# INTERLOCUTORS

## THE COUNTENANCE AND SHAPE OF FREEDOM

Washington Irving's mocking account of the terpsichorean exploits of assorted personalities in Haiti originally appeared in 1807, three years after that country's black and mulatto majority had declared itself independent from France and just one year after Haiti's recently installed emperor, the cruel and much-maligned Jean-Jacques Dessalines, had been assassinated. With revolution and minstrelsy as his implicit subtext, Irving parodied the first black independent nation, transforming it into an overwrought ballroom spectacle, complete with madras-wearing damsels, a larger-than-life dandy at the center of everything, and too much pomp and pageantry.[1] Although Irving was an equal opportunity satirist who could hardly be accused of directing his literary gibes at any one ethnic group or social circumstance, the phenomenon of black freedom—whether the result of emancipation from slavery, unrestricted physical mobility, or simply the right to gather in groups—was immediately set upon and denounced by a fairly heterogeneous cross section of Americans during the federalist period and thereafter, providing much critical fodder and contradiction for freedom- and democracy-loving white Americans.

In his *Annals of Philadelphia* (1830), chronicler John F. Watson avoided Irving's satirical tone and, instead, directly addressed the alleged flamboyance and license of free blacks:

> In the olden time dressy blacks and dandy *colour'd* beaux and belles . . . were quite unknown. Their aspirings and little vanities have been rapidly growing since they got their separate churches, and have received their exemption from slavery. Once they submitted to the appellation of servants, blacks, or negroes, but now they require to be called

coloured people, and among themselves, their common call of salutation is—gentlemen and ladies. Twenty to thirty years ago, they were much humbler, more esteemed in their place, and more useful to themselves and others. As a whole they show an overwhelming fondness for display and vainglory—fondly imitating the whites in processions and banners, and in the pomp and pageantry of Masonic and Washington Societies, &c. With the kindest feelings for their race, judicious men wish them wiser conduct, and a better use of the benevolent feelings which induced their emancipation among us.[2]

Attributing this black arrogance to bodily and spiritual emancipation, Watson nostalgically looked back to a time decades earlier when more blacks were enslaved and, in his recollection, were appreciated for their humility. Affronted by the sight of assertive, elegantly dressed blacks (although African Americans then comprised a relatively small percentage of the population of northeastern U.S. cities, according to historians Shane White and Graham White), Watson was in political accord with caricaturist Edward W. Clay, whose lithograph *Back to Back* (fig. 4) raised similar concerns about a new, radically different African American.[3] These newly emancipated "coloured people," as it turned out, had already come into existence by way of a political revolution—Haiti's resounding, contagious cry for independence, embodied by Irving in the person of Tucky Squash—and through the artistic assault of popular black music and dance.

As several revisionist surveys of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art have demonstrated, artistic representations of the enslaved and newly emancipated were an important subgenre of early modern art. However, few studies have conceived of this art beyond the descriptive categories of portraiture and genre painting.[4] I argue that the other thematic current that flows throughout these works, intentional and subconscious, is freedom: both personal, bodily emancipation and sovereignty in a more abstract, metaphysical sense.

How did the theme of freedom shape black figurative art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? First, it emerged as the subject of many works, often presenting itself in the forms of allegory (for example, Samuel Jennings's 1792 *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*) and propaganda (Josiah Wedgwood's 1787 *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*). Freedom also appeared in more abstract ways, filtered through the black figure itself (Edward W. Clay's expressive, circa-1829 *Jim Crow*) and through the overall composition of a work of art (Paul Petrovich Svinin's impressionistic *Negro Methodists Holding a Meeting in a Philadelphia Alley*, 1811–1813). Finally, many artists interjected the theme of freedom by way of more conceptual or theoretically based images (the centrifugal, dancing black man in James Goodwyn Clonney's 1841 *Militia Training* or the unshackled, fleeing slave in David Gilmour Blythe's 1864 *Old Virginia Home*). That the linkages between blacks, a legacy of human bondage, and the myriad forms of freedom

were irresistible to artists made perfect sense during a period when the nation found itself preoccupied with whether to abolish slavery and, once it was finally abolished, how to intercede on behalf of emancipated slaves and their dispossessed masters.[5]

In an especially poetic passage from his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois muses over the whole of the nineteenth century, seeing it as one in which the world's inhabitants—including African Americans—increasingly "began to descry in others that transfigured spark of divinity which we call Myself." Invoking something like art's capacity to elicit the spirit of freedom, Du Bois recognized in the struggles of both bondsmen and freedmen a parallel desire, in which the quest for bodily independence was paired with the pursuance of social and spiritual release from a shadowy, half existence, and from the depths of which African Americans seemed to cry, "O World of Worlds, how shall man make you one?"[6] Although Du Bois was not addressing the art of portraiture specifically, he was reflecting on a new order of introspection and identity formation, and on how black people in particular found themselves deeply invested in this new, self-actualizing adventure.

