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“Deceived by Misrepresentation”: An Examination of Nicolino Calyo’s Servants at a Pump

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of Art and Art History from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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“Deceived by Misrepresentations”:
An Examination of Nicolino Calyo’s Servants at a Pump

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Advisor, Susan Webster
April 2019
Introduction

This paper explores the negotiation of visual culture and public space by African Americans in antebellum New York through an examination of the nineteenth-century painting *Servants at a Pump* by Italian-American artist Nicolino Calyo (figure 1). During the nineteenth century, artistic modes of expression and social codes regarding the use of public green space sought to limit the representation and visibility of racial minorities. In visual culture, the mode of genre painting attempted to order and confine certain groups of people. At the same time, mandated and informal laws excluded African Americans and people of low socioeconomic classes from participation in the growing trend of public parks. Each of these overarching conventions segmented the population and exacerbated social divides. Calyo’s painting speaks to each of these conventions in different ways.

The title of this project comes from an editorial in the all-black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, from 1827. Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, founders and editors of the journal at the time, spoke to the burgeoning activist voice of the African American community noting, “Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick [sic] been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.”¹ By co-opting this title for my own research, I hope to highlight the contested politics of representation in antebellum American. The phrase, in the context of my research, addresses present-day audiences of this painting and artist. My project will challenge possible assumptions regarding this artist, his oeuvre, and the representation of his subjects in *Servants at a Pump*. By examining the navigation and negotiation of public space and visual culture by African Americans and European immigrants,

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this thesis attempts to undertake a more nuanced exploration of the role of visibility and representation in social development.

Social and artistic conventions of the nineteenth century (such as open space restrictions and genre painting) tended to skew people’s perception regarding racial and ethnic minorities. By appearing truthful or objective, such representations or statements undermined individuals’ ability to fully participate in society. Nicolino Calyo’s painting *Servants at a Pump* from 1840 engages with genre painting techniques and contemporary park politics but defies the usual oppressive social and artistic conventions. A closer look at this painting, in the context of contemporary social history and Calyo’s larger oeuvre, suggests a more nuanced representation of urban ecology. Calyo’s subjects—a group of African American laborers—appear to resist social and political norms as they assert themselves in public space. In addition, Calyo’s meticulous detailing of the urban landscape setting grounds the scene in real history and provides a more concrete description of life in antebellum New York. Ultimately, this painting reflects a unique blend of Old World techniques and ideologies with stories of burgeoning independence and identity development present in antebellum American society.

This project was inspired by an internship I completed during the summer and fall of 2018 with the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. One of the primary goals of my internship was to create digital learning modules that exposed audiences to visual literacy. Through research for one of these Learning Labs, I came across the painting titled *Servants at a Pump*. An image of the painting had been used in promotional materials for a museum event. I was curious about the context surrounding the painting—who was the artist, where was the setting, had the subjects been identified? Citing a lack of time and
resources, the museum could not offer me this information. Only the artist’s name and original title of the painting are identified by a period inscription on the stretcher of the canvas.²

The painting resided in storage, untouched and unexamined. I continued developing Learning Labs with superficial information I had gleaned from gallery websites and cursory Internet searches. Still, the painting had captured my attention. My curiosity motivated me to dig deeper into the story behind this painting. I wanted to know how and why this apparent portrait of freed African Americans had been created.³ I was especially compelled by the artist’s Italian heritage. I wanted to know how these two “outsider” groups interacted outside the space of the painting and how that potentially influenced the creation of this work.

In subsequent research, I discovered that previous scholarship on this painting and particular artist was sparse. Born in 1798 to an Italian naval officer, Nicolino Visconte di Calyo was an Italian-born American painter during the nineteenth century (figure 2). Classically trained in European techniques and styles, he emigrated to America in 1833 after participating in an unsuccessful riot against Austria’s Ferdinand I. Calyo found a home in New York, where he became enamored of the scenery and the inhabitants. Although regarded for his watercolor landscapes of the city, especially his gouache depictions of the Great Fire of 1835, Calyo also published a series of drawings depicting various local artisans and merchants. The artist resided in New York until his death in 1884.⁴

Margaret Sloane Patterson produced what is, to my knowledge, the only comprehensive biography of Nicolino Calyo for the American Art Journal in 1982. A trustee of The New-York Historical Society and a former assistant in the Paintings Department of the Metropolitan

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³ In the context of this paper I use the terms “African American” and “black” interchangeably to refer to Americans of black African descent.
Museum of Art, Patterson also authored *Views of Old New York, Catalogue of the William Sloane Collection* (1968). Building on Patterson’s research, I compiled records regarding Calyo’s immigration and census accountment from the New-York Historical Society. This material allowed me to track his movements and more accurately approximate his age at important life events, such as his move to New York and his painting of *Servants at a Pump*.5 I have utilized newspaper records to situate Calyo in the nineteenth-century New York scene. While he lived and worked in Baltimore and Philadelphia for periods of time, his life in New York is most interesting to me because it contextualizes his experiences during the time, he created *Servants at a Pump*.

Drawing on lectures and conversations with Professor Ely, my research attempts to understand the racial landscape in which this painting was created. In formulating my thesis, I questioned how much influence the contemporary racial hierarchy had on Calyo’s interpretation of his subjects. I considered Calyo’s political involvements in Europe. I juxtaposed his personal involvements with his pictorial interests, especially his depictions of vendors and street laborers.

This painting very much follows traditional genre painting formulas and techniques. With advice from Professor Webster, I completed a visual analysis of the setting, characters, and construction of the painting. I used this visual evidence to support my assertions regarding access to public space and the social position of African Americans at the time. Through a comparative analysis with other works within Calyo’s oeuvre, as well as similar works by contemporary artists, I was able to construct a richer understanding of the painting’s formal and stylistic

5 A passenger list of immigrants to Baltimore from foreign ports lists Calyo as 35 years of age in 1833. A New York census record from 1855, twenty-two years later, however, lists him as 53, although the penmanship is hard to decipher. A census from 1870 records his age as 70, but 10 years later, he is listed as 75. New York Historical Society Archives, New York, New York, “List of Passengers entered in the District of Baltimore, by Vessels from Foreign Ports, 1833,” n.p.
elements. Calyo’s depictions of laborers and his interest in the “other” informed my interpretation of the painting.

I explored this painting through several lenses, one being urban ecology. On Professor Braddock’s suggestion, I traced public response and interactions with green space in antebellum New York. I examined the racial and socioeconomic barriers present in these “public” spaces. This allowed me to look at *Servants at a Pump* with the knowledge that African Americans, by and large, were prohibited from using the same public space as white citizens. Despite the end of slavery in New York, black residents faced certain social and political obstacles. The segregation of public green space pushed me to question how the black community thrived in a racist society. This led me to further research Weeksville, the supposed setting of the painting, which was a successful all-black community in antebellum New York.

