

BOOKS

Reviews

Below left: Pierre Puget, *A Royal French Galley Seen from the Stern* (1668-69), a pen and brush and black ink wash drawing on vellum. Below right: A 36-pound bronze cannon decorated with the head of a Turk by Jean Baubé (1680), which now sits outside the Musée National de la Marine, Brest

Revealing the dark side of the Sun King

A new book shows how Louis XIV, known for his long reign, and cultural and political power, was also a cruel slave-keeper, using enslaved men from the Mediterranean and Africa to row his fleet of galleys By **Philip Mansel**

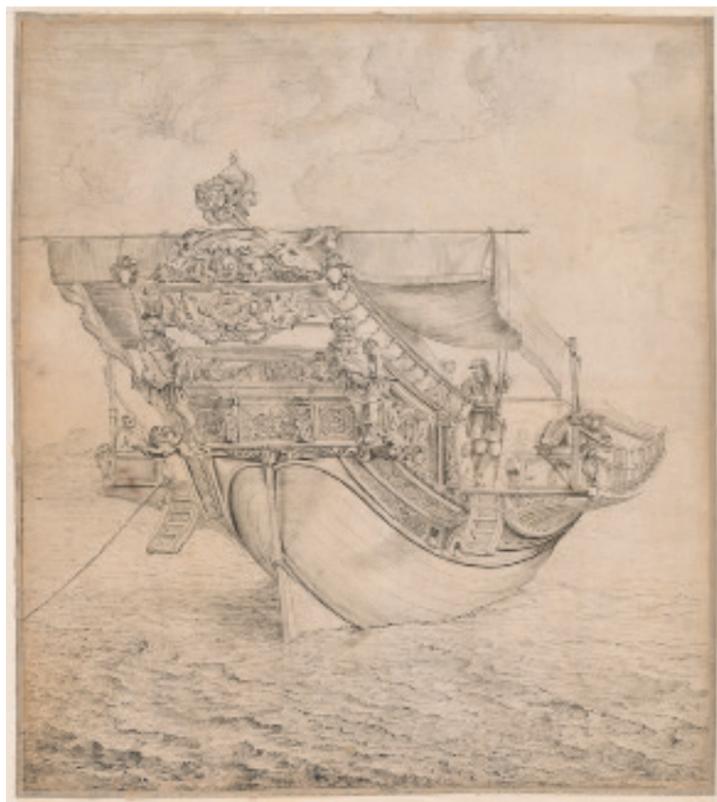
Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss
The Sun King at Sea: Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV's France

Getty Publications, 256pp, 80 colour + 34 black-and-white illustrations, £45/\$60 (hb), published 4 January

The “Sun King” Louis XIV (reigned 1643-1715) was not only one of the most cultured kings of France, but one of the cruelest. He started wars, bombarded cities, and persecuted French protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. In addition, as Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss show in this remarkable publication, he used enslaved people to row his galleys.

In theory there were no slaves in France: French soil made people free. Yet slaves – either bought in the Ottoman and Moroccan markets around the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean, recruited from criminals or, after 1685, protestants – were employed on the king’s galleys. Their numbers rose from around 300 in 1664 to 2,000 in 1670. After 1700 they declined, until the galley corps – considered unsuitable for modern naval warfare – was abolished in 1748.

Slaves also became an integral part of the local economy of Marseilles, the French navy’s base for the Levant Fleet galleys. When the ships were not at sea, enslaved men, still in chains, worked for Marseilles merchants or ran shops on the quays. Others were personal servants or artists’ models. Louis’s great minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert had a Turkish servant called Mustapha, who later had the rare privilege of returning to his homeland. Indeed, so many of the galley slaves were Muslims that in 1723



fighters broke out in Marseilles between the Sunni and Shia among them.

Crucially, Louis was a commercial and strategic ally of the Ottomans and, at times, France relied on grain from the Ottoman Empire to save it from starvation. Yet one duty of the king’s consuls in that Empire was to supply his navy with slaves, both Christian and Muslim. Despite pleas from the Moroccan ambassador, healthy Muslim slaves were considered too valuable to the French navy

to be freed or exchanged for Christian slaves in Muslim countries. (In total only 4.5% of Muslim slaves converted to Christianity, despite the prospect of liberation from the galleys.)

Some of the galley slaves were Africans. At Versailles in the summer of 1680, in an episode uncovered by Martin and Weiss, dressed only in yellow shorts and showing skin, as a witness described, “of a black so gleaming that it seemed like varnish”, 54 recently purchased slaves



were inspected by the king himself prior to rowing a model galley on the grand canal in the palace’s grounds.

