SUPPLEMENTI

Immagini controverse

Casi studio e prospettive di ricerca su un patrimonio culturale potenzialmente conflittuale

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Difficult Images: Alterity in Early Modern Genoa Exhibited

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the question of controversial or "difficult" heritage through the prism of a specific, recent experience, an exhibition devoted to the representation of Islamic alterity in early modern Genoa curated by the paper's author and by Daniele Sanguineti. Some of the artworks exhibited are presented, and the meanings they conveyed analysed. Three thematic areas are selected as examples: the visual device by which stereotypical Ottoman attributes were anachronistically assigned to negative characters in unrelated narratives (such as Pontius Pilate in the Ecce Homo iconography); the representation of subjugated Turks in 'militant' images celebrating the role of Andrea Doria as bulwark of Christianity; the depiction of enslaved people in Genoa, with reference to both the representation of galley slaves' activities in the port area and the insertion of the figures of domestic slaves (specifically, black pages) as accessories in portraits signalling the aristocratic sitters' status.

Questo contributo affronta la questione del patrimonio culturale controverso o "difficile" attraverso il prisma di un'esperienza specifica e recente, una mostra dedicata alla

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rappresentazione dell'alterità islamica nella Genova di età moderna, curata dall'autrice dell'articolo e da Daniele Sanguineti. Vengono presentate alcune delle opere esposte e analizzati i significati che esse veicolano. Tre aree tematiche sono state selezionate come esempi: il dispositivo visivo attraverso il quale riconoscibili attributi ottomani venivano anacronisticamente assegnati a personaggi negativi in narrazioni non correlate (come Ponzio Pilato nell'iconografia dell'Ecce Homo); la rappresentazione dei Turchi soggiogati in immagini "militanti" che celebravano il ruolo di Andrea Doria come baluardo della cristianità; la raffigurazione della condizione schiavile a Genova, con riferimento sia alla rappresentazione delle attività nella zona portuale degli schiavi utilizzati primariamente come rematori sulle galee, sia all'inserimento di figure di schiavi domestici (in particolare, paggi neri) all'interno di ritratti di aristocratiche, quali accessori funzionali in primo luogo a segnalarne lo stato sociale.

1. *Introduction*

A lively and complex debate – which the conference *"Immagini controverse". Un framework per un approccio inclusivo e interdisciplinare al patrimonio transculturale"* both reflected and actively contributed to – has been ongoing for a number of years regarding controversial artistic heritage. Closely intertwined with the discourse on words, texts, and literary motifs from the past that can be interpreted as forms of hate speech or perceived as potentially offensive in today's world, the debate on images additionally has to confront the concrete reality of the tangible objects that convey the depictions, whose role and fate must be addressed. These material things are a component and a means of transmission of what Sharon Macdonald defined as «difficult heritage – that is, a past that is recognized as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity»[1]. As Macdonald and others clarified in multiple contributions, cultural heritage becomes controversial, «difficult» or «dissonant» when it relates to or represents people and events of the past that still divide or disturb social groups.

The images that we inherited from the past are clearly neither innocent nor neutral *per se*; in fact, they are the result and the reflection of the power relations prevailing at the time they were created[2]. Their perceived meaning is not fixed in time. When it comes to the representation of racialised, gendered, or conflicting religious groups, it becomes especially evident that «the meanings

[1] Macdonald 2009, p. 1. The author highlights the importance of materiality in this context: «Heritage is a material as well as a symbolic practice (…). This materiality matters» (Macdonald 2009, p. 26).

[2] Maifreda 2022, p. 9.

assigned to visual objects [...] are the result of a process of co-production»[3], stemming from the interaction between artists, their patrons or clients and their publics (in the plural): these meanings are therefore variable, depending on the interests of all the agents involved and the societal changes brought about by the passage of time. Every epoch and every community legitimately re-interprets them.

Controversial or difficult artworks pose urgent challenges. They cannot be silently and uncritically accepted just because they are historical; they surely risk hurting contemporary sensibilities or reigniting conflictual feelings. But at the same time, for their intrinsic artistic value and as an eloquent testimony of their times, they should not be obliterated or left to fall into oblivion. Instead, they must be studied, contextualised, explained and made available to all interested members of the public, so that they become tools for broadening comprehension and raising awareness[4].

2. *An exhibition in Genoa*

In light of these principles – well aware of the complexity of the matter as well as the many difficulties and dangers of misunderstanding that our choice of subject entailed – together with my colleague Daniele Sanguineti I decided to organize a temporary exhibition devoted to the representation of alterity in early modern Genoa: a specific, image-rich context for which the topic translated into an analysis of the multi-faceted depiction of "Turks" and "Moors". Genoa – with its long history of relations, intense economic exchanges and military confrontations with the Islamic world – has been an epicentre for the production of significant representations linked to this theme. While Venetian art (which has indeed been a crucial workshop for the creation and dissemination of relevant images, due to the historical role played by the Venetian Republic through its relationship with the Islamic East) has been studied for decades from this point of view in a large number of publications, it is only in recent years that attention has begun to be paid to the Genoese case[5]. The exhibition, titled *Ottomani Barbareschi Mori nell'arte a Genova. Fascinazioni, scontri, scambi nei secoli XVI-XVIII*, was held in Palazzo Lomellino in Genoa from October 26th, 2024, to January 26th, 2025. Methodologically, it built upon the shared experience and knowledge gained in the frame

[3] Franco Llopis, Urquizar-Herrera 2019, p. 9.

[4] The complex "negotiations" and processes involved are discussed in Macdonald 2009 with reference to the monuments of Nazi Past (Macdonald 2009, especially pp. 102-122).

[5] Relevant literature published before the exhibition's catalogue includes Pessa 2014 e 2021; Stagno 2017 e 2019; the contributions gathered in Stagno, Franco Llopis 2021.

of the COST action *Islamic Legacy: Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1750)*, coordinated by Antonio Herrera-Urquizar of UNED, Madrid (several members of this research network were also part of the exhibition's scientific committee)[6].

The works on display – comprising paintings, drawings, statues, textiles, books and prints, many of which privately owned and normally not accessible to the public – were selected with the aim of presenting objects of high artistic quality which at the same time are especially significant for the illustration of the chosen theme. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with essays and entries by specialist historians and art historians[7].

