



TODAY'S  
MASTERS

# ELIZABETH COLOMBA RE-ENVISIONS THE PAST

Even a quick glance at the large-scale paintings of Elizabeth Colomba (b. 1976) presents unexpected contrasts — of modern and historic sensibilities, of contemporary and period settings, of France and the Caribbean — what the artist calls “the fusing of my two worlds.” Born and raised near Paris, she is from a family with roots on the French island of Martinique. Colomba’s art features a deep-seated acknowledgement of the past that bodes well for the future, allowing her to explore her dual background and reshape narratives touching on Black individualism and culture in the late 1800s.

Today Colomba works in a studio in midtown Manhattan, but she grew up in the Paris suburb of Épinay-sur-Seine. In search of opportunity, her parents had relocated from Martinique to France in 1971 with Colomba’s older sister, Myriam; the artist was born five years later. Her creative gifts were apparent early on. In fact, Colomba proclaimed at the age of 6, “I’m going to be Picasso!”

And so her journey began: Colomba’s parents encouraged their younger daughter to experiment with watercolors and displayed her creations throughout the Caribbean restaurant they operated for three decades. When she was 8, her school class was asked to replicate impressionist and post-impressionist paintings as Father’s Day gifts. Already confident she could copy a Van Gogh portrait inch by inch, Colomba went on to do just that. It came easily to her, and she knew — as did her family — that she was onto something.

The young artist adored books as much as the visual arts, and indeed a storytelling approach has permeated her artistry. Her oil on canvas *The Library* testifies to this: a young Black woman in a stunning period outfit poses by the window of



*The Library*, 2005, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in., private collection



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*Biddy Mason, 2009, oil on canvas,  
30 x 20 in., private collection*

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(LEFT) *Winter*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72 x 36 in., available from the artist ■ (BELOW) *Spring*, 2019, oil on canvas, 72 x 36 in., available from the artist



an immaculate home library furnished with a patterned rug, a globe encased in glass, a bust of a white man, a floral-printed screen, and hundreds of books filling the shelves. The scene Colomba sets is peaceful, empowering, and evocative of her classical training. It's also an immersive experience reshaping the trajectory of Black period paintings — but we'll get to that.

As a teenager, Colomba spent many a free hour at the local library, reading such books as *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, a multi-volume scholarly publication that laid the foundation for her artistic voice. Edited by the art historian Ladislav Bugner and underwritten by John and Dominique de Menil, the French-born collectors-philanthropists based in Houston, this series documents the appearance of Black subjects in Western paintings and sculptures. Colomba recalls that she found these volumes pleasantly surprising, and so she forged her own path to re-evaluate Black women in visual art. Among her objectives is to reveal that a Black subject “in a period setting is no longer synonymous with subservience and, by extension, does not instill fear or mistrust.”



*Laure (Portrait of a Negresse)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in., collection of JP Morgan Chase

the transition to painting full-time in 2007.

Soon Colomba was winning attention for blending Old Master techniques and modern concerns into something that is almost pre-contemporary — a means of, in her own words, “reclaiming history and anchoring the spirit of the African diaspora by redefining its place.” Her project involves a form of visual reappropriation — a mental reset, if you will, that reconfigures Black people not in servile roles, but in narratives showcasing their honor and cultural sophistication. Colomba explains that her characters are recognizable in a sense, though ambiguous by name or identity. “I take them out of that context and give them a full scene,” she once told *Vogue*. Each scene conveys a sense of autonomy in the way the figures view themselves, and contemplation and reflection always play a critical role.

Consider Colomba’s *Four Seasons* series, composed of four 6 x 3-foot canvases, each featuring the full-length figure of a luxuriously dressed Black woman. *Spring* depicts 12-year-old Léa, the artist’s niece, barefoot and clad in pink, determinedly extending an arm upward to pick roses. Its slightly

She seeks to make each of her subjects “the center of her own story,” and with her paintings of regal, solitary women, she has done just that.

Colomba undertook classical training in Paris at the *École supérieure des arts et industries graphiques*, nicknamed the *École Estienne*. This was followed by a year-long stint at the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*. She spent much of her free time at the *Musée du Louvre* studying key works by Delacroix, Ingres, and the Dutch masters (particularly Vermeer, whose tranquil scenes clearly resonate with her).

Upon completing her training in 1995, Colomba built a studio in her parents’ apartment, supplementing her income by working for advertising agencies. Three years later, she and a friend headed to Los Angeles to learn English while helping to create film sets, but soon she was developing storyboards and script illustrations. For the next eight years, Colomba lived in a spacious West Hollywood apartment, painting daily in her home studio and covering her expenses through illustration commissions for films like Tom Ford’s *A Single Man*. But in the early 2000s there were few connections between the movie industry in Los Angeles and Manhattan’s art world; while dining at the Chateau Marmont one evening, Colomba realized she would have to move to New York in order to pursue her true career goals. She made



*Judith*, 2007, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in., private collection

desaturated tone owes to the fact that Colomba painted the first layer in the Old Master technique of grisaille and added the color later.

The three remaining seasons from the series are no less captivating; in *Winter*, Colomba's mother, who died in 2018, takes the proverbial center stage. Her close friend, the curator Dr. Kalia Brooks Nelson, posed for *Fall*, while *Summer* depicts a model the painter spotted on the street and promptly asked to photograph. Each Black figure is transported to the Belle Époque, living among luxuries that would have been inaccessible to most women of color in France then.

Speaking of the Belle Époque, viewers will immediately discern Colomba's fascination with the late 1800s. Slavery was abolished in France in 1848, so Colomba places her subjects in the transitional decades afterward, allowing them to take ownership of their lives and stories. For example, *Laure (Portrait of a Negresse)* showcases the subservient, austere maid from Manet's famous *Olympia* (1863), but now she is wearing richly colored clothing and holding an umbrella while walking along a cobblestoned street near Paris's fashionable Parc Monceau. This painting was much noticed in New York City between October 2018 and February 2019 while hanging at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery in the groundbreaking exhibition *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today*. (Alas, it was not included when this show moved to the Musée d'Orsay in Colomba's native Paris.) The exhibition ideally suited Colomba's artistry through its examination of the changing ways in which Black figures have been represented in modern art. Many of the historical artists represented there shared Colomba's determination to defy current expectations, focusing instead on underlying elements related to the individual.

Today Colomba continues to blend history not only with her own imagination, but also with often enigmatic, symbolist evocations of mythology, religion, and the feminine sacred. In this current climate focused on addressing systemic racism, her approach is especially intriguing: each individual depicted is in full control of her own life, a vision connecting the past, present, and future. ●



*Daphne*, 2013, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 36 x 24 in., Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City

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