Excerpts from “The J’Ouvert Knight’s Guide to the Exhibition”

With texts by Isabella Kapur

Excerpted from the forthcoming Drawing Papers publication
Curtis Talwst Santiago: Can’t I Alter (March 2020)

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IN THIS DRAWING FROM 1237, the suggestion of a robed figure can be seen emerging from under an archway. The figure's long tunic with a head covering is typical of women's dress in thirteenth-century Europe. Similar garments can be observed on figures in Alphonso X's *Libro de los juegos* (Book of games), completed in 1283 and considered one of the most complete records of thirteenth-century Iberian society. The loops around the figure's neck have proven more difficult for researchers to identify; they may reference Zulu beaded necklaces. This work was likely a preparatory drawing for a mural that was intended for a church alcove. The arched shape of said alcove frames the central composition.

THE TWO TOWERING FIGURES THAT FRAME THE ENTRANCE to the gallery are known to art historians as *He Knight* and *She Knight*. Remarkably preserved for their age, these two polychromy plaques in copper alloy were initially attached to wooden containers found in the Tomb o’ the Brick Arches at the Aksumite site of Maj Hejja in northern Ethiopia. The largest of the various metal plaques discovered at the site, these works are also notable for the way in which the artist superimposed pigment on top of abstracted pattern to create the likenesses. Disruption of the third-to-fourth-century CE site by ancient grave robbers makes identifying the original context of these plaques difficult, though archaeologists posit that they represent figures buried in the tomb. The glowing red faces and geometric stylization of the bodies are elements that continued in fifteenth-century Ethiopian frescos, and also suggest a link to pictorial strategies adopted around the same time in the *Jomert* Knight tradition.
PART OF AN ESTABLISHED MEDIEVAL TRADITION, reliquaries like this example were created to hold objects physically associated with divine figures, including saints and apostles. Thus exalted and protected, the relics created a spiritual link to these figures, their precious nature reinforced by the fine materials used to house them, like the silver seen here. Though not part of the Christian tradition of saints and apostles, this object is from the same period and borrows the reliquary form to house historical remains. Depicting the J’Ouvert Knight in his multicolored armor, this reliquary contains within it a single finger bone thought to belong to the above-named figure. As with many such objects, this container was likely commissioned as a personal devotional object for a wealthy patron.

ONE OF MANY TWELFTH-CENTURY MURAL STUDIES discovered in Lisbon, Portugal, this composition is part of a larger program. Some historians have argued that this study depicts the first scene in the popular legend of Sir Morien. In this interpretation, Morien, back turned to his mother and wearing red in reference to his uncle (or sometimes father) Sir Percival, exits his home in search of his father. The water at his feet, and the accompanying boat, are often referenced as evidence that this figure is indeed Morien setting sail across the Strait of Gibraltar towards Europe, or across the English Channel towards King Arthur’s Britain. Detractors argue that the knight cannot be Morien, as, in the thirteenth-century Dutch addition to the Lancelot that introduces him to the Arthurian canon, he is described as wearing entirely black Moorish-style armor. Other theorists posit that this is in fact the J’Ouvert Knight, a figure who appears in literature beginning in the sixteenth century, and is generally depicted with a bright red, glowing face and red or multicolored armor. If so, this fragment represents one of the earliest extant images of this figure. Shown in replica here, the original work was stolen following the 5 October 1910 Revolution in Portugal, during which its former home, the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon, was undergoing structural changes.
IN LIEU OF THE BUST TO WHICH THIS NOSE BELONGS, the curators have chosen to display only the nose—the other side of the history so often seen in museums. A popular subject among history enthusiasts and scholars alike, particularly in relation to Kemet or Ancient Egypt, the removal of noses from statues has been attributed to a number of causes, the primary one being iconoclasm. In the ancient world, noses were removed from statues of deceased individuals by grave robbers and living enemies of the deceased, who hoped to hurt the individual in the afterlife and to prevent the soul from inhabiting the carved vessel. In more recent times, some have speculated that early archaeologists—intent on obscuring the African features of ancient Egyptian representations—defaced the noseless busts. Whatever the cause, Western museums have often reconstructed distinctly Caucasian features during conservation. Only in the past few decades have institutions begun to remove these inaccurate reconstructions in favor of displaying the noseless statues. The nose on view here was discovered at a site associated with the J'Ouvert Knight, and very likely belongs to a statue of a character from the J'Ouvert canon.
IN THIS COMPOSITION, THREE FIGURES EMERGE from darkness: two delineated only by their luminescent faces and faint black outlines and the other wearing the multicolored armor of the J’Ouvert Knight. The solid blocks of color and direct, communicative linework are hallmarks of medieval mural art from fifteenth-century Iberia. Reminiscent of red halos, the heads of the figures identify them as ethereal beings. The uppermost head, blurred so that shafts of light extend from the top right-hand corner, enhances this impression of divinity. In the foreground of the image, a blue devil figure reclines, light being pulled from his torso by the armored individual. This blue devil, variously identified as the Orisha Eshu and as a Jab Jab, recurs in stories of the J’Ouvert Knight as both trickster and life-giver, existing outside of linear time.

