

The Blacks In Western Art: A Changing Image

By Clarissa Myrick
Smithsonian News Service

A 12th-century mural at the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro in Leon, Spain, portrays a pious Saint Martin praying fervently to resist the temptation of a "demon." The evil spirit is represented as a black child.

A sculpture created a century later for the Cathedral of Notre Dame in France depicts a white Queen of Sheba standing regally on the back of a crouching black man.

These and other art works of the Western world reveal that some of history's most negative images of black people can be found in the Western European art of the Middle Ages. Some historians believe the negative views of blacks held in the medieval Western world and reflected in the art work of the time formed the basis for the racial intolerance of later centuries.

Western artists, however, had not always painted biased portraits of black Africans. In particular, the art of ancient Greece and Rome contains some of the most positive and realistic images of blacks.

The art of Greece and Rome, according to Dr. Frank Snowden, a professor of Classics at Howard University in Washington, D.C., shows that although the people of antiquity were not colorblind, "they never based their judgment of a man on his skin color."

Examples of the ways blacks were portrayed during antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are featured in a Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service show based on the photographs assembled in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, published by the Menil Foundation of Houston, Texas.

"This art shows us that many of the prejudices of today were not held in the early centuries of the Western world," Warren Robbins, director of the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art, says. "It shows too that the racial intolerance that first infested the Western world in medieval times was primarily the result of ignorance."

Unlike the medieval Western Europeans, the Greeks and Romans had been in contact with Africans for hundreds of years. As early as the seventh century B.C., Greek soldiers encountered black military opponents in Egypt and in other North African countries and as contingents of armies invading Greece. These Greek soldiers feared the military strength of African warriors, but that fear didn't turn into prejudice or racism, Snowden contends in his book, *Blacks in antiquity*.

Nor, he continues, did the prejudice and racism found in later centuries jaundice the eyes of Greco-Roman artists. While visiting Africa, many Greek and Roman artists followed the lead of Egyptian artists and painted, sculpted and drew true-to-life images of black people.

These artists continued to depict blacks in their art when black Africans began to migrate to Greece and Rome as slaves and free persons from 500 to 400 B.C.

The artists were intrigued by the challenge of portraying this "new racial type," and many experimented with various techniques to depict accurately the physical characteristics of black people. To represent the tightly curled hair of blacks, for instance, some sculptors cut diamond shapes in relief, other sculpted spiral cones.

For centuries, Greek and Roman artists featured images of black members of the working class and mythical African characters on terra cotta pottery; they captured the images of black statesmen, scholars and entertainers in bronze and marble statues and busts. But the number of

positive and realistic portrayals of blacks dwindled in the Middle Ages as racial intolerance spread through the Western world. According to historians, this prejudice against blacks developed primarily for two reasons.

First, in the Christian teachings of medieval Europe, the color black symbolized evil. "From the simplistic but readily accepted idea that black is the sign of death and therefore sin, it was easy to go on to the more dangerous idea that the man whose color was black was a menace, a temptation, a creature of the Devil," French

historian Jean Divisse explains in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Second, until the 15th century, Western Europeans rarely came in contact with black Africans whom they nevertheless feared. All they knew were the stories and rumors about blacks they had heard from disgruntled soldiers who fought against black Africans among the Muslim troops during the Crusades and from traveling merchants who occasionally glimpsed blacks during their journeys. Because of their religious teachings, these soldiers and merchants believed that black people were the personification of evil.

Some medieval European artists then projected this fear in their art, stereotyping blacks as servants, infidels, demons and executioners. An eighth-century Roman fresco that shows Christ trampling a dark figure as He descends into Limbo is one of the earliest portrayals of a black demon. And a 13th-century sculpture over a portal of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is just one of many art works depicting the black as executioner.

Although positive images of blacks became scarce in medieval Europe, they did not, however, become extinct. The people of the Mediterranean countries, who had more contact with black Africans than their northern contemporaries, were the first to offer blacks a chance to improve their cultural standing — and their image.

"(Black people) were allowed to move upward in society on two conditions. They had to become converts to one of the monotheistic religions, and they had to get rich or demonstrate some ability entitling them to upward movement," Devise writes.

Positive portraits of blacks did appear in Western Europe later. In the 13th century, for example, Saint Maurice, the patron saint of the Holy Roman Empire, suddenly became black after centuries of being depicted as a white man.

Historians speculate that in the mid-13th century, Frederick II, emperor of the sprawling and faltering Empire, ordered the creation of the first art works portraying a black Saint Maurice, and German artists continued to depict Saint Maurice as a black man until the 16th century.

During the same period, the complexion of the African Queen of Sheba became as changeable as the skin of a chameleon. Some medieval artists depicted the Queen as a white woman while others portrayed her, more accurately perhaps, as a black woman. And these artists used the African queen's visit to the Hebrew King Solomon to symbolize those who chose to pass from paganism to Christianity.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the image of a black King Balthasar, one of the three Wise Men who carried gifts to the infant Jesus, became a popular theme in the Western world. In fact, Balthasar was the most common black image projected in the art of the period.