The varied character, in Western visual imagery, of the perceptions of the "Turk" – in the broad sense assigned to the term in the early modern age, when it was often applied without distinction to all the Ottoman empire's subjects, regardless of ethnicity, as embodiment of the Islamic East[8] – was assumed as a pivotal concept for understanding the different sides of a complicated, non-binary representation, which was linked to an undeniably central dimension of conflict but also included a profound fascination. The purpose was to intercept the local versions of the «Kaleidoscopic reflections»[9] of those perceived by western eyes to be the Other *par excellence*[10], part of an alterity that was not univocal but interconnected[11], so that their representation – as

[6] CA18129 *IS-LE: Islamic Legacy: Narratives East, West, South, North of the Mediterranean (1350-1750)* 2019-2023, which won the 2025 Europa Nostra Award for research. The exhibition's scientific committee was composed of the following scholars: Piero Boccardo, Valentina Borniotto, Ivana Čapeta Rakić, Giuseppe Capriotti, Suraiya N. Faroqhi, Kate Fleet, Borja Franco Llopis, Lauro Magnani, Loredana Pessa, Elisabetta Raffo, Daniele Sanguineti, Laura Stagno, Antonio Urquizar Herrera.

[7] Stagno, Sanguineti 2024. The catalogue includes essays by Valentina Borniotto, Paolo Calcagno, Alessia Ceccarelli, Clario Di Fabio, Kate Fleet, Naz Defne Kut, Luca Lo Basso, Caterina Olcese Spingardi, Loredana Pessa, Daniele Sanguineti, Laura Stagno, Samuele Virga, Gianluca Zanelli. Catalogue entries were contributed by some the essays' authors, and, additionally, by Piero Boccardo, Pierangelo Campodonico, Matteo Capurro, Michael Franses, Kevin Imbimbo, Alessia Indiani, Paola Martini, Matteo Navone, Giustina Olgiati, Carla Pampaloni, Martina Panizzutt, Omer Fatih Parlak, Margherita Priarone, Maria Luisa Ricci, Maurizio Romanengo.

[8] The Ottoman Turk became between the 15th and the 18th century «the embodiment and prototype of an Islamic East for many Westerners» (Harper 2011, p. 3). In early modern Italy, the term "Turchi" (Turks) could be used for Muslims of any ethnic origin with the exception of black Africans, often called "Mori" (Moors) a word which could be applied to people from North Africa, as well; in fact, "Turk" was also sometimes used to describe non-muslim subjects of the Ottoman empire. The term was frequently used in the singular ("il Turco"), to signify the collective identity of the Ottoman subjects (Formica 2012, p. 17). The multiple terms used throughout the catalogue materials reflect the sometime overlapping uses attested at the time in Genoa and Liguria (as elsewhere): Turks, Ottomans, "Barbareschi" (people from Barbary) and Moors, the latter indeed applied, though by no mean exclusively, to the description of blacks.

[9] Holm, Rasmussen 2021, p. IX.

[10] Formica 2012, p. 4.

[11] Stoichita 2014, p. 36.

mental construction, literary description or artistic depiction – can in fact be construed as an open problem, a broad semantic field[12].

In the Genoese reception, as reflected by a significant number of artworks, different lines intersected. The plane of reality – the enemies confronted in battle or subjugated, the daily life of the slaves in the city, diplomatic missions at the court of the sultan – coexisted with that of the anachronistic projection of stereotypical Ottoman characters onto a variety of unrelated biblical and hagiographic scenes, which especially in the 17th century came to populate canvases and frescoes with a crowd of "imaginary Turks".

In both areas – the realistic as well as the metaphorical one – denigration or fascination could prevail in shaping the iconographies, according to specific agendas and circumstances (the historiographical model of the «iron curtain», interpreting relations between the West and Islam during this period solely in terms of conflict, has been superseded by more nuanced analyses that identify and decode a plurality of responses, showing that boundaries were more permeable – both physically and symbolically – than has long been believed)[13].

The importation of Ottoman textiles and luxury goods to Genoa continued unabated, as did the acquisition of books, sometimes richly illustrated, which attest the curiosity of the Genoese élites for the Levant. The many depictions of characters in magnificent oriental garb and of precious carpets of Anatolian provenance, as well as the detailed illustration of Ottoman costumes and characters in the pictorial chronicle of the missions to the Sublime Porte carried out in 1665 and 1666-1667 by Giovanni Agostino Durazzo (who chose to be portrayed in Turkish attire), are among the most remarkable testimonies of the keen interest of the Genoese in this kind of visual matter[14]. The exhibition provided significant *exempla* of these attitudes; here, as their expressions are less disturbing for present-day sensitivities, they are less relevant; but they are to be noted as meaningful threads in the rich tapestry of the many-sided local perception of the Islamic East which also included difficult and currently disturbing representations.

In the present contribution, a few images are selected as instances of the topics about which the exhibition strived to create a much ampler discourse: one – briefly presented – is emblematic of the widespread use of transferring Turkish distinctive characters to unrelated scenes; the others are directly linked to the historical context of the Republic of Genoa. The choice to focus on a limited number of relevant artworks reflects the centrality of tangible objects and specific case studies (linked to a moment in time, a place, an agenda), which characterized the exhibition.

[12] Formica 2012, p. 5.
[13] For the definition of the «iron curtain» model of interpretation, see Harper 2011, p. 5.
[14] See Pessa 2021 e 2024; Stagno 2024a e 2024b, pp. 87-93.

3. *Pontius Pilate as a Turk*

The early modern visual device of assigning recognizable Ottoman attributes to the figures of Roman or Jewish persecutors of Christ, as well as to tormentors of martyrs from all ages, functioned as a by-product of the strength of the "evil Turk" stereotype in western eyes: the current enemy was perceived, at a symbolic level, as the quintessence of any kind of threat against Christian faith and civilization, and could therefore be substituted for old villains in the illustration of a number of different narratives, in a semantically charged anachronism based on an implied simile[15]. Genoese art offers a rich gallery of images of this kind; the most frequent occurrence being that of a turbaned Pontius Pilate, clad in often sumptuous attire, in the *Ecce Homo* iconography[16]. Pilate – «giudice iniquo» blamed for Christ's death, therefore «empio» and «infame»[17]– in the wake of a complex iconographic tradition did in fact catalyse this kind of projection, to the extent that his Ottomanized version became an increasingly common type and, in the 17th century, decidedly prevalent in the local area. Orazio De Ferrari produced a series of magnificent variations on this theme, and the painting on display at the exhibition (fig. 1), executed around 1645-1646, is particularly striking[18]. It is clear that such an image is not in itself "difficult" or disturbing; rather, it becomes so when the rhetoric of hate underpinning the transformation of the Roman procurator of Judea into a Turk is understood.

