mock. A few pages later in the book, we explore how Protestant critics inverted this royal imagery to lampoon Louis XIV (figs. 6 & 7), in this case suggesting that rather than a fighter and dominator of infidels he was, in fact, cozying up with Muslims for his own political and economic gain. This satirical medal on the right shows a "suppliant" Sun King bowing down before the dey of Algiers. It's parody of an earlier official medal that portrayed an Algerian ambassador prostrate before Louis XIV. With these kinds of counter-representations, the French monarch's enemies sought to transform "The Most Christian King" into "The Most Christian Turk."



Fig. 6. Jean Mauger (French, 1648–1712). *Africa Supplex, Confecto Bello Piratico* (Africa is suppliant, since the pirate war has ended), 1684, silver, Diam.: 4 cm. London, British Museum, G3,FrM.608. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 7. *Gallia Supplex, Viro Immortali* (France is suppliant, To the immortal man). 1689, silver, Diam.: 47 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques. © Bibliothèque nationale de France.