Art historians say that the image of the black King not only perpetuated the theme of the univer-

sality of Christianity, but that it also reflected the artists' and the public's curiosity about "exotic" worlds and unknown people. However, the curiosity of these early Renaissance

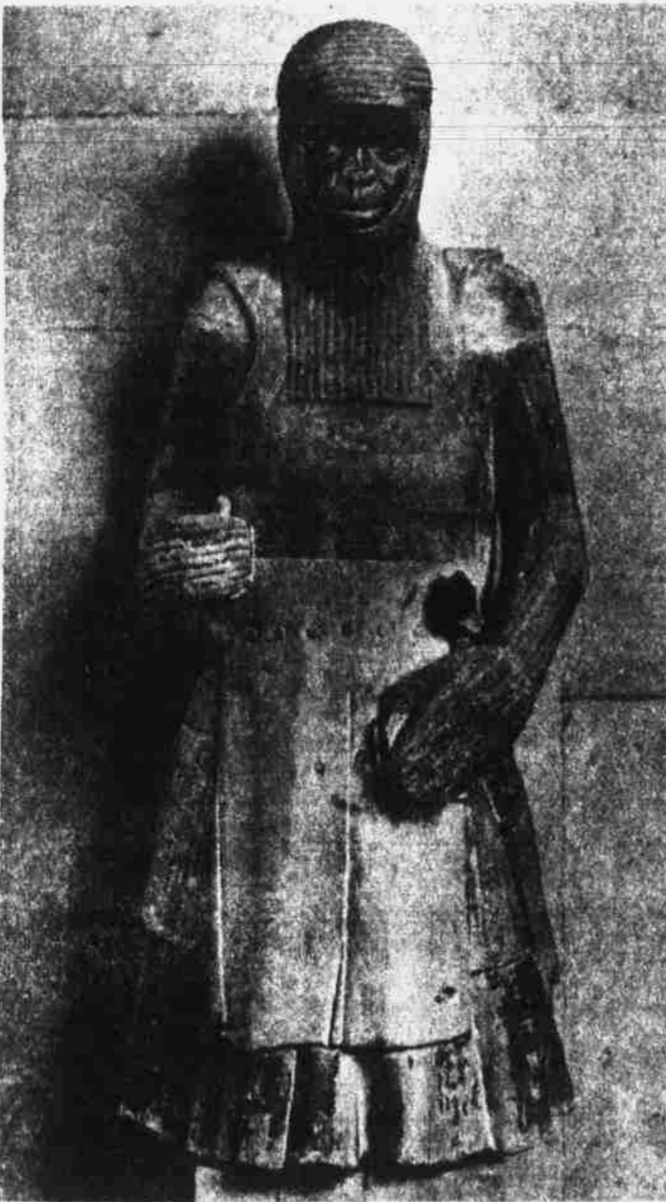
Westerners did not seem to supplant general prejudice against blacks. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Western artists went on creating art works which stereotyped blacks as servants and in-

fidels. And, for the most part, the positive images of blacks were symbolic portraits of black saints, queens and kings.

During the early 16th century, however, there was at least one famous artist who didn't always use the stock images of blacks in his works. While visiting Flanders around 1508, German artist Albrecht Durer drew thoughtful portraits of the black people he encountered. "I did the por-

trait in charcoal of Brandao, the factor's clerk, I did the portrait of his Moorish woman in silverpoint," Durer wrote of these drawings in the diary he kept during his visit.

Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Durer based his portrayal of blacks on first-hand knowledge, not rumors and superstition. His simple, honest drawings show that, when he looked at these black people, Durer did not see stereotypes and symbols, he saw real human beings.



Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of Menil Foundation/Hickey & Robertson, Houston

This vase detail of an Ethiopian warrior was created by the Greek artist Exekias between 550 and 525 B.C. Greek artists, inspired by Egyptian artists, often painted images of blacks on terra cotta pottery.

In the 13th century, St. Maurice, the patron saint of the Holy Roman Empire, suddenly became black after centuries of being depicted as a white man. This sandstone statue, carved around 1250 A.D., was probably one of the first images of the black saint. German artists continued to depict St. Maurice as a black man until the 16th century.

Getting Smart

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• Geographical changes. The rate of poverty has risen in the North and West, while falling in the South. The greatest increases in poverty rates were among central-city minorities.

• The elderly are in trouble. They account for much of the decrease in official poverty rates during the 1970's — largely due to greater Social Security benefits — but most of the elderly who have "moved out" of poverty merely moved from a few hundred dollars below the poverty line to a few hundred dollars above it.

The National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity's evaluation of the unemployment situation revealed similar severe problems. The Council reviewed the social costs of recession, inflation and energy shortages that characterized much of the 70's. It found increasing numbers of the unemployed were not nearly as well insulated by unemployment insurance and other income support programs as the public generally assumes.

The Council, in fact, noted that only about half of the jobless receive unemployment compensation, and large numbers of unemployed persons receive no food stamps or welfare benefits at all.

All Americans should feel proud of the gains we have made in reducing poverty in the United States. We must never forget that the eradication of poverty in the United States is a worthy goal that can be realized. Let us be careful not to turn our pride into shame.



Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of British Museum, London



Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of Menil Foundation/Hickey & Robertson, Houston

This depiction of a black King Balthasar, one of the three Wise Men, is a detail from "Adoration of the Magi," painted by Hieronymus Bosch between 1490 and 1510 A.D.

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