4. *The subjugated Turks as part of Andrea Doria's public image*

Other iconographies were more directly rooted in contemporary reality. In the sixteenth century, in the context of the long-standing conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian powers organised around the Habsburg axis, the role played first by Andrea Doria and then by his heir Giovanni Andrea as "generali del mare" for the Spanish crown brought Genoa to the forefront of the struggle against Ottoman forces and Barbary corsairs. The *Patente di Capitano generale dell'Armata contro il Turco* conferred on Andrea by emperor Charles V emphasised Doria's «calidad, valor y experiencia» and «singular zelo» as means of defeating «el Turco común enemigo de la Cristiandad»[19].

[15] On this theme: Čapeta Rakić 2017; Capriotti 2016; Sorce 2018 e 2019, p. 236; Stagno, Borniotto 2022.

[16] Stagno 2019, pp. 310-311; Stagno, Borniotto 2022, p.153.

[17] See Visdomini 1575, p. 19 and Mirandola 1630, among many others.

[18] On the painting see D. Sanguineti, in Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 252-255.

[19] See Stagno 2024b, p. 41.

The rhetorical construction of both Dorias' public *personae* was directly based on their fight with the Ottomans and on the *topos* of the defeated Turk, even in the long period between the conquest of Tunis (1535) and the battle of Lepanto (1571), when it was the Islamic side that was expanding and the Christian victories were in fact fragile and ephemeral. The images of Ottomans and "Barbareschi" produced in connection to Andrea (and subsequently Giovanni Andrea) are therefore firmly rooted in the so-called "culture of antagonism". They are functional to a propaganda based on the idea of Doria as the first bulwark of Christianity against Islamic enemies, a concept supported and disseminated by the widespread literary celebration of the admiral's figure: Andrea was lauded by Ariosto for his victorious fight against the corsairs – «Questo è quel Doria che fa dai pirati / sicuro il vostro mar per tutti i lati» (*Orlando Furioso*, XV, 30) – and praised by Pietro Aretino as the arm of Jesus's religion and the scourge of the «infedeli»[20].

The visual translation of this concept was extensive and complex, and has been discussed elsewhere[21]. Suffice to recall that the colossal statue commissioned by the magistrates of the Republic to honour Andrea (decreed in 1528) and the similar one erected after 1601 to celebrate Giovanni Andrea both represented the Dorias in the attire of classical *duces* trampling defeated Turks underfoot[22].

Here, I would like to focus, by way of example, on a composition which had a clear didascalic as well as a celebratory intent, emphasised by its large number of inscriptions (an association between images and words that brings the painting close to the solutions typical of ephemeral festival structures). Precisely because of the explicit and brutal way in which Andrea's triumph over his subjugated enemies is staged, this canvas can rightly be included in the category of difficult and disturbing images. The *Triumph of Andrea Doria*, also called *The hand-over of power from Andrea Doria to his heir Giovanni Andrea* (fig. 2), was probably commissioned by the latter in the last quarter of the 16th century for the family palace in the fiefdom of Melfi[23]. The glory of the old admiral, «piratarum acerrimvs hostis», is conveyed through inscriptions commemorating his feats – including his victories over the corsairs Gaddalì, Barbarossa and Dragut and the conquest of Corone, Patras and Africa – and through the most striking image in the painting: the representation of the old admiral seated on a

[20] *A lo immortale Andrea Doria*, Letter dated July 13th, 1541, in Aretino 1998, II.2, p. 298. For a first discussion of the literary celebration of Andrea as victor over the Turks, see Stagno 2024b, pp. 41-43.

[21] See, in particular, Stagno 2017.

[22] On the statues (which survive in a mutilated state), see P. Boccardo, in Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 138-141 e L. Stagno, in Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 160-163.

[23] On the painting and its material story, see L. Stagno, in Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 156-159.

throne supported by subjugated Turks, whose necks he tramples with his feet, a concise visual illustration of his recognised role as victor over the Ottomans (fig. 3). This is a motif – the "infidel" *captivi*, displayed as war trophies, carrying the victor's throne – that had been used also in earlier times, but became especially common in the early modern age in triumphal processions and the decoration of ephemeral architectures, particularly those of the Habsburgs, in the context of the ostentatious exhibition of subjugated Ottoman enemies, Barbary pirates and Moors which intensified after the celebrations of the capture of Tunis (1535)[24]. On the painting, the inscription «*TIRANNIS*» refers to the Turkish figures, a concept associated with the Ottoman Empire by a *topos* that became increasingly popular in 16th-century Christian Western literature[25]. The theme of the alleged inherent evilness of the Islamic enemies is further highlighted by the representation in the foreground of turbaned men fallen into the sea and tormented by a diabolical figure, evidently tasked with fetching them to hell.

5. *Depictions of enslaved people*

Another area of difficult heritage, besides the militant images of the kind presented above, is related to the representation of enslaved people. Genoa was traditionally a highly multi-ethnic city; specifically, it was a city "full of slaves", as stated in a document from 1482[26] . Historically of very diverse origins and ethnicities, between the 16th and 18th centuries slaves were mainly Ottoman subjects, captured during sea clashes or purchased by the "Magistrato delle Galee"[27]. Slaves in early modern Genoa – the last ones were freed with the advent of the Ligurian Democratic Republic in 1797[28] – were primarily exploited as rowers on galleys, while others were employed in domestic service. In the latter case, they often played the additional role of *status symbols:* the Genoese, wrote Jean Doubdan, a French traveller visiting the city in the mid-17th century, had the vanity «de se faire servir de quantité d'esclaves, dont la Ville est remplie de Turcs, Mores, Negres, Barbares de Tunis, d'Alger, Maroc at autres lieux»[29].

In Genoa as in western Europe generally, captives of both kinds «constituted the largest number of Muslims whom Europeans saw», in fact they were the only Muslims that most ordinary Catholics encountered[30].

[24] Franco Llopis 2017, pp. 90-92; Scorza 2012.
[25] Formica 2012, pp. 37-38.
[26] Olgiati 2018, p. 32
[27] Bono 1990, p. 89.
[28] Bonazza 2019, p. 57.
[29] Doubdan 1657, p. 650.
[30] Matar 2021, p. 229.