Two paintings that epitomize this fixation on black freedom are Nathaniel Jocelyn's *Cinqué* (fig. 8) and Christian Mayr's *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* (fig. 9). These paintings serve as an introduction to the other works considered in this chapter that, while not explicitly intended to interrogate visual representations of freedom, employ a catalytic black figure whose very form and presence engage the theme and pierce the façade of conventional portraiture and genre art. The two paintings appeared on the heels of two galvanizing incidents in the history of American race relations—the 1831 Virginia slave insurrection led by Nat Turner, the creation in 1833 of the American Anti-Slavery Society—which also provoked a flurry of state and federal legislation that placed greater restrictions on the conduct and movement of black peoples. Add to these 1830s events the concurrent rage for black characterizations in American and British theaters, and one is presented with a world where the black subject in art and life is equivalent to a minstrel-era interlocutor: the man in the middle of a line of blackface performers who questions and comments on the state of things. But in the case of Jocelyn's *Cinqué*, Mayr's *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia*, and other selected examples of black figurative art, the critiques and banter occur not through actual words, but via a complex system of composed gestures, pictorial narratives, and visual symbols. While the specific origins and motives for these two paintings could not have been more dissimilar, their shared focus on the black figure and their parallel explorations of freedom make them twin examples of a transfiguring black subject: identities in the making that even Washington Irving would have found alluring.

Figure 8 (*facing page*). Nathaniel Jocelyn, *Cinqué*, ca. 1840. Oil on canvas. 30¼ × 25½ inches. New Haven Museum & Historical Society, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of Dr. Charles Purvis, 1898, NHMHS 1971.205.

