

The Black image in Western Art



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.

PART TWO

Historians speculate that in the mid-13th century Fredrick 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 6th 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, 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 universality, 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 infidels. 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 portrait 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.

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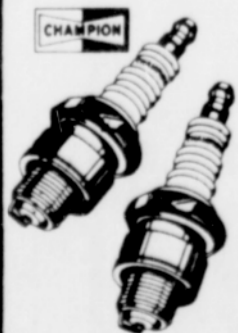
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