Unlike other contemporary all-black communities, Weeksville was not founded on an agricultural base. Established in 1838 by James Weeks, a free person of color, Weeksville developed into a thriving all-black political power base. Weeks purchased a substantial amount of land from another free African-American man, Henry Thompson, setting the precedent for a community of land-owning, politically savvy blacks. The settlement was located in present-day Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. African Americans transformed the town into a hub for economic growth and advancement. The community supported several businesses as well as schools, churches, and an orphanage. Weeksville residents circulated one of the first all-black newspapers, *The Freedman’s Torchlight.* Later in the nineteenth century, Weeksville became a

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8 Ibid, 3.
refuge for southern blacks fleeing slavery and for northern blacks who desired to escape racial violence and draft riots in New York and other cities.\(^9\)

Sumpter Priddy Gallery in Alexandria, VA, the art gallery that originally housed *Servants at a Pump*, determined that Weeksville was the setting of the painting.\(^10\) After communication with the gallery and the Weeksville Historical Society, I have chosen to challenge this reading. Calyo’s inscription on the canvas places the scene in Brooklyn. The building (or buildings) visible in the left background of this painting has yet to be conclusively identified, but it may represent the First Reformed Dutch Church (1834-1835), designed by well-known American architect Minard Lafever. At the time, this church was the most prominent classical building in town. Designed in the Greek Revival style, the church was constructed of brick covered in stucco to imitate white marble and was located on the south side of what is now Joralemon Street, near Court Street, in present-day Brooklyn Heights. The First Reformed Dutch Church, however, did not have a steeple, which could mean that the tower belongs to a separate, unidentified building behind the church.\(^11\)

Additionally, the building on the left of the boulevard could represent the artist’s rendition of the proposed Brooklyn City Hall as it might have looked upon completion. In 1835, architect Calvin Pollard submitted a plan for its construction to a design competition and won. Builders managed to lay the cornerstone and foundations by 1836, but the Bank Panic of 1837 brought the project to a halt. Construction did not resume until 1845, when it was continued with a revised and simplified design by a different architect. The incomplete City Hall finally opened

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\(^10\) Sarah Kate Gillespie, the former Curator of Fine Arts at the Brooklyn Historical Society, helped Sumpter Priddy with architectural analysis and ultimate placement of the painting’s setting.

in 1848 and is currently located on the north side of Joralemon Street, between Court and Adams Streets.\textsuperscript{12}

These buildings are located, as they were in the 1800s, in downtown Brooklyn, an area three miles away from the boundaries of Weeksville. This indicates that earlier assumptions about the placement of the painting’s setting were incorrect. Residents from Weeksville could have traveled the distance on the Long Island Railway or by foot. To engage in commerce, settlers in Weeksville, as well as earlier Dutch inhabitants of the area, depended on downtown Brooklyn’s access to docks, warehouses, and ferries.\textsuperscript{13} Images of City Hall, including a photograph of the front of the building, as well as a print from the latter half of the 1800s reveal that there was a park with a fountain directly in front of the building (figures 3 and 4). In addition, a long, dirt boulevard stretches parallel to the City Hall building in either direction (figure 4). This is the most likely placement of the scene in the painting \textit{Servants at a Pump}.

Although I have combed the literature to the best of my ability, my thesis remains incomplete. The lack of primary source documentation regarding Calyo presented a challenge in pursuing a conclusive interpretation of his painting. Newspapers and legal documents provide objective and summary information. Personal communications or diary entries from the artist regarding his paintings would have been helpful in discerning his view of New York and its varied residents. My research also lacked a source of evidence for Calyo’s business in the art market. I could uncover little evidence of how he found patrons, how he executed exhibitions, or where he derived his primary source of income. Because of these omissions, I was unable to accurately determine the original intention and audience for this painting.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Wellman, \textit{Brooklyn’s Promised Land}, 25.
While much of this thesis is therefore speculative, I hope that my curation of contextual material supports my argument. I understand that my research on this painting could have far-reaching consequences for the painting itself. It is my hope that Nicolino Calyo’s *Servants at a Pump* will be publicly exhibited and thereby illuminate a critical time in American history when African Americans and immigrants negotiated the visual culture and urban space of antebellum New York.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the social hierarchy in the United States rapidly changed. In response to increased job opportunities in the industrializing North, European immigrants and Southern migrants surged into cities such as New York. The influx of new peoples and ideas threatened white Americans’ supposed supremacy and sense of social order. Although aided by their white complexion, many European immigrants—especially those from Southern Europe—faced discrimination while attempting to assimilate into the dominant American culture. Cast as the “other” by whites, Southern European immigrants identified with the social exclusion experienced by racial minorities.¹⁴

As America prepared for the Civil War, racial tensions in the United States intensified. America’s racial hierarchy grew increasingly more complex as a result. Black Americans faced persecution from both native-born white Americans and European immigrants. The sanctioning of public space in particular revealed the racial biases held by many New Yorkers. European immigrants, though initially excluded, were incorporated more readily into mainstream society. African Americans were seen as immoral and representative of the ills of the city, thus preventing them from gaining full access to public spaces, such as parks, in the city. In response to the discrimination, many African Americans formed all-black settlements throughout New

York City. These communities provided separate spaces for African Americans’ development and well-being. Still, white Americans feared the dissolution of racial boundaries.

Fear of losing control manifested itself in whites’ desire to dominate both physical and painted spaces. They attempted to reclaim “their” public places. The rise of genre painting in the antebellum United States reflected the rapidly shifting socio-political environment. Not exclusive to socially powerful painters, the conventions of genre painting allowed artists to establish order and exercise some dominance over their subjects. As Elizabeth Johns argues, although “typing often occurs from the apex down…it is also undertaken by human beings in middling situations.”15 The mode of genre painting typically flourished during times of social restructuring when opportunities for political, social, and economic advancement enlarged for marginalized populations.16 Genre paintings and “portraits” of character types explored and reflected contemporary social relations. Nicolino Calyo, an Italian immigrant artist, used this function of representation to explore his own social reality in antebellum New York.

**Servants at a Pump: A Visual Analysis**

Calyo’s engaging genre scene constitutes an unusually early representation of African-Americans in an urban American setting. The artist has depicted in detail the clothing and accessories that identify each character and his or her livelihood.

This oil-on-canvas painting shows seven African-American individuals gathered around a water pump. From left to right, these figures include a young boy working the pump handle, clad in brown pants and jacket with a blue shirt. To his right, a laundress wearing a pink dress and white head wrap sits on a basket of clothing. Across the fountain from her stands a male carriage

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16 Ibid, xii.
driver in a wide-brimmed straw hat, wearing a fitted blue waistcoat and crisp white shirt with a shawl collar. He holds a long horsewhip and stands with his right leg propped up on the edge of the basin. In front of him, a young boy in a red shirt playfully drinks from the pump's spout. At the center of the group, a scullery maid carrying a wash pail wears a blue shirt and a full green, pleated skirt, partially covered by a white apron. A pink scarf is draped across her shoulders and chest, and she dons a multicolor patterned head wrap. Across from the scullery maid, a domestic cook, identified by the basket of market goods hanging from his left arm, which includes peaches and greens, stands with his back to the viewer. He wears slim-fitting trousers and a short, black overcoat atop a white shirt and clutches two still-feathered fowl in his right hand. The last member of the group is a nursemaid dressed in a long white gown. She holds a baby on her right hip and uses a green parasol to shade the two of them. A black dog, possibly belonging to the same family as the nursemaid’s charge, lies on the ground behind her.