This book is well produced and researched, with many previously unpublished illustrations including a list of galley slaves (Ahmet de Smyrne, Moustapha de Bellegrade and others); contemporary prints and drawings of galleys and their sculpted decoration; and views of Marseilles. As symbols of sovereignty, as well as a Catholic “crusading” zeal which in reality Louis XIV did not possess – he encouraged Ottoman attacks on the Habsburg monarchy – Muslim slaves were also shown, chained and turbaned, in a fresco on the ceiling of Versailles’s Hall of Mirrors and in sculptural form at the king’s feet on the sterns of his ships.

Martin and Weiss do not set out Louis’s use of galley slaves in relation

to other European monarchs, nor in the context of what Ottomans or Moroccans were doing.

And there is some moralising language: Madame Palatine, the king’s sister-in-law, was not a “war prize” as stated, but a valued royal bride with a household almost as large as the queen’s. Nevertheless, this is a valuable corrective to the adulation still found in many books on Louis XIV. Cruelty and exploitation – also evident in the appalling death rate among the workers and soldiers who built Versailles and dug the park – were among the foundations of the Sun King’s power.

• **Philip Mansel’s** latest book is *King of the World: the Life of Louis XIV* (Penguin 2019). He is a co-founder of the *Society for Court Studies*

An arresting story of art crime

Renowned investigative reporters’ overview of the types of art crime includes serious analysis – and some entertaining tales. By **Ben Lewis**

Stefan Koldehoff and Tobias Timm, translated by Paul David Young (First German edition Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Cologne 2020)

Art & Crime: the Fight Against Looters, Forgers and Fraudsters in the High-Stakes Art World

Seven Stories Press, 416pp, 8 pages of colour illustrations, \$35/£26 (hb), published US 11 January/UK/27 January

Art & Crime, the new book from Germany’s leading art world investigative reporters, is a clearly organised, sharply written and engaging addition to the genre of art-market crime compendiums. The litany of crimes dealt with chapter by chapter – looted antiquities, Jewish restitution, art washing, fraud, museum thefts, money laundering – will be familiar, but the book had a particular fascination for this reviewer

on account of its slant towards German market stories, less well-covered in the US and UK press.

There is an enthrallingly detailed account of the misdemeanours of Germany’s pre-eminent art adviser, Helge Achenbach, who drove Joseph Beuys’s Bentley and dealt in Richter, Picasso, Immendorf and Gursky. Comparable to the “freeport king” Yves Bouvier, Achenbach sold works with massive mark-ups by misleading the collectors about the price he had himself paid. In 2014 he was convicted of swindling the billionaire Aldi supermarket heirs, sentenced to six years in prison and ordered to pay them \$21.9m in damages.

Art & Crime is not all German material. A marvellous section on the Modigliani market tracks the creation of forgeries, and the spats over catalogues raisonné created since the artist’s death, drawing attention to the absurd situation where



Wrong footed: Imelda Marcos, the former First Lady of the Philippines, was duped into buying dozens of misattributed and copied works by the art dealer Adriana Bellini

the catalogue authors have a financial interest in the market for their subject. The topic begs for a book in its own right and is emblematic of the conflicts of interest and lack of independent scrutiny that plague the art market.

Koldehoff and Timm are arguably a little too cautious about naming and shaming, using only the first initial of those accused or convicted of art crimes, but they do not pull their punches when they lambast the art market for its opacity, deceptive commercial conventions and resistance to regulation,

all backed up by art world “Omerta”, in their words “this weird collective spirit in the art world.” Nor are they shy to point out the responsibility of public institutions as well as criminals for art crime. Thefts from museums are all too easy with feeble security and, on occasion, institutions have even turned a profit on stolen artworks, cashing-in the large insurance premium for the missing work only to get it back with a considerably smaller ransom payment.

There is a highly entertaining chapter on former First Lady of the

Philippines, Imelda Marcos, whom, I had almost forgotten, deployed the classic art-washing playbook of the oligarch/kleptocrat and was conned into buying 60 misattributed, later copies and “school of” pictures by the Italian art dealer Adriana Bellini. One hundred works she collected are still missing. The chapter on Donald Trump is even better, notably his well-worn collector sleights-of-hand, performed with even less taste and grace than usual: buying art through his charitable foundation, bidding up works of art he has a stake in – portraits of himself, rather than artists he collects – and acquiring large numbers of fakes. Fake news, fake art! In the early 1980s Andy Warhol painted some pictures of Trump Tower, but the mogul turned them down. Warhol wrote in his diary: “I just hate the Trumps because they never bought my Trump Tower portraits.”

In their conclusion, Koldehoff and Timm gamely suggest the ten questions art-market participants should ask themselves if they want to help clean up the art world – verifiable provenance, below-market price, identity of seller etc – but all this can be boiled down to one simple global regulatory reform: just treat art like any other financial asset or instrument.

• **Ben Lewis** is a cultural critic, historian and the author of *The Last Leonardo: the Secret Lives of the World’s Most Expensive Painting* (Harper Collins 2019)