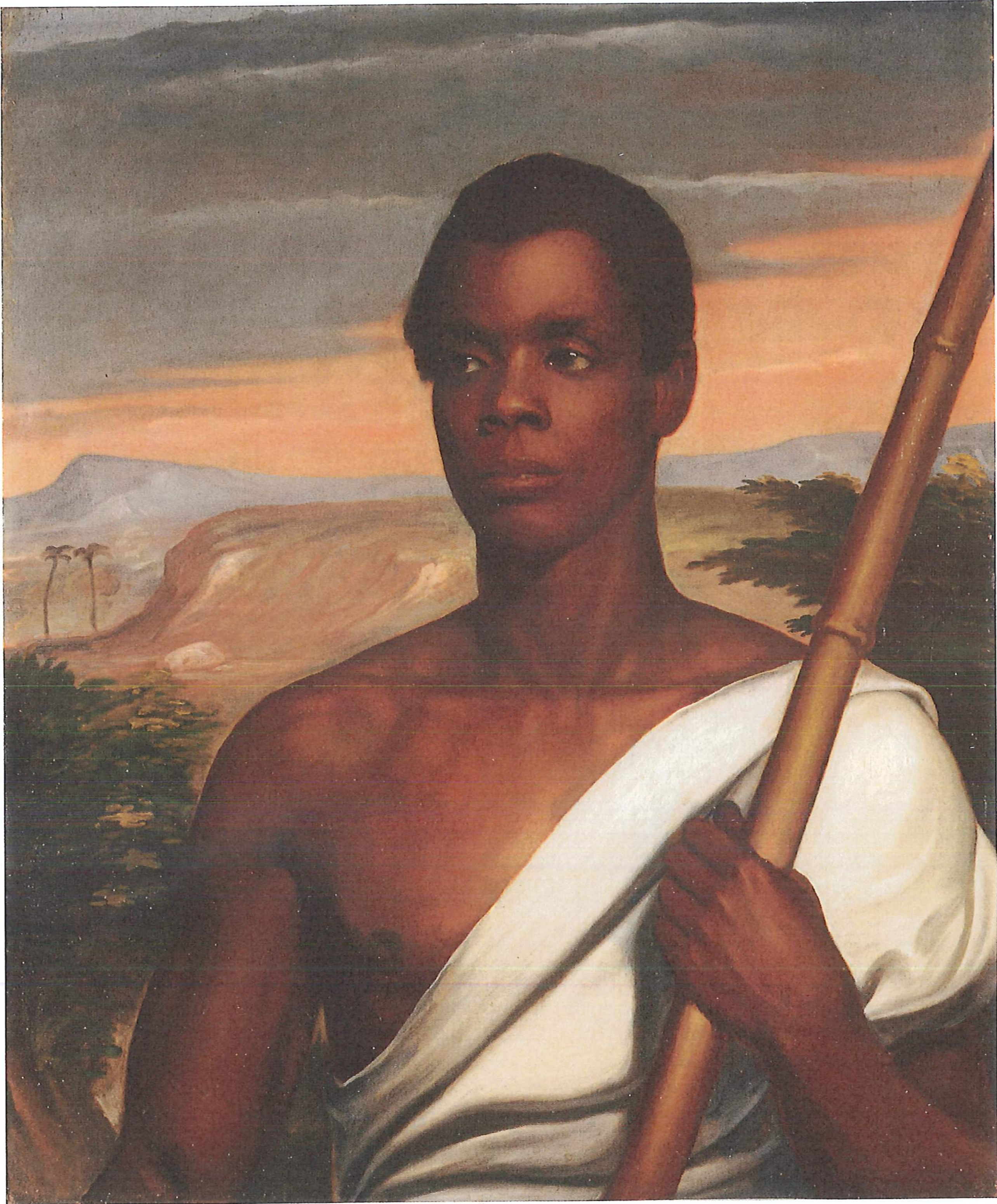

Figure 9. Christian Mayr, *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia,* 1838. Oil on canvas. 24 × 29½ inches. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina.

Following examination of Jocelyn's and Mayr's paintings, this chapter looks closely at other subject-specific works of art created prior to World War II, with gender and fashion collectively serving as the organizing principles. Using *Kitchen Ball*'s evocative representations of women as a point of thematic departure, I grapple with the intersections in nineteenth-century visual culture between womanliness, blackness, and the idea of emblematic clothing, specifically black women's head coverings. A comparable discussion of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century portrayals of black men follows. This section develops more broadly the social occurrences of racial misapprehensions, a nascent and provocative black dandy, and the notion of gender-centered, culturally tacit uniforms in the American imagination.

Before addressing Nathaniel Jocelyn's *Cinqué*, a brief retelling of the events that surrounded its creation is in order.[7] Early in 1839, Sengbeh Pieh (pronounced *seng'be pē-ā'*), a twenty-five-year-old man from the West African nation of Sierra Leone, was abducted and brought to a coastal "slave factory" run by Portuguese slavers.[8] He, along with dozens of other captured Africans were shackled and placed on board a Portuguese slave ship, the *Teçora*, bound for Havana, Cuba. Upon reaching Havana (in the spring of 1839), the Africans were taken to a holding area, where two merchants, Pedro Montes and Jose Ruiz, purchased a group of them, including Sengbeh Pieh. On June 28, 1839, Montes, Ruiz, approximately fifty-three enslaved Africans, and a crew of five left Havana on the schooner *Amistad*, en route to the coastal town of Nuevitas in the province of Puerto Príncipe. The journey was interrupted when the slaves, under the leadership of Sengbeh Pieh, broke loose from their shackles and killed the ship's captain and cook. After two crew members jumped overboard, the Africans demanded that Montes, Ruiz, and the sole remaining crew member, a cabin boy, navigate the *Amistad* back to Sierra Leone. After six weeks on a helter-skelter course throughout the western Atlantic, the *Amistad* was sited by American authorities off the coast of New London, Connecticut, whereupon it was towed ashore and its motley crew of Africans and Cubans jailed.[9]

After explaining their presence in American waters, the Cubans as well as the enslaved Africans all demanded that justice be done. Montes and Ruiz insisted that they be returned to Cuba with their slaves, while the Africans pleaded for their freedom and return to Sierra Leone. A lengthy and widely publicized legal battle between pro- and antislavery advocates culminated in the case's being brought before the United States Supreme Court in February 1841. Former president John Quincy Adams, then a congressman from Massachusetts, represented the Africans and delivered an eloquent argument on their behalf, and in March the court acted to free them. "Cinqué" (as Sengbeh Pieh's name came to be mispronounced) and thirty-four fellow Africans who, since August 1839, had

lived under the custodianship of assorted Connecticut jailers and abolitionists, were finally sent back to Sierra Leone in November 1841.[10]

At some point during the Africans' incarceration, Robert Purvis, a wealthy African American from Philadelphia active in the abolitionist movement, commissioned Nathaniel Jocelyn, a white artist from New Haven and the elder brother of Amistad Committee member Simeon S. Jocelyn, to paint Cinqué's portrait. When this transpired is not certain, nor are the details of the agreement. Years later, Purvis stated that he had paid Jocelyn about $260 for the portrait, yet no period correspondence concerning this transaction has ever been located.[11]

Nathaniel Jocelyn was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1796.[12] At an early age Jocelyn was apprenticed to his father, Simeon Jocelin, an engraver and clockmaker. In his teens Jocelyn received art instructions from another New Haven artist, George Munger, and worked alongside his younger brother, Simeon, in the family's engraving business. With the encouragement of artist John Trumbull and inventor Eli Whitney, Jocelyn abandoned engraving and decided to become a portrait painter. During the 1820s, Jocelyn perfected his skills, first among the wealthy planter and merchant class of Savannah, Georgia, and later back in New Haven.