All characters except the woman and baby are located on a square pavement of red brick. The water pump sits in the middle of the pavement, surrounded by a low-walled, rectangular basin. The pump is a rectangular stone pillar topped with a small dome. A spout emerges halfway up the pillar, and the pump handle is a lever that protrudes from the adjacent pillar side. Water flows from the spout into the basin below. The scene is set on a long green in a spacious tree-lined park. The broad avenue that disappears into the distance behind the figures, lined on the right with a row of weeping willows and on the left by a wooded lot of deciduous trees, helps to create perspective for the scene and gives a pleasant aspect to the town. A porticoed structure with bell tower and steeple anchors the scene on the distant left. Opposite it, on the right, a five-bay classical structure with a low-pitched roof surmounted by a glazed lantern provides the last discernible focal point. Tiny figures dot the background, proceeding about their daily business.
The painting represents an idyllic scene—sunny day, lovely park, abundant water, well-dressed people. Calyo is trying to depict pleasurable leisure activity at the end of a workday.\footnote{17} While the characters in the painting are obviously laborers, they have time to gather and enjoy the open space. Instead of drudgery or dullness, the scene expresses vitality and vibrancy. Calyo does not seem to be passing judgment on these people or depicting them with scrutiny. He is most interested in the characters’ occupations and how they fit into the larger landscape of downtown Brooklyn. This interest grew out of his earlier training and artistic influences and experiences in Europe.

**Nicolino Calyo: Immigrant and Artist**

Nicolino Calyo was an Italian-American painter during the nineteenth century. Born in 1799 to a Neapolitan army officer, Calyo aligned himself with the popular movement against Bourbon rule in Italy. At the age of 22, he participated in an unsuccessful riot against Austria's Ferdinand IV. Calyo traveled around Europe\footnote{18} with renowned Italian poet Gabriele Rossetti in the wake of the uprising.\footnote{19} A short biography of Gabriele Rossetti appeared in a memoir written by his son, Dante Gabriele, which included a compilation of Dante’s personal letters. The biography, written by Gabriele’s other son, William, details his involvement with the Italian secret society, the Carbonari. This group of grassroots political activists became fundamental in fomenting Italy’s nationalist movement in the nineteenth century. It is likely Calyo was also involved in this radical political organization, which Ferdinand himself strictly outlawed after the

\footnote{17} After analyzing the orientation of the buildings and people and the direction of the shadows, I have determined that this painting is set in the early evening.
\footnote{18} An index of paintings by Calyo found in an American exhibition notice indicates that he traveled throughout Spain, as well as to Paris, Rome, Pompeii. His father’s connections with royal European governments allowed him to roam so extensively ( “Calyo’s Exhibition,” *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, April 20, 1835).
\footnote{19} A. C. Opie, ”Rossetti the Elder,” *Merry England* 4, no. 22 (February,1885), 263.
uprising in 1821. The king’s denouncement of “Carbonarism” forced some Neapolitans to flee the country, including Calyo.  

In the following years, Calyo traveled around Europe studying art. Before his exile, Calyo had learned Neoclassical, Italian, and Dutch landscape painting techniques and traditions at the Naples Academy. Described by a nineteenth-century art critic, Shearjashub Spooner, as “an acute observer and a true connoisseur,” Calyo produced paintings and drawings in the *veduta* style of Canaletto. In addition to being an accomplished artist, Calyo was considered particularly adept at establishing the authenticity of paintings. He was deemed “competent to judge of the authenticity of paintings, by what masters they were executed, and to restore them when they were injured.” Calyo’s father retained political affiliations with the Spanish government, allowing his son to develop his painting techniques across Europe, including sojourns to Malta and Spain. Calyo briefly served in the Spanish royal court under Queen Maria Cristina, most likely as a court artist. He produced several views of Granada, which he kept with him in his travels to America.

The artist emigrated from Europe to America in 1833 during the lead-up to the Spanish Civil War. Purchase records from an American patron, Dr. Thomas Edmonson, reveal that Calyo was actively making and selling art in his new home of Baltimore, Maryland, during the 1830s. The wealthy patron owned several of Calyo’s works, including depictions of historic houses.

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23 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
around Baltimore and landscape views of the harbor. By 1835, Calyo had produced enough paintings to curate an exhibition in Baltimore at the fashionable Assembly Rooms. The show included seven works “generally 5 feet by 4,” which were described as:

1st. A general view of Baltimore, from the top of the building called “Citizens’ Retreat,” on Federal Hill. It would gratify the artist if amateurs would visit the spot themselves, in order to form a just estimate of the fidelity of this painting.

2nd. An interior view of the Hall of Representatives at Washington.

3rd. Interior view of the Court of Lions in the Alhambra, at the Granada in Spain. This view, so full of architectural wonder, was taken by the artist at much expense of labor and time, while residing at Granada in 1833, is particularly recommended to the attention of visitors, and especially of those who have seen that great and only remaining monument of Moorish skill and grandeur.

4th. A view of the Louvre in Paris from the Pont Neuf.

5th. A view of the Square and Cathedral of St. Peter in Rome.

6th. A view of the City of Naples, taken from the hill of Posilippo.

7th. A view of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1822, taken by night.

These descriptions, likely provided by the artist himself, clearly confirm that Calyo was an urban topographical (i.e. descriptive) painter, not a romantic painter of wilderness landscapes in the dramatic style of his English-American contemporary, Thomas Cole, whose *Course of Empire* was famously exhibited in New York in 1836. Calyo’s wide-angle views of urban landscapes provide panoramic vistas of the scenes, encompassing all the best aspects of the terrain. The citizens of Baltimore felt he had done a great service to their city by rendering it in his drawings.

After traveling through major northern cities, including Philadelphia, Calyo eventually found a home in New York, where he became enamored of the landscape and the inhabitants. He

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27 Patterson, “Nicolino Calyo,” 7-8.

28 Although this particular painting remains unlocated, Calyo produced several other views of Baltimore, including one from the top of Federal Hill looking out onto the harbor. *View of Baltimore Harbor from Federal Hill* (1837) was completed from a set of drawings Calyo created of Baltimore (figure 5). By 1837, he had already settled in New York. *350 Years of Art and Architecture in Maryland*, (College Park: University of Maryland, 1984), 35.

29 American and Commercial Daily Advertiser, 1835.


published a series of drawings depicting various local artisans and merchants, *The Cries of New York* (ca. 1840-1844), which attempted to capture the hustle and bustle of the people involved in urban commerce (figures 6 and 7). In the series, Calyo documented both black and white “criers” interacting with each other and selling their wares. The figures in the drawings engage in activities typical of their occupations. Calyo places his criers in small, composed settings. The individuals seem to sit or stand on a clearly defined platform, as if on a theatrical stage or set within a diorama. Each figure casts a long shadow, as though lit by an overhead spotlight. The artist relies on actions and costumes to give more dimension and specificity to his characters. Each individual wears a different outfit. In addition to the inscribed labels below each illustration, clothing denotes the profession, class, and status of each character.

A note from Calyo’s personal life reveals a unique nuance to his interest in laborers. A census record from 1855 indicates that Calyo had two Irish servants working in his home.\(^{32}\) Calyo was obviously wealthy enough to afford the help, placing him on socially higher ground than any domestic laborers he encountered. Coupled with his radical political agenda in Italy, Calyo’s employment of house servants complicates his relationship with the subject matter in *Cries*. He seems fascinated by the working classes, but it is unclear whether that interest comes from a place of domination or genuine intrigue for how the other half lives. This nuanced connection between Calyo and the lower classes of New York reflects the ambiguous and complex nature of social relations in antebellum New York.

In addition to his portraits of laborers, Calyo was widely regarded for his watercolor landscapes of the city, especially his gouache depictions of the Great Fire of 1835 (figure 8). The artist’s faithful gouache renditions of his surroundings were considered an achievement in

contemporary landscape painting. Through his urban landscape views, Calyo expressed an interest in spectacle. His watercolors of the Great Fire show a city engulfed in flames (see again figure 8). Calyo also recorded scenes from the aftermath of the fire. They depict the ruins of Manhattan from the shores of Brooklyn and Williamsburg. His urban landscapes utilize perspective and lighting to highlight the focal points of the scene, namely the large-scale blaze. Calyo provides a broad view of each space to give his audience a sense of scale and magnitude. Clear lines demarcate shifts in topographical levels or indicate recession of the land into the distance. The artist manipulates natural light to emphasize certain events or scenes within the painting.