When not at sea, slaves serving on galleys – in addition to performing their assigned tasks, which included ships' maintenance and repairs – could engage in modest trade, crafts and services, earning small sums that they could spend on improving their daily lives or set aside in the hope of raising the funds necessary for a possible future redemption[31]. One of the characteristics of Mediterranean slavery – on which there is an increasing body of research – was the potential (albeit difficult) reversibility of this condition, together with its reciprocity, as enslavement symmetrically affected Christians captured and working in servitude in the territories subject to the Ottoman Empire[32].

Genoese art comprises detailed illustrations of the daily lives of enslaved people (alongside the persistence of the traditional, ubiquitous formula generically depicting sitting chained slaves, often in pairs). In particular, their life in the city's port took centre stage in the works of the Flemish artist Cornelis De Wael, who was active in Genoa as a painter and as a merchant of engravings, canvases, books and other objects; he was «the first and only artist to devote a series of prints entirely to the activity of slaves in port» in all of Europe[33] The twelve plates that make up the series, first published in 1645, show slaves while waiting on a pier, leaning against bales of merchandise; dry-docking a galley, drinking from a fountain, carrying a sail ashore; drawing water from a well, preparing pitch in a cauldron to caulk vessels, serving and eating their meal, mingling with soldiers and poor disreputable women, receiving their soup while a carcass is being butchered. The last scene in the series shows a slave working as a tooth puller. De Wael also dedicated a number of paintings (many of them lost) to the theme, which were iconographically close to the prints; one of these – on display in the exhibition – is to be the focus of attention here (fig. 4).

Both in the painting and in the prints, the slaves are always characterised by shaven heads and a topknot, sometimes covered by a cap, and an iron shackle on one ankle, without a chain (while an 18th-century engraving depicting two of them in Piazza Banchi, outside the port area, shows the presence of the latter); some have moustaches, and in scenes where enslaved people are shown at rest, one of them is usually smoking a long pipe[34].

The local characters who interacted with the slaves also play a significant role in the compositions. In the right part of the panting, an officer or "gen-

[31] Bono 2016, pp. 159-177; Virga 2024, pp. 113-118

[32] Bono 1994; Virga 2024; Zappia 2021.

[33] Stoesser 2018, I, p. 199. On the print series: Ivi, I, pp. 199-200, II, pp. 608-611 (with previous bibliography).

[34] Smoking was a habit particularly associated with enslaved people in other contexts as well (Massing 2012, p. 101, with particular reference to slaves of African descent). It was still mentioned in the late 18th century by a German traveller, favourably impressed by the slaves/tradesmen of Genoa who, according to him, were peacefully smoking their pipes while hawking their merchandise (Bono 2016, p. 163). Other contemporary descriptions evoke direr circumstances.

tiluomo di poppa" is shown talking to a "comito", who was responsible for managing and disciplining the crew, both at sea and in the port area; he was therefore accustomed to «adoprar il bastone, non meno che il fischietto»[35] (the whistle, used to convey orders, is depicted here in his left hand, attached to his clothes with a red cord). This scene is related to that illustrated in the ninth engraving in the series of prints (fig. 5), in which, however, there are some additional figures: in particular, between the two officers the "papasso" is also represented, a figure of authority within the slave community, of which he was the representative. He enjoyed some privileges over his companions, including an exemption from the obligation to wear the ankle shackle and the right to wear a turban and better-quality clothes in the oriental style[36].

With their wealth of detail, De Wael's works – based on the artist's direct experience as well as the knowledge of prints by Stefano Della Bella and others – clearly illustrate the role that images can play as "eyewitnesses" in historical research, provided that it is taken into account that «the testimony of images, like that of texts, raises problems of context, function, rhetoric, recollection (whether soon or long after the event), second-hand witnessing and so on»[37], and is influenced by agendas and intentions on the part of those who produce or commission them. Cornelis's extensive and varied output dedicated to aspects of everyday life (of which slaves at work were one) has been described as based on a «selective reality»[38]. Historians tend to think that these illustrations may have a relatively high degree of adherence to factual conditions, although there seems to be a downplaying of the harsher aspects of enslavement (for example, corporal punishments never appear)[39]. A crucial problem, which should not be overlooked – although it does not invalidate the usefulness of an in-depth analysis of these pictorial documents – is the absence of representations originating within the slave community, with reference to visual narratives (the same partially applies to textual sources, though some precious documents survive, such as letters recording the voices of enslaved persons); so that the reconstruction of the enslaved people's life in Genoa (as in many other contexts) is mainly based on external sources. These may also offer divergent takes. As far as pictorial testimonies are concerned, for instance, the undramatic tone of the scenes illustrated by De Wael contrasts with the openly tragic and violent depiction of incoming "new" slaves in the port of Genoa which Alessandro Magnasco would later give in his late maturity (from 1730-1735), in the context of a modality of representation that contains a moral judgement and an intent to denounce the cruelty of their treatment,

[35] Pantera 1614, p. 118.
[36] On the figure of the "papasso", see Virga 2024.
[37] Burke 2019 (first published in 2001), pp. 14-15.
[38] Stoesser 2018, vol. I, p. 206.
[39] See Castagneto 2008; Giacchero 1970, pp. 159-163.

in line with the enlightened ethical positions also expressed by the artist in works devoted to other subjects[40].