Although born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1810 to a wealthy, white cotton broker and his mulatto wife, Robert Purvis spent his formative years in Philadelphia, where the family relocated in 1819. Upon the conclusion of his formal education at Amherst College and his father's death in 1826, Purvis embarked on a career as an antislavery patron and social reformer. He helped launch William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, was a charter member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and figured prominently in social, economic, and political matters pertaining to Pennsylvania blacks.[13]

One event toward the end of the 1830s may have precipitated Purvis's contact with Nathaniel Jocelyn. In the spring of 1838, Pennsylvania Hall, a freestanding structure recently built by a joint-stock company of abolitionists, was attacked and burned to the ground by a mob of rioting whites hostile to the aims of abolitionism and angered by the highly publicized gathering at the hall of the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. Prior to the attack, the very fair-skinned Robert Purvis and his more recognizably African American wife, Harriet Forten Purvis, were mistakenly identified as an interracial couple as they entered the hall and became the object of taunts, jeers, and stone-throwing.[14]

This hostile climate in Philadelphia, which touched Purvis not only at Pennsylvania Hall but at other times in more insidious ways, contributed to a steady shift in his views on race relations. Whereas he and the other black abolitionists had formerly espoused nonresistance when confronted by white violence, the dangers in being black, living in the so-called free North, and advocating the abolition of slavery and racial discrimination demanded a change of heart and

strategy. Purvis and his fellow black abolitionists began to lobby among themselves for more assertive measures to combat slavery and bigotry, including political agitation, subterfuge, and armed force.[15] Cinqué and the other captive Africans represented a response to the escalating violence that must have appealed to Purvis's more emotional, disaffected side. Purvis considered Nathaniel Jocelyn—a talented, white artist well known among abolitionists, and in close contact, physically and politically, to the Amistad affair—the ideal person to paint Cinqué and provide a material symbol of black resistance and moral fortitude.

The painting portrays Cinqué from the diaphragm up, clothed in a white, toga-like garment and holding a staff diagonally along the right side of the canvas. Trees and shrubbery flank the figure in the foreground. In the distant middle-ground and background are mountains, plateaus, valleys, and the sky, filled with horizontal clouds and illuminated from a light source behind the mountains on the horizon.

The portrait—with its dark figure and lighter background—reverses the tonal dynamic of portraits in which Caucasian figures dominant a darker visual landscape. This rupture of nineteenth-century expectations makes for a refreshing, even jarring composition, despite the presence of more conventional painting strategies.[16] Cinqué's forehead and chest are bathed in a warm, intense light, a romantic, symbolic indication of his intelligence, his humanity, and celestial intervention on his behalf. Cinqué's wrinkle-free brow is dark, suggesting a sense of sobriety, if not outright pathos. This combination of brooding self-possession with an attitude of inner vitality and latent action stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding landscape, both dazzling and illusory. Looking more like a Greco-Roman divinity than a brutish marauder, and with a staff that evokes the insignia of an ancient shepherd or wanderer, this representation contradicts the prevailing perception of Cinqué and his fellow Africans as savages and instead embraces a republican ideal, an allegorical representation of Christian proselytizing, and a symbol of black activism. That these manifestations of Cinqué—abolitionist symbol, religious icon, and subversive figure—are all contained in the idea of a radical, antislavery philosophy, can be educed from the events and sentiments expressed following the creation of the portrait.

As one might expect, Jocelyn's portrait of Cinqué was not viewed by everyone in such laudatory terms. When Purvis submitted the portrait for exhibition to Philadelphia's Artists' Fund Society in the spring of 1841, he received the following letter from the Society's president, painter John Neagle:

Dear Sir,—The hanging committee have instructed me, most respectfully, to return the portrait you so kindly offered for exhibition—it being contrary to usage to display work of that character, believing that under the excitement of the times, it might prove in-

jurious both to the proprietors and the institution. At the same time, I am instructed to return the thanks of the Society for your tender of the use of so excellent a work of art.

Almost immediately, the Boston abolitionist Henry Clarke Wright, a friend of Purvis, fired off a response, but rather than just sending it to the Artists' Fund Society, he copied his letter to several abolitionist newspapers.