In his Great Fire renderings, Calyo magnified the conflagration by setting the scene at night. In another view of New York, Calyo depicted the construction of the Yorkville tunnel as it extends into upper Manhattan (figure 9). The project required explosive excavation. Calyo crystalized a particular blast in his painting, rendering the event and its effects on the surrounding public. Unlike his renditions of the Great Fire, this piece uses cool colors to contrast the catastrophe with the hazy, warm sunset in the background.33

While Calyo produced urban landscapes depicting actual historical events (see figures 8 and 9), his stylization of the scenes suggests that he exaggerated certain aspects to add intrigue to the painting. For example, in his View of the Waterworks (ca. 1835-36), Calyo produced a highly descriptive vision of a popular recreational site in Philadelphia (figure 10). His accuracy in depicting the scene has been corroborated by historians, who cite the architectural development of the area. Despite his seemingly meticulous detail in rendering the scene, Calyo “manipulated foliage at will, eliminated architectural detail [from the surrounding buildings], and artificially

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33 Avery, American Drawings, 155.
extended the foreground, making the river falsely narrow.”

Calyo was unafraid to fudge his landscapes to better serve the composition. While his paintings remain relatively truthful and descriptive, it is important to note that he employed artistic license. His renderings of cityscapes or major events, like the Great Fire, lack the urgency and impressionism of *plein air* painting. Instead, Calyo opted for meticulous detail and deliberate coordination in his scenes.

Calyo most likely worked from sketches and drawings taken on the spot. He painted his scenes not as they were happening, but in a controlled studio environment. This suggests that Calyo was interested in producing carefully crafted depictions of his surroundings. Topographical scenes like his were popular with potential art buyers as they acted like postcards of the city. Calyo’s slight alteration of the scenes indicates his painterly interest in order and aesthetics. While visual accuracy is important, more imperative is the attractiveness and drama of the work. Calyo’s adjustments to lighting and landscaping are only the beginning. In *Servants at a Pump*, Calyo dramatically blends two styles of painting: genre and landscape. While his rendering of the background remains true to form, his placement of a group of African American laborers seems contrived.

Having received a classical academic art education in Naples, Calyo would have been familiar with Italian painting traditions, including genre paintings and Renaissance garden views. Both of these modes of artistic expression followed the dominant epistemology regarding order

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34 Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art, 300.

35 Although I have only studied this painting in light of Calyo’s preceding body of work, it should be examined within the context of his larger oeuvre. *Servants at a Pump* can be understood as an experiment in preparation for Calyo’s later painting *Crossing the Falls (The Indian Bridge)* from 1857. This painting depicts a group of Native Americans poised against the Catskill Mountains. Although the figures are not the focal point of the painting (instead, the mountains rendered in gently graduating hues stand at the center of the work), Calyo has taken the time to render them in different positions and costumes. He managed to capture a “range of characters, ages, gestures, and even interactions that define the communal efforts of the tribe, all set in front of the dramatic framework of forest and mountains.” Lisa Reitzes, Stephanie Street, and Gerry D. Scott, III, *A National Image: The American Painting and Sculpture Collection in the San Antonio Museum of Art* (San Antonio: San Antonio Museum of Art, 2003).
and classification. Genre paintings attempted to organize and categorize people and scenes of everyday life. Their well-choreographed subjects and carefully structured compositions represented a certain manicured domesticity. Costume prints, a popular European art form in the nineteenth century, also attempted to order bodies by type of dress. The costumes of such characters indicated their social status and reflected their class associations. Costume books, therefore, visually reinforced social class systems.

Contemporary artists such as the Italian Salvatore Marroni and the American Benjamin Latrobe produced studies of different types of people arranged on a pictorial stage, similar to Calyo’s *Cries* (figures 11 and 12). Although their drawings are similar in appearance to Calyo’s, they do not appear as fully realized as Calyo’s. Marroni and Latrobe’s characters seem more like thumbnail sketches; they lack context and are not as developed. The *Cries* images capture a slice of New York City life in a detailed depiction of the city’s street vendors and laborers. Calyo’s drawings can stand alone as caricatures of types, but together they reflect a wide array of labor in the city. Although expressed through stock imagery and character types, Calyo’s interest in the New York labor force remains genuine and specific.

The material aspect of *Servants at a Pump* places it in a different category of Calyo’s work. In this painting, Calyo utilizes oil on canvas to create pictorial nuances. The inherent luminosity of oil paint allows for a softer, glowing effect with subtle graduations in color. Oil is much more delicate than acrylic or gouache, a favorite medium of Calyo’s. The artist’s rendering of his subjects is gentle, pleasing, and almost whimsical. They are well dressed in finely colored clothes, and they all appear satisfied, convivial, and relaxed. In addition, Calyo carefully detailed the boulevard behind the group. The foliage blends together in shades of green and yellow without losing the slight detail of the branches and leaves. Similarly, architectural details, such as
the columns on the City Hall building and the windowpanes on the house on the right-hand side of the road, are finely rendered. All of this close attention to detail reflects Calyo’s interest in depicting truthful scenes. He is interested in accuracy and quality. His landscape paintings, in particular, attempt to capture an authentic view of whatever scene is depicted.

By exercising his skill in acute observation in Servants at a Pump, Calyo establishes the validity of this scene. This is a complicated statement because it is more likely that Calyo painted this scene from on-site sketches he produced (as he did with his View of the Waterworks), and then added the group of figures later. These figures, like his Cries characters, serve as composite images of real, observed New York laborers and Calyo’s impression and memory of them. Still, by placing these figures within a highly realistic scene, Calyo asserts that they existed and deserved to be recorded. The use of oil paint, a traditionally stately medium, further reinforces the importance of this painting and its subjects for Calyo, a patron, or some unknown audience.

In light of contemporary circumstances, Calyo’s use of atmospheric perspective and orthogonals in Servants at a Pump mirrors the superimposed rectilinear structure of the New York City grid system, while it also recalls Renaissance pictorial precedents. Both mechanisms sought to organize and order subjects and landscapes. In Calyo’s constructed scene, the vanishing point for his grid rests on the head of the scullery maid wearing the apron. She stands facing the audience with a slight smile, possibly indicating she knows something the rest of the group does not, and, at the same time, she welcomes the viewer into the scene. The trees lining the boulevard add lushness to the setting while geometrically projecting a position for the beholder’s eye opposite the vanishing point in the distant horizon. Calyo presents an enticing vision of the community, integrating open green space with human actors and commercial endeavors.
The Rise of Urban Green Space

Compared to his *Cries* images, which present human subjects in vague, undefined or stage-like spaces, Calyo finally contextualizes his characters within a well-established setting in *Servants at a Pump.* He places a group of African American laborers on a broad, tree-lined avenue, which can be read as an open, communal, and recreational space. During the rapid industrialization of the 1800s, city residents realized the benefits of natural surroundings, as indicated by the development of small parks throughout Manhattan. The setting of this painting is important in light of the social restrictions placed on public green space in the antebellum period. Although Brooklyn was not as developed as Manhattan in the 1840s, city planners turned to the main island for design inspiration in later years. Parks in Manhattan served as a model for public green space in the neighboring borough. Given the discriminatory practices regarding these “public” spaces in other parts of the city, the use of park space by working-class African Americans qualifies as an anti-racist action and an act of self-determination on the part of the community.

