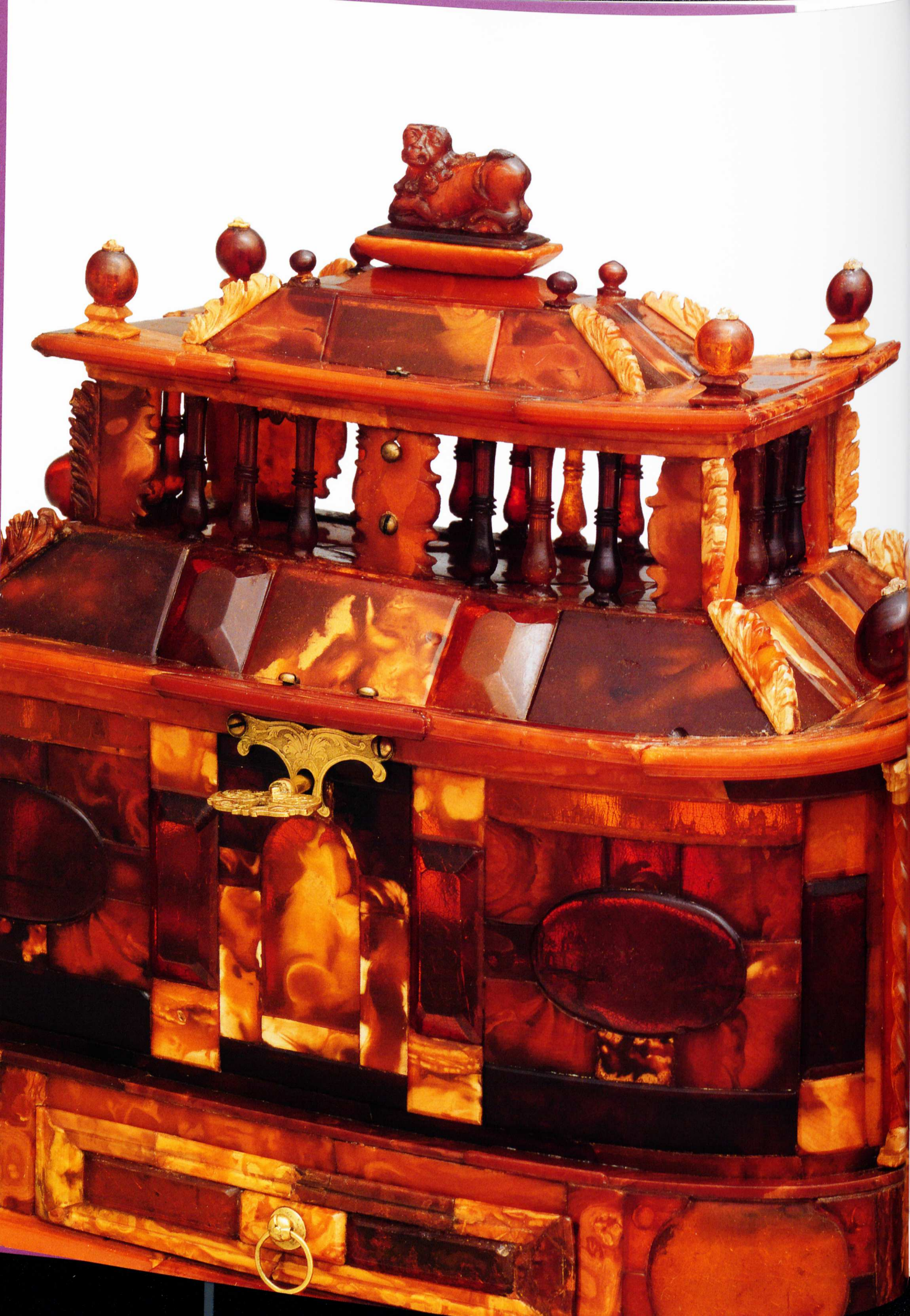


HOW TO READ

European Decorative Arts

Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide

THE MET

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London

7

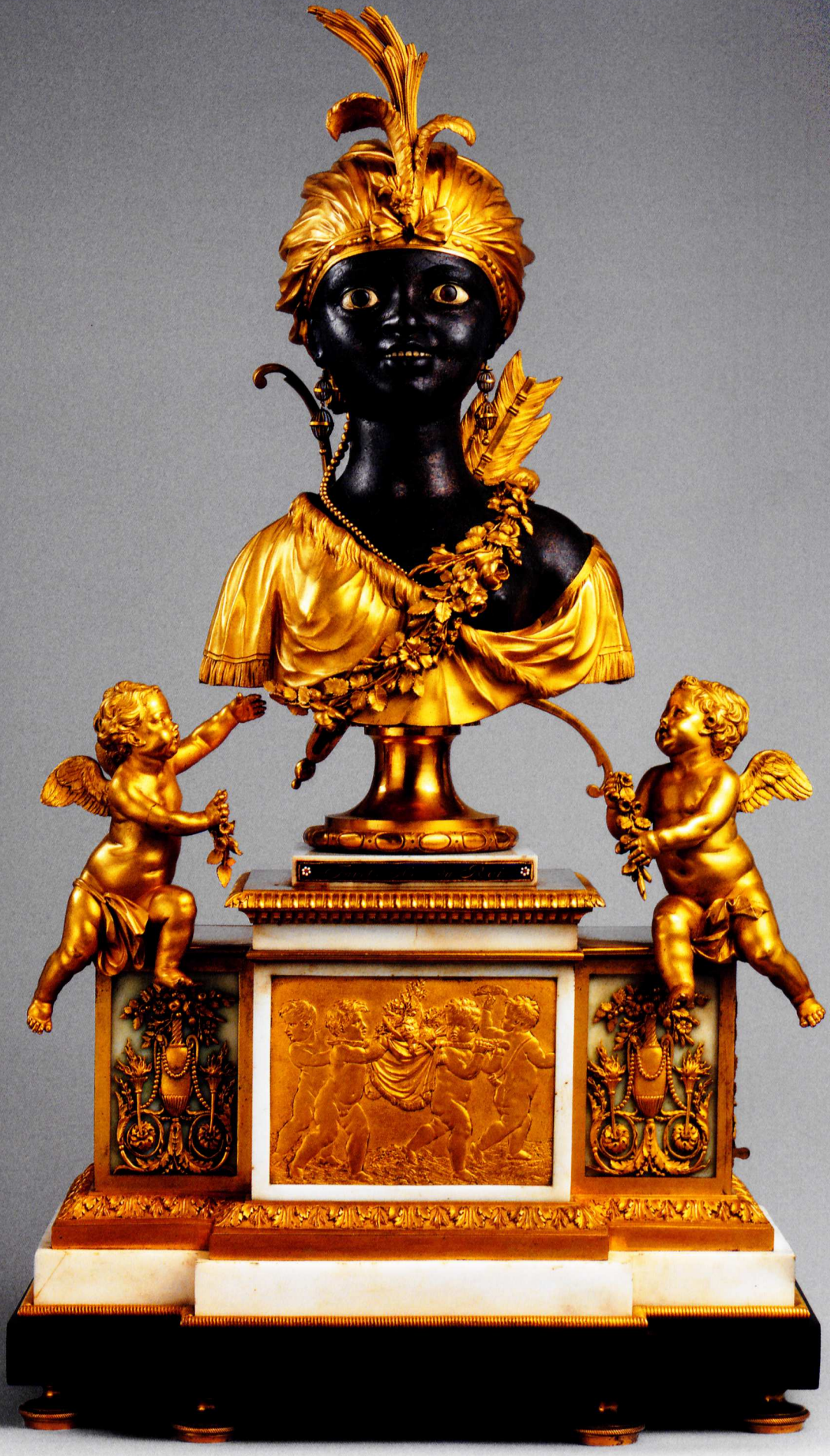
Mantel Clock with Musical Movement

Jean Baptiste André Furet (French, ca. 1720–1807)
French (Paris), ca. 1784
Case: gilded and lacquered bronze and marble; Movement (in bust): brass and steel with enameled hour and minute chapter rings (in head); Miniature organ with pipes and bellows (in base): brass, steel, and leather, 29 × 16¼ × 9 in. (73.7 × 41.3 × 22.9 cm)
Gift of Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1958 (58.75.127)