Wright began his letter with the question "Why is that portrait denied a place in that gallery?" After listing several plausible reasons—questions about Jocelyn's membership in the Society, doubts about the artistic quality of the portrait, misgivings about Cinqué's character, and apprehensions about public interest in the subject—he discounted each as an explanation for the hanging committee's rejection of the portrait. Then Wright concluded his letter with the following diatribe:

The plain English of it is, Cinque is a NEGRO. This is a Negro-*hating* and negro-*stealing* nation. A slaveholding people.—The negro-*haters* of the north, and the negro-*stealers* of the south will not tolerate a portrait of a negro in a picture gallery. And *such* a negro! His dauntless look, as it appears on canvass, would make the souls of the slaveholders quake. His portrait would be a standing anti-slavery lecture to slaveholders and their apologists. To have it in the gallery would lead to discussions about slavery and the "inalienable" rights of man, and convert every set of visiters into an anti-slavery meeting. So "the hanging committee" bowed their necks to the yoke and bared their backs to the scourge, installed *slavery* as doorkeeper to the gallery, carefully to exclude every thing that can speak of freedom and inalienable rights, and give offence to men-stealers!! Shame on them![17]

In the eyes of abolitionists like Wright and Purvis, Jocelyn's *Cinqué*—portrayed holding his improvised weapon against his Cuban captors—communicated black resistance and arming one's self against bodily harm: a theme that, following the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, Purvis would have empathized with. And the placement of Cinqué within a picturesque wilderness, clothed in a brilliant white robe and illuminated by soft, golden light, resonated with Purvis's belief that the antislavery movement was a divine, morally guided enterprise.

Cinqué's image as a proselytizing shepherd and abolitionist icon made the picture, as Wright described it, a subversive blow against a "negro-*hating* and negro-*stealing*" populace. Neagle, the Artists' Fund Society president and Philadelphia's leading portrait painter, implicitly acknowledged its incendiary quality with his carefully worded statement that it would have been "contrary to usage to display work of that character." "Work of that character"—the ennobling of a black man, the partial uncovering of his body, and the unapologetic championing of the antislavery cause—would have overshadowed everything else in the

1841 exhibition and ideologically opposed the other portraits on display.[18] *Cinqué*, the quintessential antislavery portrait, raised the ante on an otherwise predictable genre, and gave the colloquial phrase "cutting a figure" a new meaning. Traditional "grand manner" portraiture was transformed by the abolitionist movement into a conceptually lacerating art form, capable not only of recording faces and social positions but of challenging long-standing notions about the savagery of the black race, concepts of freedom and heroism, and "character" in artistic representations during the Jacksonian era.[19]

In contrast to Joceyln's reworking of portraiture, artist Christian Friedrich Mayr (1803–1851) revolutionized genre painting by doing something different: enveloping his black figures with the curious pairing of incisive specificity and pseudo-universality. Mayr was born in Nuremberg, Germany. Both his father, Johann Daniel von Mayer, and stepfather, Christian Friedrich Fues, were professional artists, providing Mayr with apprenticeships and encouraging him to pursue more formal art instruction, initially at Nuremberg's Royal Art Academy and later at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich.[20] Mayr's training stressed the importance of religious and history painting, but, as his overall artistic output shows, he bypassed this direction for portraiture and genre painting. It may have been this predisposition toward more "democratic" art forms that encouraged Mayr eventually to emigrate to the United States, where he practiced his artistic skills in cities up and down the Atlantic seaboard. One of those municipalities, the famous resort of White Sulphur Springs, in what is now West Virginia, was the location for his best known painting, *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia*.

Mayr's painting depicts a large group of African Americans dancing and conversing in what appears to be a brick and timber structure with a vaulted roof. The building's rafters—painted in perspective and furnished with a primitive chandelier, a hanging basket, and braided garlic—comprise the upper half of the composition. The lower half is filled with life: approximately thirty-seven people and a dog.

Although all of the people appear to be African American, their body types, clothing, ages, gender differences, physical singularities, and positions within the scene challenge any reductive categorizing. Perhaps the only generalization one might make about the group is that they are well-dressed, immaculately groomed, and, on the whole, physically robust. Art historian Michael D. Harris suggests that such a representation of African Americans, "[showing] them to have similar tastes and aspirations as whites," would have elicited sympathy among white viewers in the 1830s, despite the subservient, degraded status of blacks at the time.[21] A more detailed description of these figures is in order, but a brief discussion about the painting's pictorial structure will hopefully bolster subsequent statements about the subject matter and Mayr's intentions.

Figures 10–11. Christian Mayr, *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* (details), 1838.

The painting's distinct upper and lower halves are themselves halved, vertically this time, by a chandelier and the striking central figure of a woman in white. Other architectural and figural elements further divide the composition, creating in the painting's lower half a least five distinct groupings: (1) the aforementioned woman in white and her male dancing partner (also dressed in white), a tight configuration of fellow dancers, spectators, and a flute-playing musician, and (in the distance background) a man lighting a candle on a high wall sconce; (2) assorted background figures and, more prominently, another musician—a fiddler—and an especially fashionable female/male couple, standing and conversing; (3) another elegantly dressed dancing couple, the woman wearing a salmon-colored dress (fig. 10), surrounded by the heads and partial figures of other people (including one very distinguished-looking woman with a cloth head-wrap and a man holding a chair aloft); (4) several figures, some only partially visible, most notably a full-figured woman in a pink and white dress and, seated beside her, a young man pointing in the woman's direction (fig. 11); and (5) a young boy attempting to rouse a sleepy dog.