Domestic slaves were represented differently. They were generally not depicted in groups, but individually, in relation with and subordinate to the image of their masters (more often than not, their mistresses, as their figures were mostly inserted in female portraits), in an accessory role that served first and foremost to signal the social status of the sitter, but which could take on additional symbolic meanings. The young "paggio moro" (a Moor, i.e. a black African) – whose presence also allowed the artist to contrast his skin's dark colour to the whiteness of the lady's complexion – features in a sequence of important paintings (which have antecedents in the influential Venetian "incunabula" of this specific *genre*, in particular Titian's portrait of Laura Danti with her page), starting with such an iconic image as the portrait of Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo with the black page holding her parasol, painted by Van Dyck at the beginning of his stay in Genoa, in 1623[41]. Among the various known instances of this kind of images, two paintings from the early 18th century are presented here, both displayed in the exhibition. The first is a French portrait of an unknown lady painted in 1713 by François De Troy and acquired by Costantino Balbi, a refined art collector as well as diplomat and future *doge* of Genoa, who visited the painter's atelier in Paris and was portrayed by the artist[42]. In the lady's portrait – inventoried in 1724 in Costantino's palace in the via Balbi and copied in the following years (a replica survives, probably the one owned in 1749 by Giovanni Francesco II Brignole Sale, which attests the local success of the composition) a black page holds a silver basin. The sequence of gestures suggests that his mistress has just dipped a sponge into the basin's water and is now cleansing the boy's forehead (fig. 6 and fig. 7). This scene has been correctly identified as an illustration of the motif of "trying to whiten an Ethiopian"[43], a literary *topos* – signifying impossibility – of ancient origin and transversal fortune, rooted in the negative perception of dark skin, whose varied manifestations during the centuries have been recognized as part of the western construction of a racist imagery[44] . A portrait executed shortly afterwards, between 1715 and 1720, by Domenico Parodi, one of the most appreciated and versatile Genoese artists of the time, stages a simpler scene (fig. 8), in which an elegantly-livered black page with the customary pearl earring – clearly indebted to De Troy's model – holds a *corbeille* of flowers, of which

[40] Franchini Guelfi 2000, p. 347 e 2015, pp. 23-24.

[41] On the subject of portraits comprising the figures of black pages in Genoa, see Sanguineti 2024.

[42] On the painting, see D. Sanguineti, in Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 286-289.

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] Faloppa 2022.

his mistress picks one[45]. In this triumph of 18th-century, Arcadian grace, it is chilling to detect the discreet glimmer of the metal collar which signals the boy's condition of enslavement.

6. *Challenges and perspectives*

The "disassembling" of images and the analysis of their components in order to identify and communicate the stratification of meanings they convey, in close connection to the historical context in which they were produced (a goal of both "traditional" iconology and contemporary visual studies), was one of the purposes of the exhibition, and the results were shared through the interpretative materials available on-site for visitors, and the more in-depth studies gathered in the catalogue. The eloquence of the artworks themselves, the impact of the irreplaceable direct contact with centuries-old originals, was a calculated factor, facilitating rational ad emotional involvement. The outcomes confirmed the idea that exhibitions can be useful occasions and provide tools to increase awareness with regard to difficult heritage; at the same time, the research and organisational work that were carried out brought into focus some inherent challenges. One of them is the difficulty to retrieve and centre the voices and the points of view originating from the inside of represented communities – for instance enslaved people – for the paucity of surviving documents; another is the need of a wider recourse to participatory approaches involving potentially affected diverse communities[46]. In order to pursue this latter aim, the insights and knowledge gained though the exhibition will be part of a much broader project, the recently financed MSCA *CIRCE – Inclusive valorisation model for controversial cultural heritage in the mediterranean harbours and beyond* coordinated by Giuseppe Capriotti, which makes fostering inclusive and participatory approaches to difficult artistic heritage one of its primary objectives[47].

[45] Stagno, Sanguineti 2024, pp. 290-293.

[46] On the role of participatory approaches and initiatives in the vast and multi-faceted field of research on Islam and Heritage in Europe, see Macdonald *et al.* 2021.

[47] Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Staff Exchanges (Horizon-MSCA-SE-2024). CIRCE is coordinated by the University of Macerata and its consortium of partners is composed of Università di Genova; Universidad UNED – Madrid; Sveučilište u Splitu, Filozofski fakultet; Université de Tunis; Groupement professionnel de la Médina Mdinti; Hrvatska udruga likovnih umjetnika Split – HULU Split, with Pwani University in Kilifi and Livoi Benjamin Africa Nomads Art Space in Mombasa, Kenia, as associated partners.

