Twitter Thread by Summer Brennan ■



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I wanted to tell a little story about one of the most fascinating Parisian muses of the 19th century:

Jeanne Duval.

She was known in her time as "the Black Venus."

Very little is known about Duval for certain, but she inspired some of the most famous—and scandalous—poems of the era, written by her lover, the bad boy poet Charles Baudelaire. (If you put sunglasses on his statue in the Luxembourg gardens, he looks a bit like Bono).

Now, I should say, am not an expert on Jeanne Duval. There is an amazing book that you really, truly must read called "Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-century France" by @ParisNoire. Go buy it. It came out last year. It's ■ https://t.co/poNU0FQC9E

Baudelaire's poems about Jeanne were pretty racy for the time. In "Les Fleurs du Mal," his physical and emotional obsession with her is on full display. The fact that she was Black, a Creole woman from Haiti (he says), made them even more scandalous to White Parisian society.

The reaction to Baudelaire's poems about sex and death were so extreme that he was even prosecuted for creating "an offense against public morals." He was fined, but not imprisoned.

Here's one of his poems about Jeanne, original title "Sed non satiata" ("but not satisfied").

The image of Jeanne Duval as created by Baudelaire is as clear as any can be of a woman seen solely through the lens of an obsessive partner of 20 years: she's angelic, she's demonic, she's his saving grace, she's his worst nightmare, etc. etc.

But what do we know about her for certain? She was the unwed Baudelaire's "mistress" for 20 years, and lived with him—basically a common-law wife—on the Île Saint-Louis, on rue de la Femme Sans Tête (Headless Woman street) now called rue Le Regrattier (Regret It street.)

It's really too bad that most of what we know about Jeanne is filtered through the White men who knew her, especially Baudelaire. They had a very rocky relationship. She was likely born around 1820, met Baudelaire around 1840, broke up with him in 1862, then soon "disappeared."

She was an actress & dancer, but perhaps due to the use of pseudonyms in the press, there is sadly little to no record of her own artistic output. Despite her profound influence on him, many of Baudelaire's friends thought her presence ruined his image as a great French writer.

(And FYI, the new name of Headless Woman street is probably named after someone called Le Regrattier, but to a French-as-a-second-language person, the reference to regret is too apt not to notice on the address of a stormy love affair)

We haven't even had a very clear picture of what Jeanne Duval actually looked like. In the late 1850s or early 1860s, towards the end of their stormy relationship, Baudelaire made some drawings of her in his notebooks, but they are meant to represent her as she was when they met.

A few painters who knew Baudelaire *may* have painted Jeanne Duval, or almost painted her, or painted her and then painted her likeness out again (!), but there are actually no confirmed painted portraits of she who was known as one of the hottest women in Paris.

In 1855, painter Gustave Courbet made an enormous painting called "L'Atelier du peintre." On the far right he painted Baudelaire, with Jeanne just behind him. Then the lovers got in a fight, and Baudelaire had Courbet paint her out!! Only a shadow remains. https://t.co/GQzm3ka7tF

Then in about 1862, Édouard Manet, who was Baudelaire's close friend, does a portrait called "La Maîtresse de Baudelaire" (Baudelaire's Mistress) of a woman overwhelmed by enormous skirts. Here's the watercolor study.

(art thread paused, gotta start breakfast ■■■)

SO. Manet does this painting in about 1862, sometimes called Baudelaire's Mistress, or Baudelaire's Mistress Reclining, sometimes called Woman with a Fan, and the finished oil version is...somewhat less than flattering? It's at the The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest.

Consensus has long been that this is a portrait of Jeanne Duval, so much so that you can find it online & in exhibitions under a title that includes her name.

Here's the thing tho—and so far the cheese stands alone on this one, so be warned—I actually don't think it's Jeanne.

Starting in about 1857, Baudelaire was also involved with a famous French courtesan, a White woman named Aglaé Joséphine Savatier, better known as Appollonie Sabatier or "La Président." As well as being a sex worker, she was an artist, artist's model, and notorious party-thrower.

Excuse me *Apollonie.*

Apollonie Sabatier is perhaps best known for her work modeling for Auguste Clésinger's "Woman Bitten by a Serpent." But she has something really interesting in common with Édouard Manet as well...

In 1863, when Manet was the marquee artist in the scandalous, widely mocked "Salon des Refusés," Sabatier was one of the few women artists whose work was also exhibited. According to the show catalogue, she showed three miniatures.

(Paintings: Manet. Catalogue of Sabatier.)

We know that many of Baudelaire's friends thought that Jeanne Duval tarnished his image as "a great French writer" for a number of reasons, including racist ones. Did Manet think so too?

Scholars have speculated this may be why his painting "Baudelaire's Mistress" a) isn't the most flattering portrait ever and/or b) doesn't make her look very Black.

There is also another possibility, which is that the painting is of Apollonie Sabatier (seen left) and not Duval.

I think this is sad, since it would mean we don't actually have a portrait of Jeanne Duval by Manet. But it would make sense, if Baudelaire's friends were trying to downplay his involvement with Duval, for Manet to paint his *other* mistress and hence make her more official.

Fortunately, these were not the only suspected images of Jeanne Duval!

(taking a little break, I'll be back)

Right! So where were we? Ah yes, other suspected images of Jeanne Duval!

Another comes from Constantin Guys, a Dutch-born French painter, illustrator and journalist. Baudelaire was a big fan of his, even though Guys is mostly unknown today.

(Here's a portrait of Guys by Manet)

Baudelaire even wrote a big essay called “The Painter of Modern Life,” which a lot of scholars seem to think should have been about Manet, but it's not, it's about Guys.

So anyway, Guys did this drawing, which is now referred to as a "presumed" portrait of Jeanne Duval.

Is this Jeanne Duval? We don't really know. It might be.

But I'm most interested in the photographs taken by the guy known as the world's first celebrity photographer, Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, who adopted the nom de guerre "Nadar." (Below, a goofy self-portrait.)

So let's fast forward for a second to the late 20th century, when the Ghanaian-Scottish artist Maud Sulter (below) starts to work with a particular Nadar photograph from about 1855, that she identifies to be Jeanne Duval. https://t.co/V6jarrAGm5

Here is the photo by Nadar.

To my knowledge, it was formerly called just "young model, draped in black velvet, with loose hair," but the BNF has now added a tag with the name Jeanne Duval to a print of it in their online database https://t.co/7cTQIuopT8

Maud Sulter continues to do some incredible work with/about Jeanne Duval and this Nadar photo. Sulter's exhibition "Jeanne Duval: A Melodrama" is held at the National Galleries of Scotland in 2003. Tragically, Sulter passed away in 2008. https://t.co/vdai2mKXrv

Even without any further identification, you can see why Sulter would have flagged this photo as Jeanne Duval. The shadows around her eyes, her eyebrows, the little cleft in her chin. She also looks the way that Duval was described in texts by Baudelaire, but also by Nadar.

When Sulter first encountered the Nadar photo, it was captioned simply "Unknown Woman, c. 1860." She later wrote “There she stared at me, willing me to give her a name, an identity, a voice…" And that's what she did, through research and imagination.

(Photo: Maud Sulter)

So I guess this is where I come in, and the "discovery" I made in an archive while looking for a different artist's muse, that is the reason I wanted to share this thread in the first place despite not being an expert on Jeanne Duval. (more after a little break)