Mayr's palette is warm, with the predominating browns and grays randomly punctuated by whites, pinks, and shades of black that fracture the composition into a lively, optical field. This color scheme, in tandem with the deep shading within the composition and its emphatic, raking perspectives, creates an effect like tunnel vision: the viewer's eye is whisked from the dark peripheries and toward brighter visual hot spots. Once the eye settles on a highlight, it voraciously takes in the racial kaleidoscope, the posturing figures, and the fanciful scenario.

Frederick Marryat, an English travel writer who met Mayr at White Sulphur Springs and saw the painting soon after it was completed, wrote about that encounter:

> Among others, attracted to the springs professionally, was a very clever German painter, who, like all Germans, had a very correct ear for music. He had painted a kitchen-dance in old Virginia, and in the picture he had introduced all the well-known colored people in the place; among the rest were the band of musicians, but I observed that one man was missing. "Why did you not put him in," inquired I. "Why, Sir, I could not put him in; it was impossible; he never *plays in tune*. Why, if I put him in, Sir, he would spoil the *harmony* of my whole picture!"[22]

Just as revealing as Mayr's joke about the omitted, out-of-tune musician is Marryat's statement about the veracity of the painting's cast of characters. Each figure's portraitlike specificity comes through, even though their second-class racial status and Mayr's licensed reconstruction of the scene removed them from the customary portrait sitter/portraitist dynamic.

This strange, psychological amalgam of verisimilitude, subjugation, namelessness, and vitality explains to a great extent the enduring appeal of Mayr's *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia*. Other works by Mayr appear weak in comparison and are, for the most part, indistinguishable from other early-nineteenth-century American genre paintings. But here, Mayr's careful depiction of a dark, vaulted interior packed with stylishly dressed colored people, preening and gyrating to music by candlelight, without a hint of satire or racial ridicule, is like no other antebellum image of black life.

In his notes on Mayr's painting, John W. Coffey, chief curator of the North Carolina Museum of Art, reminds us that White Sulphur Springs was "a favorite summer resort among Southern plantation families." "The names of these guests," writes historian Louise McNeill Pease, "read like an index of Southern history." Attracting not just wealthy southerners but prominent people from other parts of the United States and even abroad, White Sulphur Springs was legendary for its mineral springs, mountain air, breathtaking vistas and, most of all, its seasonal calendar of fancy parties, masked balls, promenades, and other social functions. One 1830s commentator gushed that "the votaries of pleasure

are willing to be crushed to death to obtain a chance of laying their offerings on the shrine that fashion has set up in this happy valley."[23]

The slaves who accompanied their masters to the resort, as well as the establishment's regular labor force of enslaved and free blacks, were also frequently referred to in descriptions of White Sulphur Springs. From remarks about "Negro boys . . . pulling the fan ropes to shoo away the flies" to notices regarding "the hired Negroes who came in the summer to cook and serve in the hotels," one receives the impression that this favorite destination of the elite was largely maintained by throngs of black men, women, and children.[24] One European traveler who visited around the time that Mayr was there commented that "it is a strange spectacle to see the cohorts of waiters, white, black and mulatto, running about and colliding while they serve that multitude of guests."[25] In an 1841 diary entry made by a visitor to the nearby Salt Sulphur Springs, the exhilarating effects of dancing and the creative contributions to the festivities by black musicians are duly noted:

> We danced three cotillions, several waltzes and finished off with the Virginia reel, which was danced in good earnest by the Virginian, and I came to the conclusion that "old Virginy never true" [was] . . . true a thing as could be said of them. The musicians as I before mentioned were nothing extra, but one old colored man . . . would improve the music by making the strangest noise in his throat I ever heard & which I could better imitate than describe.[26]

Whether this elderly vocalizer was the out-of-tune musician who Mayr edited out of his painting is uncertain, but plainly an African American presence at the springs was significant. Thus, Mayr's image was not far from reality. What does ring counterfeit or peculiar, however, is Mayr's implied presence among these servants and slaves.

While White Sulphur Springs' guests would have had full access to its facilities and grounds, deeply ingrained boundaries based on race and class privilege would have kept them from the insular sphere of their black help. Even if one acknowledges the reality of an accepted level of master/slave intimacy in the antebellum South, for self-declared social superiors to have introduced themselves into the leisure activities of their so-called inferiors at a place as public and protocol-conscious as White Sulphur Springs would have been frowned upon.