Public park spaces gained enormous popularity beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. By the mid-1830s, Americans had fallen in love with a certain idea of nature. Artists such as George Catlin described the “pristine wildness and beauty” of the Western frontier’s landscape. Catlin even advocated certain land being set aside for the founding of a “nation’s park containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature’s beauty!”36 The transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s seminal essay “Nature,” published in 1836, called for renewed appreciation of the natural world. The concept of “nature” became a symbol for morality and virtue. Emerson argued that spirituality could only be accessed through the

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sublimity of nature. In contrast to busy, dirty cities, Americans viewed natural lands as untouched oases.\(^{37}\)

Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States underwent massive industrial and urban growth. American industry and innovation boomed. Wealthy business investors and politicians reveled in the rise of industrialization, which meant faster production of goods and services and an expanded infrastructure to transport wares transnationally. In cities, pollution from manufactories’ smokestacks and improper waste management contributed to toxic air quality. Urban centers such as New York expanded rapidly. The newly engineered Erie Canal altered the state’s natural and commercial environment.\(^{38}\) Opportunities for trade grew and New York City’s profitability was enhanced thanks to the artificial waterway. Labor-seeking migrants from the South, many of whom were free or fugitive enslaved Africans, as well as early immigrants from Europe, caused New York’s population to swell. The rapid change of geographic and demographic landscapes in early-nineteenth-century New York produced uncertainty and volatility.

The rapidly growing populations of New York resulted in divided living spaces and smaller, more cramped quarters. A lack of light and of ventilation and primitive plumbing characterized the tenements. Overcrowding only exacerbated the problems associated with squalid living conditions. By the 1830s, New Yorkers realized their proximity to water did not allow enough healthy air circulation. An outbreak of cholera in 1832 raised a public health concern.\(^{39}\) City officials recognized the need for more open air and space for citizens’ recreation. Urban developers decided to combat pollution with parks. Seen as a benefit to citizens’ health,

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\(^{37}\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Essays* (New York: Open Road Media, 2016), 94-104.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
public parks gained popularity in the early 1800s and continued to develop as urban institutions throughout the nineteenth century.  

New York’s park craze of the 1830s was not the first instinct New Yorkers had towards developing open space. The Commissioner’s Plan of 1811 sought to provide structure and recreation to the people of New York. The three appointed commissioners, Simeon de Witt, Gouverneur Morris, and John Rutherford, developed a rigid grid overlay for the city (figure 13). They agreed that a rectilinear city would prove most efficient and cost-effective. They described their plan in terms such as “habits of system and order” and “separation and classification.” New York’s formative city planners envisioned a city of “right-angled houses . . . cheap to build and . . . convenient to live in.” Responding to current needs for urban green space, Morris, de Witt, and Rutherford allotted land in their plan for New York’s first “central park.” The proposed Grande Parade was a 260-acre tract of land that stretched from “23rd Street to 34th Street, between Third and Seventh Avenue.” To skirt the issue of private property encroachment, municipal mandates approved the use of eminent domain to “purchase any land set aside on the official map for a street or park.” Critics of the commissioners’ plan complained that the number of proposed parks limited land speculation on the part of developers. Property owners were upset about the seizure of their land.

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44 Ibid.
Despite this public outcry, the commissioners felt they had been conservative in allocating land for parks. They responded to backlash by arguing that their plan was purely utilitarian. Their parks served a purpose for the citizens of New York; they were not some frivolous endeavor. The city’s surrounding rivers provided sufficient access to fresh air. Additional trees and open spaces simply circulated the air. In an effort to avoid steep property prices, the plan proposed “larger public spaces in the northern reaches of the island where land was cheaper—Bloomingdale, Hamilton, Harlem, and Manhattan Squares, and the Harlem Marsh.” The Grande Parade remained an elaborate exception to the rule. Property values in the proposed area were high; thus, the park required enormous amounts of funding. City officials were skeptical that the Grand Parade’s benefits would be worth such a large investment.

Citizens on both sides of the issue spoke out publicly. The land remained in political gridlock until in 1828 municipal officials voted to override the park’s allocation on the city plan. The state government followed suit a year later.

The lack of a large centralized public park only fed New Yorkers’ desire for more green spaces throughout the city. In addition to the need for healthy recreational areas, the park craze of the 1830s responded to elites’ interest in public parks modeled on formal European prototypes. In an increasingly diversifying society, overt displays of wealth served a political function. Elite citizens felt that public squares “could help them regain their position” in the social hierarchy. These communal spaces provided social exposure to wealthy New Yorkers. Residents in wealthy neighborhoods benefitted from the city government’s funding structure,

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47 The Greatest Grid, 40.
48 Ibid, 41.
50 Ibid, 54.
51 Ibid, 47.
which unequally distributed green spaces to affluent areas. Well-to-do citizens flocked to the small, scattered parks throughout the city, including Bowling Green, the Battery, and City Hall Park. Wealthy classes exercised proper social etiquette in elaborate public rituals. Weekday evenings and Sunday afternoons were reserved for promenading.

The social practice of promenading grew especially popular in the 1830s as genteel New Yorkers felt threatened by the influx of working-class peoples. These regular affairs helped cement class structure. Although public in concept, these green spaces became highly segregated and symbolic of racial and socioeconomic privilege. “Beautiful women, scrupulously-dressed dandies and pretty children” would parade on the “fashionable side” of the street in front of an audience of onlookers. Members of the upper class would exchange reserved tips of the hat or gentle nods of recognition. These small courtesies further tightened the social circle surrounding white, elite New Yorkers. Wealthy white women especially benefitted from the exclusivity of the promenade. They could move freely without fear of mixing with other classes or races. The popularity of promenading and the fervor for public parks reflected elite insecurity about their domination of public space. They felt increasingly threatened by the rising numbers of racially and socioeconomically diverse populations inhabiting New York.

Despite their best efforts to exclude “others,” wealthy, white individuals found themselves “walking in the same grounds with mechanics, house-servants, and laboring people.” Contemporary author Asa Greene noted the working class’s weekend retreats to the Battery. He believed in the democratizing nature of parks. In places like the Battery, industrial

52 Map of the City of New York, 37-38.
54 George G. Foster, New York in Slices (New York: W.F. Burgess, 1849), 7-13; 3-5.
workers were “placed on a footing of equality with the richest of their neighbors.” They could partake in the recreational and health benefits of parks that otherwise would have been reserved for New York’s upper crust.

In addition to working populations, white New Yorkers came in contact with the elite black population of the city. Well-to-do African Americans had been taking advantage of the open space along the promenade. They would parade along the same path as wealthy whites. Elegantly dressed couples with a “very superior air of gallantry” walked side by side with their white counterparts. White New Yorkers felt threatened by these instances of racial mixing. A popular newspaper printed a letter from the editor suggesting that the sidewalks on Broadway be segregated according to race. The angry author writes that the “city [has] been disturbed, the courts of justice insulted, and the administration of the laws impeded by a mob of Blacks—I beg pardon, ladies and gentlemen of color.” White New Yorkers questioned whether racial integration was their new reality in the wake of emancipation. Just as the lower classes had encroached upon “their territory,” African Americans were endangering whites’ control over public spaces.