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Appendix

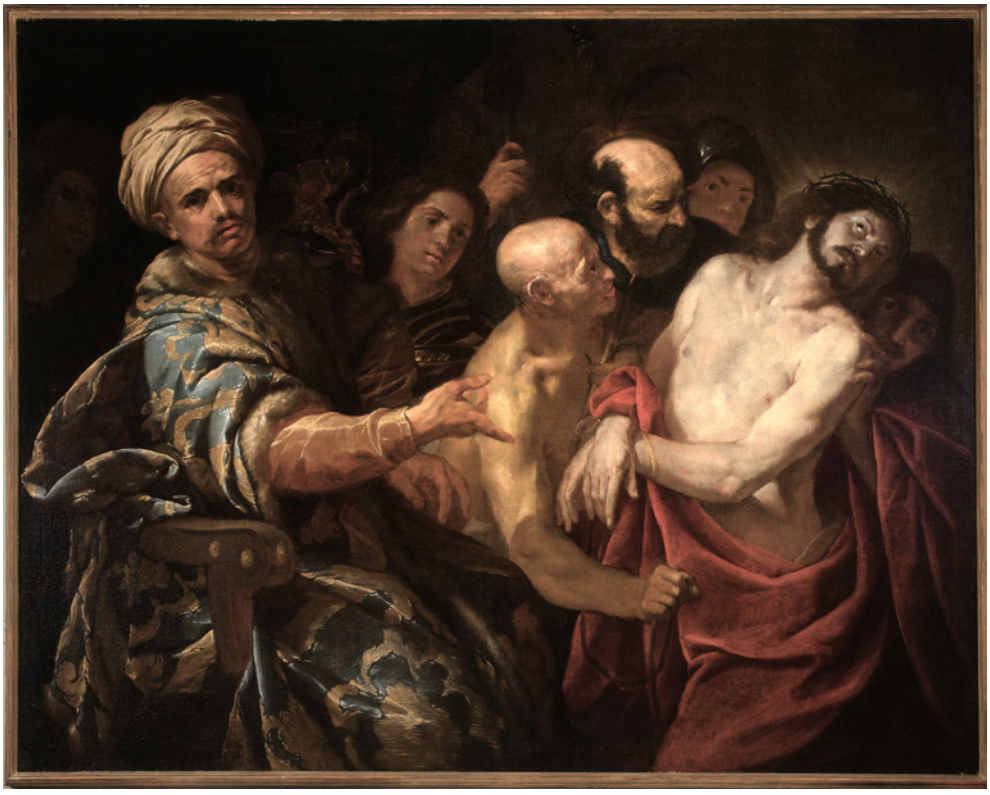

Fig. 1. Orazio De Ferrari, *Ecce Homo*, Private collection

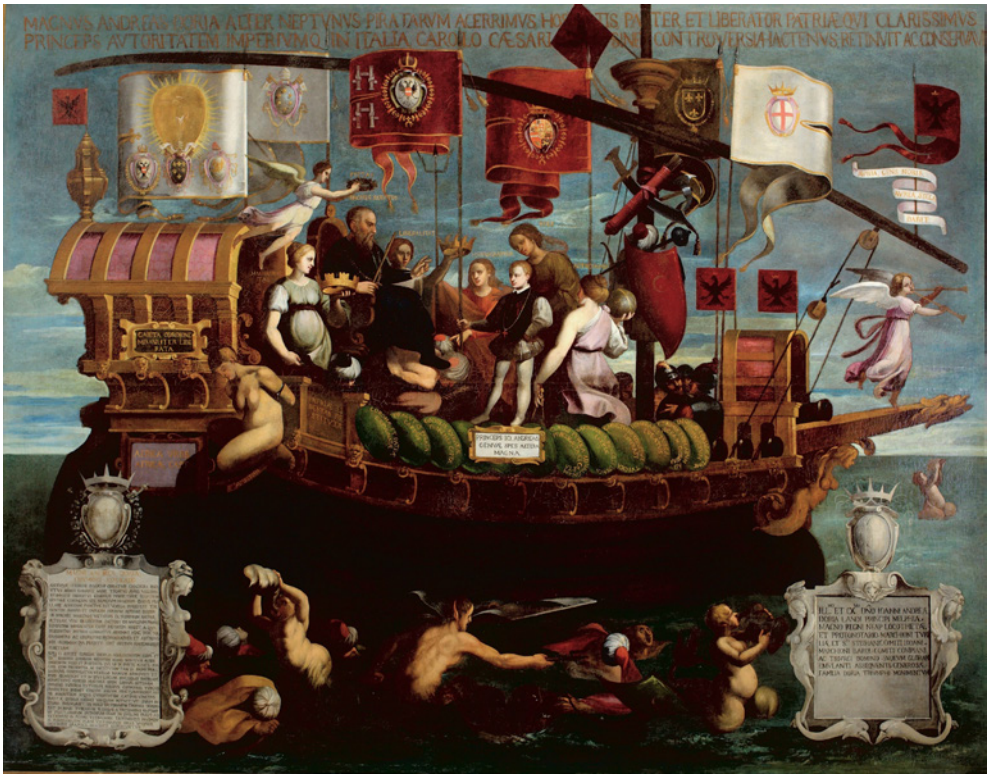

Fig. 2. Late 16th-century painter, *Triumph of Andrea Doria*, also called *The hand-over of power from Andrea Doria to his heir Giovanni Andrea*, Genoa, Palazzo del Principe

Fig. 3. Late 16th-century painter, *Triumph of Andrea Doria*, also called *The hand-over of power from Andrea Doria to his heir Giovanni Andrea*, Genoa, Palazzo del Principe, detail