On the other hand, the outwardly genteel resort had another, less publicized side that encouraged its male guests to venture beyond the official race/class boundaries, and into less condescending territories. While exploring the grounds of White Sulphur Springs during a visit in the early 1830s, John H. B. Latrobe, a lawyer for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (and the son of the famous architect

Benjamin H. Latrobe) happened upon several unnamed cabins and outbuildings where, he soon discovered, gamblers and other late-night revelers congregated. "Those remarkably well-dressed, genteel men lounging about the cabin door are the priests of the Temple of Fortune," Latrobe wryly noted.[27] As Mayr's peephole view of the kitchen ball insinuates, he too loitered at the threshold of one of those outbuildings, taking in nocturnal sights that, while not completely unfamiliar to the resort's other guests, seemed intemperate and slightly salacious.

Subtle, socially encoded signs of sexual courtship abound in *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia*, ranging from couples engaged in dancing and intimate, face-to-face conversation to intense gazing, too-close-for-comfort jostling, and other dalliances. On the left side of the scene (and in subdued lighting) the voluptuous woman in pink and white brandishes a handkerchief and coquettishly lifts the hem of her dress, while the man immediately behind her shimmies forward and touches her shoulder. Alongside them a seated younger man brazenly points his finger in their direction while, in another frank acknowledgment, staring directly at Mayr and us, the scene's viewers.

Complicity with the artist and subsequent viewers—knowingly serving as the objects of someone else's visual pleasure—places Mayr's African Americans in a curious relationship with White Sulphur Springs' social hierarchy and its legacy of white supremacy. While their controlled bacchanalia suggests a kind of freedom, their exhibitionism and interdependence with a subjugating and circumscribing edifice attests to what is often conceived of, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish art, as a visual, class-based censure. In both American and Netherlandish genre painting the middle class is implicated in encouraging artists to cast the cultural and economic "others" of their times in a mostly pejorative, comical mold. In the American context the stereotyping of blacks, women, immigrants, rural types, and other outsiders by the urban middle class, argues art historian Elizabeth Johns, "ordered the disorder about them, assigned the proper blame for the incongruities in the democracy," and, most importantly, made the middle class "the moral center of the body politic."[28] In the Netherlandish context the ridiculing of the boorish behavior and reprobate lifestyle of the peasantry by an influential burgher class fueled a growing art market for moralizing pictures that illustrated these indigent, sinful abodes.[29]

Mayr, first exposed to Dutch and Flemish paintings by his art-dealing father in Nuremberg and, later, among New York galleries and art collectors, shared much of the Netherlandish attitude toward the socially marginalized, as seen in the similarities between his painting and works by the Dutch painter Adriaen van Ostade. Both artists exploited their societies' contempt for the peasantry and suspicions about dancing—the latter possibly derived from Pieter Brueghel the Elder's renowned painting *The Wedding Dance* (1566).

This message of an intemperate, undisciplined physicality, manifested in the black body, was rampant in American genre painting and graphic arts. As a caption for images of black dancers, musicians, and other revelers, the expression "cutting a figure" referred, in this racialized context, both to style-setting and to acrobatic perambulating. Dancing and gesticulating, implicitly profligate black figures, either solitary or placed alongside a contrastive white majority, provided a droll interlude within the larger context of the pictorial narrative. The following verses from *Dancing Mad: An Ethiopian Eccentricity* (1875), a Reconstruction-era extravaganza that was intended to be performed in blackface, probe this notion of an unruly yet appreciable black body in vivid, picturesque language:

See them at de *fete champetre*
Skipping like industrious fleas,
Here and there they're hopping, bobbing—
Not an arm or leg at ease.
Light as flakes of down they're floating,
In their robes of muslin clad,
Can't keep still to save their gizzards—
Sure they must be dancing mad![30]

It is no surprise that African American dance movements, as well as the black body in stasis, were widely understood in these atavistic terms, given the second-class status and derogated image of blacks. Nonetheless, a significant number of American artists (John Lewis Krimmel, James Goodwyn Clonney, John Quidor, and William Sidney Mount, among others) consistently employed this "Ethiopian Eccentricity" to great effect, endearing themselves to their patrons and eliciting visual correspondences with the nationwide mania for blackface minstrelsy. Indeed, the assorted dancers in *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* would not have been out of place on the illustrated covers of sheet music for the minstrel troupes and individual performers of the period, despite Mayr's attentiveness to individual details.