In Calyo’s Servants at a Pump, the main characters—a group of African-American laborers—seem to be enjoying themselves within a public park space. The scene is pleasant—the group enjoys collective leisure time, they are well-dressed, the sun is shining, and water is plentiful. By asserting themselves in a public space, the people in the painting defy contemporary norms regarding working class, minority populations. Given that downtown Brooklyn was highly segregated at this time, and these people likely traveled from a rural settlement, their presence in an urban park speaks to the self-determination of the black community. Calyo’s

58 Ibid, 216.
59 Frances Milton Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans (London: Whittaker, Treacher, 1832), 279.
representation of these people is a testament to their significance in the landscape and impact on him as a white artist of wealth.

**Ally or Competitor: Racial Politics in Antebellum New York**

Beginning in the seventeenth century, America’s racial hierarchy was constructed by white elites to mitigate the possibilities of poor whites and enslaved blacks banding together to overthrow the established power structure. Socio-economic status in the newly-formed capitalist economy was a fluid metric of success. Social classes could evolve and change based on access to opportunities for wealth accumulation. Where class status remained in flux, especially in the years after the Revolutionary War, race was a permanent fixture of a person’s identity. Many European Americans conflated class with race. They believed that blacks could not be granted the full rights of citizenship if they “behaved with working class values.” Upper class whites drew arbitrary distinctions between the behaviors of African Americans and poor whites. In doing so, they ceremonially attributed citizenship to poor whites and lowered the social status of black Americans. This attitude maintained the illusion that all whites were of a higher class than blacks. The construction of a racial hierarchy in the United States became a tool for white Americans to undermine the success of people of color and, in some cases, later European immigrants.

To understand the gravity of Calyo’s subject matter, it is important to consider the trajectory of African Americans in New York up until 1840. Given the timeline of emancipation, the laborers depicted in *Servants at a Pump* may well have been enslaved until recently. Freed

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61 Bacon’s Rebellion helped to redefine notions of race in the American colonies, or at least in the Chesapeake region. Prior to the rebellion, blacks and whites held the same laboring positions. Bacon’s Rebellion helped to consolidate the planter class, thereby drawing distinctions between white indentured servants and black indentured servants. The burgeoning of plantation slavery, the advent of the plantation, and the system of disciplined, exploitative labor that followed the rebellion began to transform notions of race in America.


blacks’ position in society was unstable in light of prevailing hostile laws. By 1840, African Americans had established enclaves within the city in pursuit of safety and fellowship. Instances of upward mobility and community building during this time should be understood in the context of the overwhelming hardship and discrimination faced by people of color.

During the Revolutionary War, the British army promised enslaved Africans freedom in exchange for their military service. Many blacks seized the opportunity and enlisted with the British army, fighting against the Patriots. To combat the steady supply of enslaved peoples to the British, American troops reversed their enlistment policy for Africans. After three years of service to the local or state militia, blacks could gain their freedom. In 1781, the New York Assembly passed a resolution granting emancipation to all people of color who had served in the state’s armed forces. British general Sir Guy Carleton signed a provisional treaty that freed Africans who had joined the army prior to 1782.64 Blacks’ participation in the Revolution demonstrated their will for independence and ability to bargain for their own emancipation. This same spirit of self-reliance contributed to the black abolition movement in New York and the establishment of all-black communities.

After the Revolutionary War, abolition gained support among New York politicians. In 1785, New York’s Constitutional Convention nearly passed a resolution for gradual emancipation of enslaved people. The New York Manumission Society, spearheaded by powerful New York politicians, rallied support for the emancipation bill, but ultimately lost the battle. Freedom at any rate for African Americans was impeded by white legislators’ dispute over the appropriate civil rights for blacks. Convoluted legislation gradually dismantled the slave

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trade in New York, eventually halting the import and sale of Africans by 1788. A system of progressive manumission finally went into effect eleven years later.\textsuperscript{65}

Despite the attainment of abolition, black New Yorkers still faced the threat of capture and enslavement. Illegal trading schemes attempted to circumvent these mandates. Slave owners smuggled blacks into Southern states and sold them.\textsuperscript{66} In 1790, African Americans accounted for 7.6\% of New York’s total population; this dropped to 2.3\% by 1830.\textsuperscript{67} Compared to Southern states, New York’s laws for freed African Americans appeared generous, meaning the population decrease was likely forced emigration. In opposition to pro-slavery rulings by the federal government, northern states, including New York, passed personal liberty laws, protecting African Americans from kidnapping or being claimed as fugitive slaves. Personal liberty laws in the mid-1830s in New York allowed freed blacks some measure of security, albeit inconsistent.\textsuperscript{68}

In spite of prevailing antislavery sentiments, white Americans did not fully embrace emancipation. African Americans acted in their own interests to gain the full benefits of freedom.

As a European immigrant in antebellum America, Calyo occupied an interesting position in the American racial and social hierarchy. Although European immigrants such as Italians, Irish, and Germans suffered persecution, they benefitted from America’s increasingly colorist system of segregation. Europeans could assert their whiteness and assimilate more easily into dominant American society. This kind of social stratification only exacerbated racial distinctions. While groups such as Italians faced persecution for their appearance and ethnicity, their comparatively light skin helped them benefit from the privileges of white dominant culture in America. In addition, Calyo hailed from a prominent and wealthy European family. This

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid, 161-174.
\item Wellman, \textit{Brooklyn’s Promised Land}, 36.
\item McManus, \textit{A History of Negro Slavery}, 176.
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undoubtedly granted him status above the lowly working-class immigrant populations. Calyo’s depictions of laborers reflect his interest in representing the other side of American society. Along with contemporary visual tropes (see again figures 11 and 12), his personal status contributed to his curiosity regarding laboring peoples. Blackness, to Calyo, represented another layer of “otherness.”

The characters in Servants at a Pump occupy an intriguing intersection: their respective occupations suggest socio-economic success and mobility, while their skin color still represents marginalization in the antebellum context. Less than twenty years prior to the completion of this painting, African Americans were still considered property in New York. Assuming that the characters in Servants at a Pump reflect residents of Weeksville, it is likely that some of them were formerly enslaved. Calyo’s depiction of these people, like his renderings of the Great Fire, suggests an interest in spectacle. To Calyo, a well-established European-American, a group of successfully employed African Americans enjoying leisure time might have been considered a spectacle. Although Calyo likely did not paint this subject matter from life, his concern for this type of person (black, working-class, content), as evidenced in Servants at a Pump and some of the characters in his Cries series, reveals a more nuanced view of African Americans held by European Americans in the antebellum era.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, racial tension in the United States intensified and views on slavery became more firmly entrenched. Although African Americans had held longer residence in the United States and had, in some instances in the North, created stable, well-defined communities, divisions based on race and class prevailed. New York State abolished slavery in 1827. Ten years later, New York City hosted the first Convention of the Anti-Slavery Society of American Women, an event attended by both black and white women in
support of abolition. Two years after the Convention, enslaved Africans aboard the Amistad rose up in mutiny. They fought for emancipation in New York courts and ultimately claimed freedom in 1841 after a Supreme Court decision ruled them free.

Fear of racial mixing and miscegenation lingered following emancipation in New York. In 1834, these sentiments fueled a riot in which protesters attacked abolitionists and African Americans. Popular culture reflected whites’ anxieties. By the 1830s minstrelsy had become an incredibly popular form of entertainment. New York theatres premiered minstrel shows featuring white actors in blackface engaged in racial stereotyping. Illustrations and cartoons of African-American performers populated contemporary sheet music and magazines.