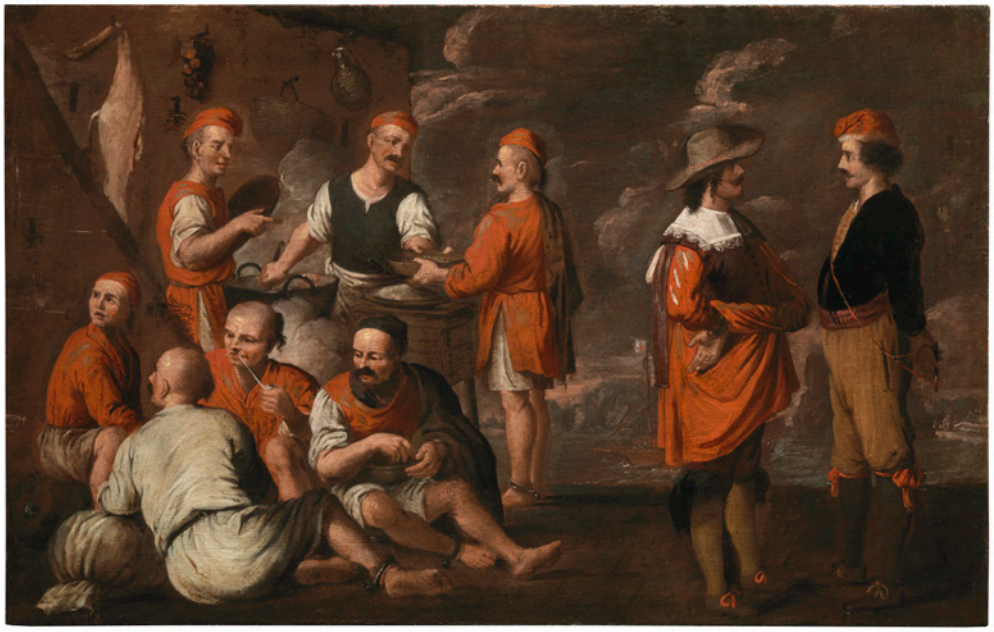

Fig. 4. Cornelis De Wael, *The slaves' meal*, Private collection

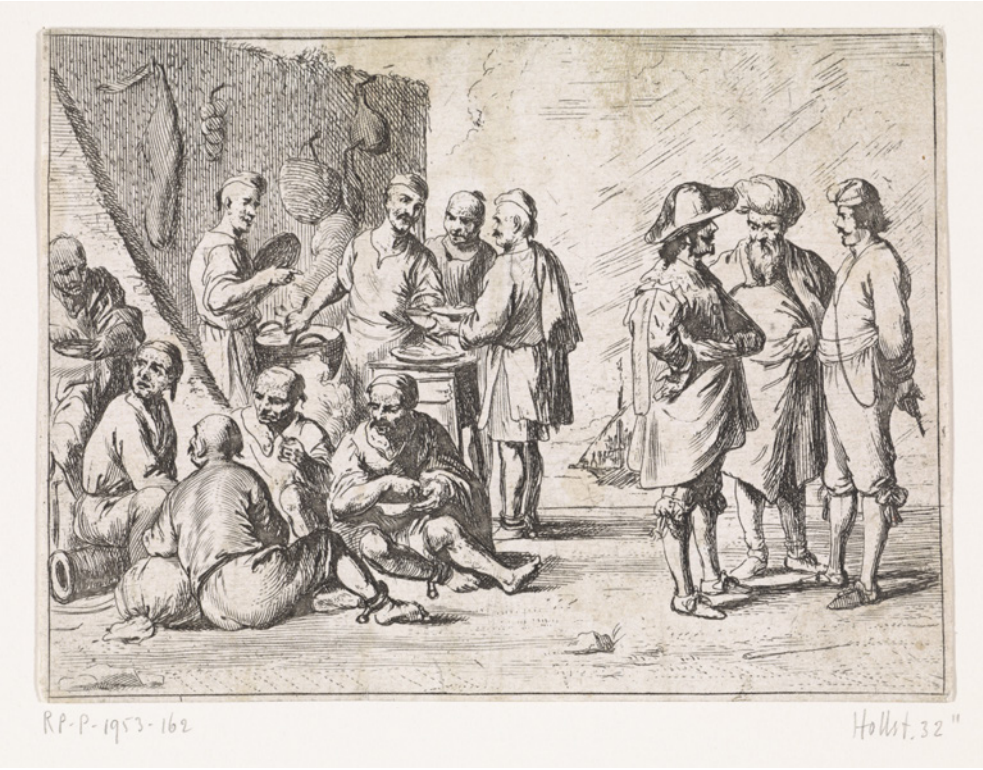

Fig. 5. Cornelis De Wael, *The slaves' meal*, ninth print of the series depicting the activities of galley-slaves, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

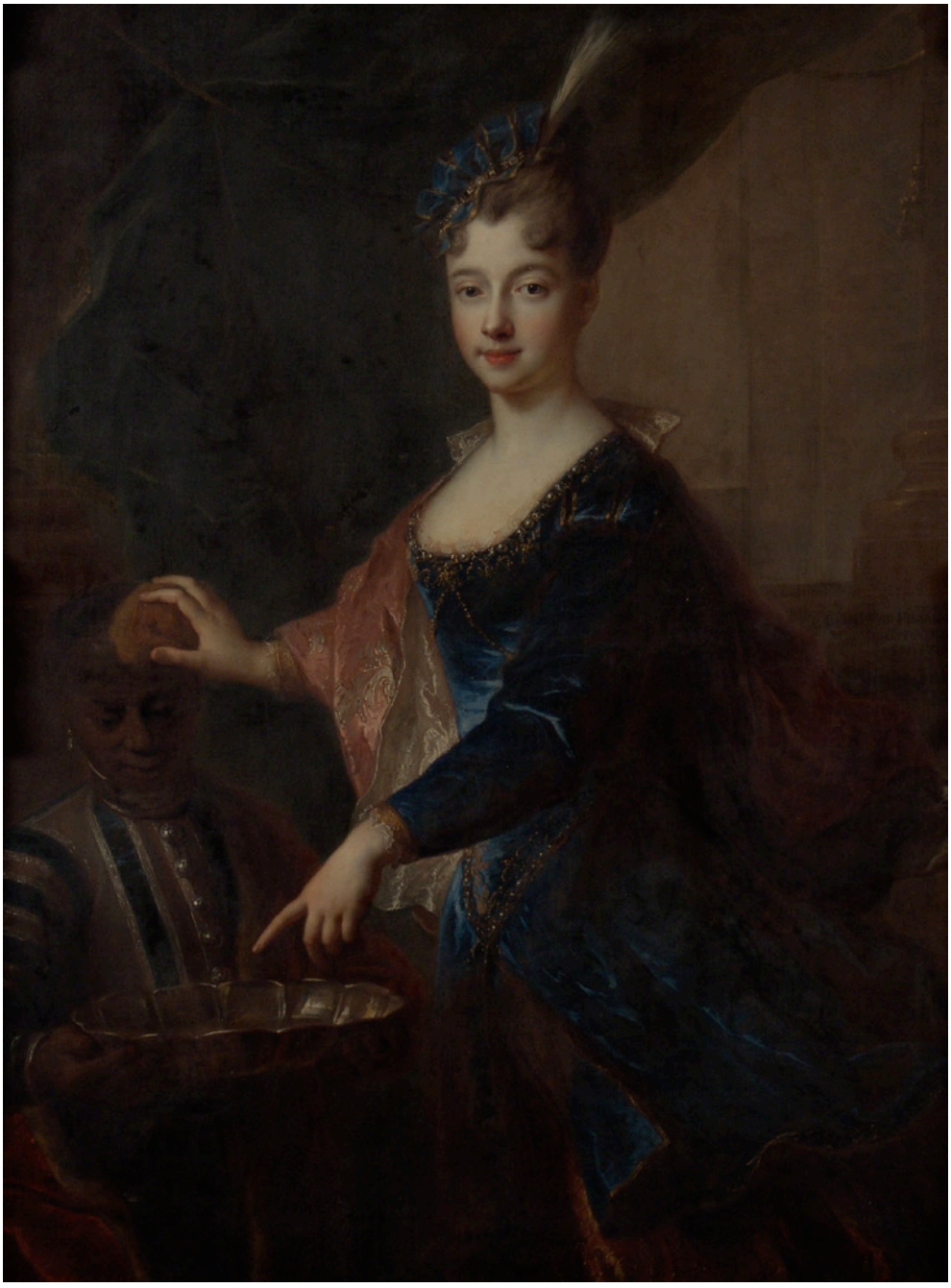

Fig. 6. François de Troy, *Lady with a black page*, Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta

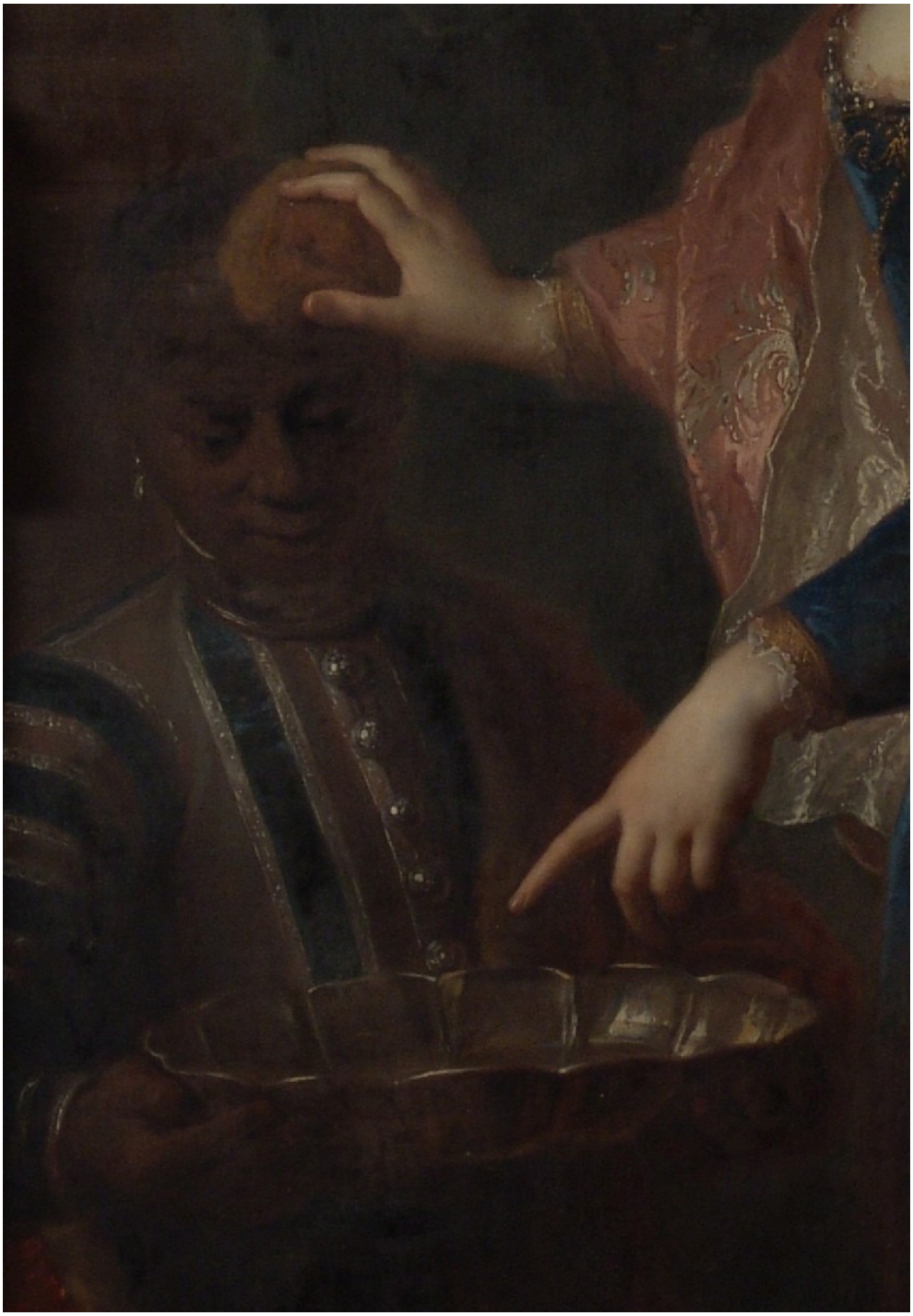

Fig. 7. François de Troy, *Lady with a black page*, detail, Sovrano Militare Ordine di Malta

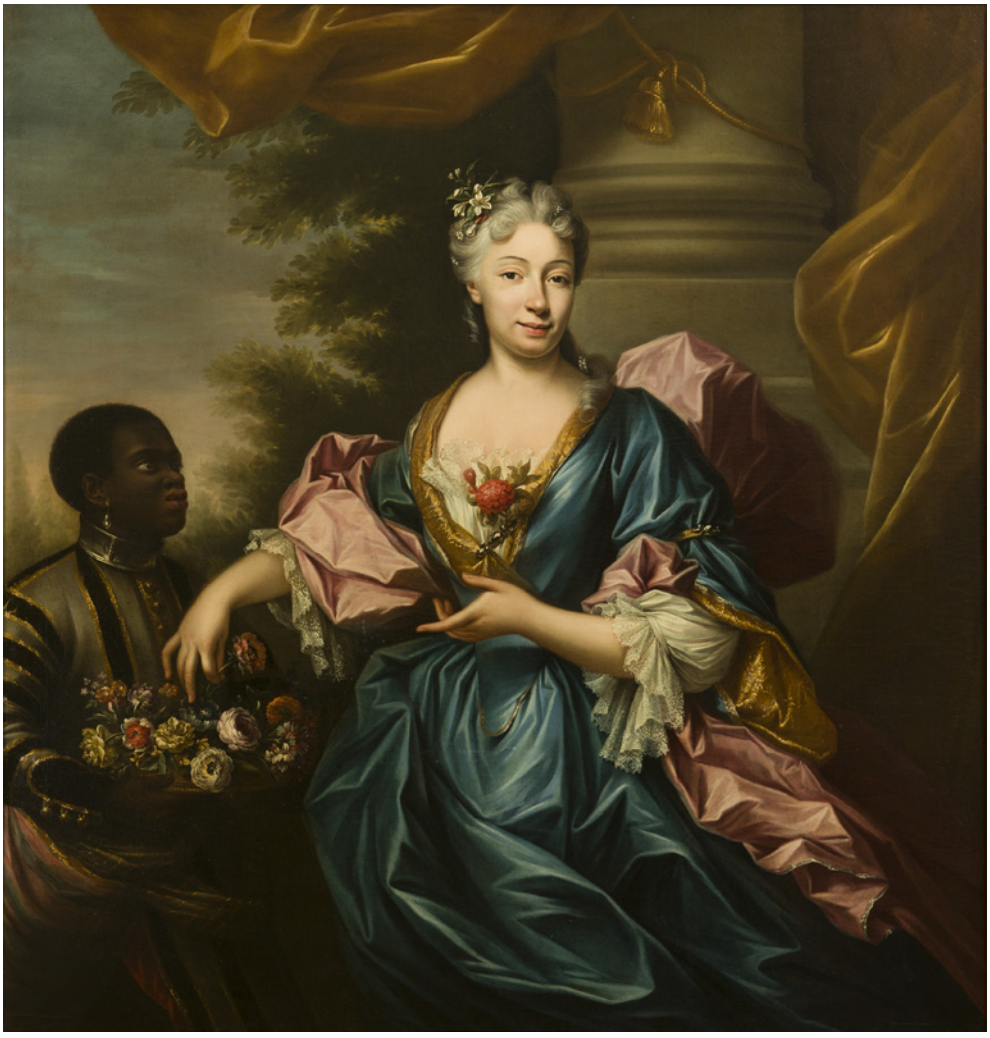

Fig. 8. Domenico Parodi, *Lady with a black page*, Genoa, Private collection

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