ORIGINALY THOUGHT TO HAVE BEEN QUARRIED FROM ONE OF THE MESOLITHIC SITES in the Iberian Mediterranean Basin, the stone on view here was recovered from the foundation of a church in eastern Andalucía in 1983. Anomalous for its depiction of the human face, rather than local fauna or a stylized full-body figure, this object has since been the subject of much debate among scholars. The remarkable preservation of the red and white pigment, the presence of pigment on the reverse side of the stone, and the unusual subject matter, suggest that this object was in fact created much later, perhaps during or shortly prior to the construction of the church in 1261. The similarity of this hazy red face to twelfth-through-fifteenth-century murals of the J’Ouvert Knight in Lisbon (as in the reproduction on view nearby), lend credence to this theory. Meanwhile, chemical analysis has revealed that the bright red pigment originated in Trinidad, further complicating efforts to identify the stone. Analysis of pollen traces found in the white paint likewise suggests that the work is of Caribbean origin.

A morte do cavaleiro protável, or The Death of the Silver Knight (1692), by Velázquez, popularized the use of the silver knight as a thematic protagonist. In this work, he was depicted as a Christ-like figure with his characteristically vibrant silver armor, his characteristic violets and full-length cloak. The silver knight, however, is less an allegory of redemption than a timeless symbol of eternity. As such, he stands as a timeless reminder of the temporal nature of life on earth.
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ONE OF MANY TWELFTH-MURAL STUDIES discovered in Lisbon, Portugal, this composition is part of a larger program. Some have argued that this study depicts the first popular legend of Sir Morien. In this interpretation, Morien, back turned to his mother and weeping, reference to his uncle (or sometimes father) exits his home in search of his father. The waving feet, and the accompanying boat, are often read as evidence that this figure is indeed Morien across the Strait of Gibraltar towards Europe. The English Channel towards King Arthur’s. Detractors argue that the knight cannot be in the thirteenth-century Dutch addition to that introduces him to the Arthurian canon as wearing entirely black Moorish. Other theorists posit that this is in fact the J’Ouvert Knight, a figure who appears in literature before the sixteenth century, and is generally depicted as bright red, glowing face and red or multicolor. If so, this fragment represents one of the emblems of this figure. Shown in replica here, this work was stolen following The 5 October 1974 in Portugal, during which its former home, the Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon, was under structural changes.

**A morte do cavaleiro prateado, or “The Death of the Silver Knight.”** depicts a key moment in C.T. Santiago’s seventeenth-century play The J’Ouvert Knight. An adaptation of the novel La vida del caballero de la alba (The Life of the Knight of the Dawn), the play popularized the use of the name “J’Ouvert Knight” for the red-armored protagonist. In this work, he can be seen in the center of the composition, his characteristically vibrant face turned towards the collapsing figure of his longtime rival and occasional ally, the Silver Knight. Much as these figures’ poses mirror one another, so too do their stories. In this scene, the J’Ouvert Knight, manifesting as a glowing red specter, appears before a Silver Knight on the brink of unconsciousness. It is impossible to deny the similarity between this scene and the famous Woman in Red episode in the original novel, where the J’Ouvert Knight is the one in peril. In fact, in this drawing, the J’Ouvert Knight can be seen as assuming the role of the Woman in Red, a clever reference both to the many identities she has been given by readers and historians, and to the grander tradition of masquerade in J’Ouvert. A depiction of the Woman in Red episode, Saint Monix Mumala to the Lost and In Need, is on view nearby.