In his drawings, Calyo appears to exaggerate his characters’ physical features, namely their facial structure (browbones, chins/jawlines, and noses) and their posture, which distorts their physiognomy. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, American artists stereotypically amplified black physiognomy and behavior rather than objectively record them, creating caricatures or “stock types” that served as comic foils to the subjects’ white counterparts. White artists perpetuated representational tropes to suppress black people in visual culture (see figure 14). Based on the artist’s stylistic choices in rendering black people, Calyo’s drawings seem to reflect the prevailing stereotypical notions regarding African Americans, however, a closer look at Calyo’s larger body of work reveals a more nuanced relationship between artist and subject.

71 Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14; 48-49.
73 For a comprehensive examination of American artists’ portrayals of African Americans during this time period, see McElroy, Facing History.
As part of his *Cries* series, Calyo created two images of young boys participating in minstrel showmanship. Calyo’s *Negro Dancer* and *Negro Banjo Player* fit into the category of minstrelsy cartoons (figures 15 and 16). The boys’ particular clothing and instruments are rendered in close detail so as to indicate their roles. Calyo included descriptive labels underneath each character: *The Negro Dancer* and *The Negro Banjo Player*, respectively. Below the label on the edge of the dancer’s “stage,” the artist included a note that reads: “First upon my heel, and then upon my toe, wheel about, turn about, and jump Jim Crow.” This phrase derives from a popular minstrel tune of the day. T.D. Rice, a prolific minstrel performer, penned the song in 1833, using the lyrics “weel a-bout, and turn a-about, And do jis so; eb’rytime I weel a-bout, I jump Jim Crow.”74 An image of Rice in blackface appeared on the cover to an early edition of “Jump Jim Crow” sheet music (figure 17). At this time, he was performing at the Bowery Theatre in New York. In the image, his clothes appear tattered and dirty. His gestures are exaggerated and cartoonish. The character that he assumes actively mocks black culture and attempts to perform “blackness” as a way of undermining African Americans’ social success.

While Rice, a white showman, is credited with bringing the character of Jim Crow to the forefront of blackface minstrelsy, the song and the persona existed before their debut on the minstrel stage. Southern blacks cultivated a different version of Jim Crow in the refrains of their folk songs.75 These lyrics were most likely sung by African Americans during work activities, such as corn shucking.76 In addition, the characteristic dance moves associated with Jim Crow have connections to traditional banjo playing techniques.77 Since whites could more easily mimic

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74 Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 77.
blacks’ physicality, it is likely that their appropriation of this dance made the Jim Crow stereotype more pervasive in minstrel tradition.\(^7^8\)

In light of this knowledge, Calyo’s depictions of the *Negro Dancer* and *Negro Banjo Player* do not reflect the practice of blackface popular in minstrel theatre. Instead, they represent the black minstrel performers of New York. The boys appear to be African American, not white performers in blackface. In comparison to the image of Rice, Calyo’s characters are well dressed and exhibit talent with instruments and dance. While their physicality seems stereotypical, it is more representational of the traditional movements associated with African American folk tunes. The inscription of the lyrics below their feet serves more as a theatrical prop than a symbol of oppression. It refers not to the traditional of minstrelsy, but to the song’s black folk origins.

Calyo’s *Negro Dancer* and *Negro Banjo Player* subvert oppressive minstrelsy tropes by depicting refined, talented performers engaged in a traditional act. His rendering of the characters may well have drawn on prevalent representational tropes, making it appear pejorative. Selections from Calyo’s oeuvre, however, confirm his attentiveness and interest to all citizens of New York.

Compared to his depictions of African Americans, Calyo’s portrayals of white merchants appear equally cartoonish. For example, Calyo’s *Hot Corn Woman* and *Market-woman* appear remarkably similar (figures 19 and 20), even as they are racially distinct. Both are dressed in layers of shawls and stoop on the corner to sell their wares. They are seated in similar positions, each surrounded by baskets of goods. Their faces are disfigured and appear exaggerated in representation. Although racial stereotypes persisted in nineteenth-century visual culture, Calyo’s depictions of African Americans do not appear to egregiously misrepresent black people. Instead, Calyo seems interested in studying the diversity of workers around him in New

\(^7^8\) Ibid, 98.
York. Creating and using stock characters in contrived settings provided artists with means to order or explain their social circumstances. Some of his *Cries* images, such as the *Auctioneer in Public Streets* (figure 7), depict an integrated scene of New Yorkers, indicating Calyo’s overwhelming interest in the working class, and not necessarily in racial minorities.

**Land of Opportunity: The Establishment of Weeksville, Brooklyn**

Although the setting of *Servants at a Pump* has been identified as an area outside of Weeksville, this all-black settlement played a critical role in community development and black empowerment in the nineteenth century. As compared to mixed-race Brooklyn, Weeksville offered African Americans more opportunity for economic growth and entrepreneurship. Given their designated professions, it is likely that the characters in *Servants at a Pump* worked in downtown Brooklyn. Weeksville remained rural longer than surrounding settlements and, therefore, maintained agricultural jobs. Still, Weeksville supported black laborers and provided a separate space apart from antagonistic whites.

The reality of living in independent households in the wake of slavery proved difficult for black New Yorkers. Black laborers were limited by their inability to afford single-family homes. Many opted to share housing and live with non-family members. Often, residences were determined by occupation, concentrating numbers of African American workers under the same roof. In addition, post-emancipation African Americans occupied some of the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. While enslaved, many blacks honed trade skills that they could use as free laborers. This allowed them to secure positions as carpenters, bootblacks, seamstresses, and milliners. Black New Yorkers with apprenticeship experience were “twice as likely to possess

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80 Ibid, 102-114.
skilled jobs as their contemporaries in Philadelphia.”  

Still, blacks disproportionately rented space or lived in boarding homes as compared to their white counterparts: “half of black men and almost a third of black women boarded in the homes of others, compared to approximately 20% of white men and 15% of white women.”  

The lack of independent property ownership on the part of black workers in New York drove African Americans to establish safe spaces for themselves within the city.

In addition to parading in open park spaces such as the Battery, black New Yorkers asserted themselves in mainstream society by forming separate spaces within the white community. All-black chapels and theatres catered to the population’s needs. Even in the era of emancipation, African Americans carried the memory of slavery with them into new communities and experiences. Prominent African-American abolitionists such as Peter Williams and William Whipper called for black citizens to act in the interest of their own peoples. 

Black leaders preached self-reliance and self-help. Despite racial discrimination and persistent stereotyping, African Americans found ways to thrive in society.

In an effort to establish separate physical, psychological, and social spaces from whites, some African Americans formed their own enclaves just beyond the city center. In 1825, a free black laborer, Andrew Williams, purchased three rural lots between present-day Eighty-third and Eighty-eighth Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Another investor, Epiphany Davis, soon followed Williams’s lead and purchased twelve lots of land in the area. This provided the basis for Seneca Village, a thriving community of majority black workers. 

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82 Ibid, 76.
83 Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 279.
85 Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 74-75.
Manhattan, Weeksville seized the opportunity of available land to develop a community for black laborers outside of the main city.

Land outside of Manhattan, including Brooklyn, remained largely rural. African Americans took advantage of such undeveloped territory to create institutions by and for themselves. The separation from racist society allowed black Americans to thrive and develop a sense of autonomy. They farmed the land, which sustained residents and contributed value to the community. Relatively cheap real estate allowed more people to buy and own homes. As of 1821, provisions in the state constitution restricted the voting rights of African-American men based on property qualifications. The law required a “$250 freehold over and above debts and insisted that he actually pay taxes on the property.” In addition, black property owners had to reside in the state for three years, yet white landowners were only required one-year residence. The availability of cheap land in Brooklyn allowed African Americans to overcome these discriminatory suffrage mandates and establish thriving communities.

