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The Cultural Construction of Racial Identity in Saint-Domingue with Jordan Hallmark

Welcome to PDXPLORES a Portland state research podcast, featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Jordan Hallmark, and I am a recent graduate of the master's program in History at Portland State University.

In April 1792, Madam Desmaré, a white colonist from the French colony of Saint-Domingue, the Caribbean territory known today as Haiti, wrote a letter to the national convention in Paris, in which she accused freeman of color from her community of Jérémie, a town in the colony's southern province, of raping and murdering a pregnant white woman, extracting her unborn child and then using the fetus to club the poor woman's husband to death. While it is true that violent altercations between free whites and free people of color had occurred in this community, many of the letters gory details were later proven false.

Written a year into the Haitian revolution, as free people of color in her community were fighting for equal rights, the letter makes gruesome but effective case against racial equality by casting two of Jérémie's most prosperous free people of color, Jacque Lafond and Noel Azor, as innately barbarous monster's incapable of civilized coexistence with whites. While white colonists like Madam Desmaré cited racially determined cultural differences as justifications for white supremacy, my research shows how free people of color like Lafond and Azor contested the racial colonial hierarchy and asserted their positions among the colony socioeconomic elite through the display of furniture and other luxury objects.

Based on the analysis of inventories from Jérémie material record. My research shows that in spite of attempts by white colonists to maintain exclusive access to these visual markers of social cultural ascendancy, through the implementation of some laws targeting non-white consumers, the collecting practices of free people of color and white colonists alike were nearly identical in terms of the type and quantity of luxury objects they use to construct their cultural identities as members of French colonial society. And yet, if you were to visit every museum on earth, you might leave with the impression that no works of art were ever produced or collected in French colonial Saint-Domingue.

So where do these objects go? It has been claimed that the outbreak of the Haitian revolution in 1791 led to the destruction of any and all material traces of Haiti's French colonial past. Yet if one searches for examples of Saint-Domingue furniture outside the scholarly bubble of museums and the academy, surviving pieces can be found, if one is willing to explore the commercial world of antique dealers. A chilling prospect for serious scholars. That such objects, albeit rare are more likely to be found in your grandmother's latest issue of the magazine antiques than in the national museum of Haiti or in the Louvre speaks to the scholarly ambivalence surrounding the material culture of Saint-Domingue.

For while some scholars may see the study of furniture of Saint-Domingue as a frivolous pursuit, other scholars are reluctant to engage with this material. Not on account of its perceived frivolity, but rather due to the trauma that such objects may evoke as products of slavery, violence, and white supremacy.

But by erasing the decorative arts collected by Saint-Domingue free people of color from the art historical cannon we, like Madam Desmaré more than two centuries ago, deny people of color of the civic and cultural identity they so assiduously cultivated through the material fashioning of the spaces they once called home.