Novelty inevitably attracts attention, and this was certainly no different in the late eighteenth century. In July 1784, a clock of this model was among three extraordinary timepieces on display in the shop window of an esteemed Parisian clockmaker. According to the anonymous chronicle *Mémoires secrets*, these objects provoked much interest: "One goes to see at the watchmaker M. Furet three clocks of very unusual composition. The first represents the bust of a Black woman whose head is exceptionally made.... Upon pulling one [earring] the hour is described in the right eye and the minutes in the left. Upon pulling the other a musical movement plays a succession of airs." The clock, which is signed *Furet H^ger du Roi* (Furet Clockmaker to the King), could also be activated automatically as the hour struck, and the tunes it played were produced on a spring-driven cylinder organ hidden in its base. That at least five of these highly unusual timepieces were created, one of which was acquired for Queen Marie Antoinette, indicates the high regard in which the objects were held.

Automata, mechanical devices that could move or perform certain tasks, were eagerly collected in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Such man-made artworks (*artificialia*) joined products of nature (*naturalia*), ethnographic artifacts, and archaeological pieces in the cabinets of curiosities known as *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* (see no. 34). The technological ingenuity of this timepiece illustrates the continued interest in scientific measurements during the Age of Enlightenment. To satisfy the demand for new and different models, French clockmakers frequently employed mythological or allegorical figures to decorate their cases. The choice of a Black figure for a bust, however, is unusual and conveys a racialized narrative.

Actively involved in the slave trade, France shipped thousands of Africans to its overseas colonies to serve as a workforce for the production of sugar, coffee, cotton, and tobacco. While emancipation decrees of 1571 and 1691



promised slaves their freedom upon arrival in France, these edicts were routinely ignored during the eighteenth century when plantation owners returned to Europe with their servants. In fact, various French laws issued at the time show an increasingly prejudiced attitude toward non-Europeans. Legislation in 1777 went as far as to forbid *gens de couleur* (people of color) from entering the country. Viewed in the context of French colonialism, this clock's mechanism presses the woman into a twofold servitude—not only to tell time but also to amuse its owners—and, in so doing, cleverly but cruelly reflects the bias of the period.

With the extravagantly bejeweled turban and garment baring the shoulder and breast, the bust evokes the exoticized (and eroticized) Black female servant frequently depicted in Western fantasies of Near Eastern and North African harem scenes. The slightly parted lips, suggestive of sensuality, illustrate European presumptions as to the inherent lasciviousness of women of color. In this light, the clock could be understood as an expression of Turquerie, the fascination with Turkish culture fueled by travel reports, Ottoman embassies, and descriptions in the influential *Thousand and One Nights*, first published in French between 1704 and 1717.

Turquerie influenced all aspects of eighteenth-century arts, from dress to operas, plays to portraiture, and even architecture. In the last quarter of the century, *boudoirs* and *cabinets turcs*, small private rooms in the Turkish style, were made for Marie Antoinette and her brother-in-law the comte d'Artois at the palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleau. Decorated with camels, turbaned pashas, crescent moons, and pearl motifs, these interiors show a fictionalized and idealized view of the Near East as a place of fabled luxury and riches—if not of assignations and intrigue. This musical mantel clock would have been a fitting object for such a setting, sustaining prevailing imperialistic prejudices while presenting itself as an ostensibly "neutral" object.