

Blacks in western art: A changing image

By Clarissa Myrick
Smithsonian News Service

Part One

A 12-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, have 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," Warrne 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 con-

tingents 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 the 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 to depict accurately the physical characteristics of Black people. To represent the tightly curled hair of Blacks, for instance, some sculptors cut diamonds shapes in relief, others 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 Devisse 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



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

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.

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 13-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," Devisse 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.
End Part One.



Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of British Museum, London

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.

Wear black ribbons for Black children

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munity offers any hope of arresting the worsening picture for Black children," states Evelyn Moore, Executive Director of the National Black Child Development Institute. "Who, if not us," she asks, "will be responsible for Black children?"

The Coalition For Black Colleges and the National Black Child Development Institute point out that the wearing of yellow ribbons successfully reminded Americans of our patriotic duty to the hostages in Iran. "This domestic tragedy is comparable to if not worse than the taking of hostages in Iran and Black ribbons will remind us of our moral obligations to Black children. They

will become a profound symbol of the tragic deaths and an equally evocative statement of our national solidarity to protect the defenseless," states Tony Brown.

The Black Children's Campaign also emphasizes the color Black because of its association with mourning and when tied to the American flag, it vividly reminds Americans that the nation's morality is endangered. The Atlanta incident is a tragedy for all Americans.

The Campaign believes that this simple expression of moral support from the country would assist the families and workers of Atlanta as they face the stark terror of their

situation and let them know that we share their deep sense of loss and anguish.

The Campaign is urging that Americans in addition to wearing a ribbon: volunteer to serve as an area coordinator; inform as many people as you can by passing out fliers in your community; call your radio and television stations urging them to publicize the Campaign and give appropriate news coverage to the Atlanta situation; endorse and solicit endorsements for the Black Children's Campaign.

For more information write: Black Children, 1463 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20005.

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From the Front Door

By Tom Boothe

From the Front Door, as you may know, The House of Exodus was awarded a \$50,000.00 grant to develop a Youth Alcohol and Drug Prevention Program. This award was made back in November through the North/Northeast Mental Health Project.

The House of Exodus is happy to report that the first quarter review was extremely favorable, which motivates us to do even better next quarter.

As you know Exodus is a comprehensive, innovative and aggressive treatment center, and is a driving force in the Black community and is meeting the challenge of treating our community citizens from (5) years of age, to over (70) years of age; and is providing positive support through a dedicated professional staff.

Exodus's latest development is it's New Youth Mental Health Offensive, which is a part of the Exodus Youth Prevention Department. To accommodate this new undertaking, we have moved to our new facilities, which is the entire block on the Northside of Alberta street between 16th and 17th. The address is 1639 N.E. Alberta.

We are proud of the support the community is giving Exodus, not the people you might expect, but the quiet citizens whom you would least expect to be concerned about the quality of their neighbors life. (By the way these citizens are absolutely non-solicited volunteers), who came and asked "how can I help?" Some gave money, some are giving their time and expertise and others are coming to participate in groups, and to learn and help in anyway they can.

Some of these individuals and businesses have asked me not to glorify them, by mentioning and publishing their names, so to not single them out to the public, we here at Exodus want all of you to know that the clients, and staff, and perhaps the entire community sincerely appreciates your support.

As I said last week, you can't spend your time or money for a better purpose. Join with the Exodus Youth Mental Health Offensive, building our community into a better and safer place to live and raise our children.

Brought to you as a public service by House of Exodus