That Mayr was smitten by the idea of a transgressive, potentially rebellious expressivity in the visual arts, analogous to the Netherlandish model, is perhaps hinted at in another published interview, during which Mayr spoke candidly about the temperamental, penny-pinching ways of American art buyers:

The Americans in general do not estimate genius. . . . There is only one way to dispose of a picture in America, and that is, to raffle it; the Americans will then run the chance of getting it. If you do not like to part with your pictures in that way, you must paint portraits; people will purchase their own faces all over the world: the worst of it is, that in this country, they will purchase nothing else.[31]

Apart from critiquing the American Art-Union and its democratization of art through a national public lottery system, Mayr voiced dissatisfaction with the aesthetic judgments and artistic tastes of his adopted homeland. Directing this disdain toward a socially ambitious yet fiscally conservative and provincial bourgeoisie, Mayr portrayed the American citizenry in as unflattering a light as most genre painters imagined their lowly subjects. Undergirding his critique was the reality that genre paintings and portraiture were the most popular forms of art in antebellum America, and that clients who aspired to more than lighthearted scenes of everyday life and pictures of themselves were the exception rather than the rule.

Reflecting on this statement in light of *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia*, one could ask whether, in this painting, Mayr had acquiesced to the typical art patron's expectations or had thumbed his nose at them by creating something superficially in the mode of genre painting and portraiture yet fundamentally different. Arguably the painting's distinctiveness separated it from the majority of genre paintings and portraits of its day, giving its African American subjects and their candlelit setting an almost phantasmagoric quality. Even if one accepted the premise that the painting was meant to be part documentation/part souvenir, Mayr's inordinate concentration on each reveler's face and form transcended routine reportage and entered into infatuation.

When *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* was first exhibited, at the National Academy of Design's twentieth annual exhibition in 1845, it was paired with another, similarly titled painting by Mayr, *Juba in the Kitchen at the White Sulphur Springs in Virginia*.[32] Based on its title's reference to the West African–derived, body-percussive dance step known as *juba*, this long-lost companion work apparently also featured black subjects and, like *Kitchen Ball*, examined an oppositional world of performative athleticism, subaltern earthiness, and provocation.[33] By exhibiting such quirky, visually complex works alongside the more conventional paintings by Mount, Clonney, and the other leading genre artists, Mayr was either working harder to be a part of the image-making system that he detested or staking out his own, idiosyncratic space in the American art world: a place where those on the lowest rung of society exemplified a bodily freedom and creative license that those who were socially above them and (like the throngs who gathered at White Sulphur Springs)—and, more pointedly, those who deemed themselves enlightened patrons of art—could only simulate. But one could also argue that *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* championed the proslavery beliefs of most Americans through its picturesque, untroubled portrayal of southern black life, and its voyeuristic, peephole view behind the cabin doors. In this respect Mayr would be comparable to his artistic contemporaries, spinning pictorial narratives that confirmed rather than repudiated black incontinence.

Ultimately, there is enough ambiguity in this painting to throw into question the artist's sympathies. The work's disparate points of view, joined with Mayr's criticism of the American Art-Union and voiced frustration over most Americans' narcissistic privileging of portraiture, help make the case that *Kitchen Ball* is, at the very least, a fractious and idiosyncratic work. It is this uncertainty with regard to social status and racial empathy—dispersed throughout the picture and insinuated by the artist himself—that makes *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* an intriguing work. Although the characters are not named, Mayr's thirty-odd portraits of White Sulphur Springs' hired and conscripted help constitute a powerful depiction of African American humanity during the Jacksonian era and, notwithstanding Mayr's incursion into the intimate lives of his subjects, inadvertently constitute a compelling argument against stereotyping and racial stratification. But it would take a few more years and the imposing, solitary figure of a genuine black rebel—in the form of Nathaniel Jocelyn's *Cinqué*—for American art and its alignment with antiblack racism to be shaken from its entrenchment.

## LA NOIRE DE . . .

Between the two dancing couples at the center of Christian Mayr's *Kitchen Ball at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia* is an assortment of onlookers: seated, standing, and partially visible behind the fully realized figures in the painting's middleground. One spectator is especially noteworthy: a woman with her arms crossed, wearing a turbanlike cloth head-wrap (fig. 10). Compared to the other women in the painting, with their lace-trimmed bonnets, floral headbands, and ringlet-laden hairstyles, this woman seems older, appears less caught up in the male/female couplings around her, and conveys a sense of self-awareness and wisdom that distinguishes her from everyone else at this after-hours "kitchen ball."

Her presence among the carousing partygoers stands as a contemplative interlude within Mayr's black, brown, and beige spectacle: even in the midst of excitement and lively high-stepping, she suggests, there is the possibility of restraint and space for a woman to delight in her regal aloneness. Whether rendered from real life or created from Mayr's memory or imagination, such a figure again underscores this painting's conceptual distance from the majority of black images in nineteenth-century American art. Light years removed from the legions of black caricatures, Mayr's African American figures—and especially this woman with the head-wrap—present an alternative history of the black subject in art: one in which persons of African descent are cerebral entities as well as emotive and sensual ones.

More than a decade after Mayr painted his anonymous, head-wrap–wearing woman, New York artist Ferdinand Thomas Lee Boyle painted a madras-

# CUTTING A FIGURE

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