In 1832, William Thomas, a chimney sweep, became the first free African American to privately own land in Brooklyn. He purchased thirty acres of land from the Lefferts family estate. The Lefferts were among the most prominent Dutch-American families in Brooklyn at this time. Thomas sold parcel tracts of land to other free blacks in the area, increasing the size of the community. The area later became known as Carrsville, a zone thought to be a neighboring all-black community to Weeksville. In 1838, James Weeks, a free black settler from Virginia,
acquired much of the land that would eventually become Weeksville from the 240-acre Lefferts family estate. Weeksville’s first residents established a tradition of land-ownership among black Americans. Land purveyors in Weeksville attracted investors from across the country, even as far south as the Carolinas. They advertised in African-American newspapers and directed their marketing specifically towards black investors. Settlers wanted to provide newcomers with cheap and accessible land to build homes, not just farms.\(^9^1\) This spirit of community building helped drive Weeksville’s success.

After the definitive abolition law of 1827, African Americans fought for their civil rights by establishing community organizations and producing newspapers. A key aspect of social uplift, the believed, was education. Even though educated blacks still occupied low-paying jobs, education was seen as a tool for economic advancement. The African Woolman Benevolent Society of Brooklyn established a school for black youths in 1827.\(^9^2\) The *Freedman’s Torchlight*, one of the first black newspapers in circulation, operated as a primer for African Americans in and around the country. Missionaries from Weeksville traveled to the South in hopes of educating and emancipating blacks.\(^9^3\)

While the figures in *Servants at a Pump* do not directly correlate to real Weeksville citizens, notions of self-help and community development, values prevalent in Weeksville, can be seen in the painting. The group appears content as they relax in a public park. Individuals have chosen to spend their leisure time together, conversing and interacting with each other. Their variety of professions indicates economic diversity and reflects many of the occupations

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\(^9^1\) Ibid, 31.
\(^9^2\) Ibid, 41.
held by blacks at that time. Their neat dress indicates a pride in their profession and a certain degree of wealth. While this painting’s connection to Weeksville remains tenuous, the representation of African Americans in this manner speaks to the overall success of the black community in Brooklyn at this time.

Conclusion

In writing and researching for this thesis, I found myself navigating fine lines of interpretation. Was this scene painted from life or completely fabricated by the artist? Was Calyo motivated by a desire to ascend in the racial hierarchy, thereby casting his figures as content, docile urban workers? Or, did this Italian immigrant sympathize with the social positions of his subjects? More often than choosing one side of an interpretation, I negotiated a middle ground. While it is easy to dismiss Calyo as patronizing or racially insensitive, his works and the subjects he portrays deserve a more nuanced analysis. Calyo’s images reflect the rapidly changing social landscape of the United States during a crucial time period. The characters in *Servants at a Pump*, as well as his figures in the *Cries* series, represent a new America populated, both visually and literally, with diverse peoples.

Antebellum politics regarding the representation of African Americans and working-class peoples in public and painted spaces sought to suppress or eliminate their presence. *Servants at a Pump*, in contrast, boldly states the prominence of African American laborers in antebellum Brooklyn. By situating a group of African American professionals in a pleasant open space, Calyo asserts their right to enjoy the same privileges of park space as other New Yorkers. In his stylized rendering of the scene, Calyo both participates in and subverts the conventions of genre painting. His interest in order, both pictorial and social, operates in tandem with his desire to

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expose what he sees as the real New York. As a newly immigrated Italian artist, Calyo used familiar modes of representation to order and make sense of the social scene around him. Calyo’s overwhelming curiosity in cataloguing New York’s workforce speaks to an interest in urban diversity on several levels.

In light of contemporary circumstances, *Servants at a Pump* can be seen as a testament to the complex racial landscape of antebellum New York. During the nineteenth century, African Americans and European immigrants attempted to navigate the prevailing social systems in America. Issues of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic class restricted their access to society. These nuances in character also complicated their assumption of an American identity. Artists such as Calyo sought order in the painted space. African Americans, facing significantly worse oppression, developed strong, separate communities within and outside of the city. These enclaves served as havens for urban blacks as well as migrants fleeing persecution elsewhere. Within settlements such as Weeksville, African Americans created economic opportunities and proudly engaged in activist efforts. By establishing newspapers and social institutions, African Americans seized control of their social narrative. They were not merely defined by outsiders’ representations.

*Servants at a Pump* by Nicolino Calyo exists in an in-between space of speaking to and acting against social norms and conventions. The painting itself, its artist, and its subjects deserve careful consideration and interpretation. Further research for this project may explore the unique tension between different classes of African Americans in Manhattan and Brooklyn, urban development, including public parks and water systems, in and a more in-depth examination of Calyo’s practice in and around New York. My hope is that this study as it stands will lend more subtlety to research on this critical juncture in American history.
Figure 1: Nicolino Calyo, *Servants at a Pump*, ca. 1840, 24” x 20,” oil on canvas, The National Museum of African American History and Culture.
Figure 2: John A. Calyo, *Nicolino Calyo*, ca. 1830-1870, 25.25” x 21,” oil on canvas, The Museum of the City of New York.
Figure 3: Unknown photographer, City Hall, Brooklyn, photograph, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallace Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, NYPL Digital Collection.

Figure 4: J. Bornet, Brooklyn City Hall, ca. 1852-1868, 14.7 x 16.5 cm, wood engraving print, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallace Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, NYPL Digital Collection.
Figure 5: Nicolino Calyo, *View from Federal Hill northward*, ca. 1837, 10.25” x 14,” oil on canvas, The Maryland Historical Society.
Figure 6: Nicolino Calyo, *The Lemon and Orange Stand*, ca. 1840-1844, 10.25” x 14,” watercolor on paper, The Museum of the City of New York.

Figure 7: Nicolino Calyo, *The Auctioneer*, ca. 1840-1844, 11.5” x 9.5,” watercolor on paper, The Yale University Art Gallery.
Figure 8: Nicolino Calyo, *Burning of the Merchants’ Exchange, New York, December 16th & 17th, 1835, 1835, 13” x 20.375,” gouache on paper, The Museum of the City of New York.

Figure 9: Nicolino Calyo, *View of the Tunnel of the Harlem Railroad, 1837, 18” x 26,” gouache on off-white wove paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 10: Nicolino Calyo, *View of the Waterworks*, 1835-36, 26.125” x 36.25,” watercolor and gouache on paper, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Figure 11: Salvatore Marroni, *Donna di Tivoli*, 1856, 21x13 cm, print, NYPL Digital Collections

Figure 13: John Randel, *Plan of Manhattan Island*, 1811, 73 x 272 cm, ink on paper. The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division. http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/26c27e80-be8a-0131-bfaa-58d3857bd0
Figure 14: James Goodwyn Clonney, *Waking Up*, 1851, 27.12” x 22,” oil on canvas, Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
Figure 15: Nicolino Calyo, *The Negro Banjo*, ca. 1840-1844, 10.25” x 14,” watercolor on paper, Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 16: Nicolino Calyo, *The Negro Dancer*, ca. 1840-1844, 10.25” x 14,” watercolor on paper, Yale University Art Gallery.
Figure 17: Edward W. Clay, *Mr. T. Rice as the Original Jim Crow*, ca. 1833, 10.2” x 7,” lithograph, Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia.
Figure 18: Nicolino Calyo, *The Hot Corn Seller*, ca. 1840-1844, 10.25” x 14,” watercolor on paper, The Museum of the City of New York.

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