REVEALING THE AFRICAN PRESENCE IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE

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THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

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COVER AND PAGE 118 Workshop of Gerard David, *Adoration of the Kings* (no. 1), detail
PAGE 2 Domenico Tintoretto, *Portrait of a Man* (no. 65)
PAGE 6 Girolamo da Santacroce, *Adoration of the Kings* (no. 24)
PAGE 12 *Chafariz d'el Rey in the Alfama District* (no. 47), detail
PAGE 34 Jan Muller, after Hendrick Goltzius, *The First Day (Dies 1)* (no. 38)
PAGE 60 *Habits des habitans du Caire*, from Leo Africanus, *Historiale description de l'Afrique* (no. 19)
PAGE 80 *Portrait of a Wealthy African* (no. 61)
PAGE 98 Andrés Sánchez Galque, *Los tres mulatos de Esmeraldas* (no. 77)

INTRODUCTION

JOANEATH SPICER

The value placed on the identity and perspective of the individual may be one of the chief legacies of the European Renaissance to Western culture, but that attention expanded to encompass those outside the cultural elites only very gradually and imperfectly. Given the conventionalized treatment of other marginalized groups of the time such as peasants, the material available for illuminating the lives of individual Africans in Renaissance Europe through the visual arts is considerable, though little known to the wider public. The focus here is on Africans living in or visiting Europe in what has been called the long sixteenth century, from the 1480s to around 1610. The exhibition and essays seek to draw out not only their physical presence but their identity and participation in society, as well as the challenges, prejudices, and the opportunities they encountered. Addressing this rich material in the context of a public exhibition offers the possibility to encourage broad public discussion of the larger issues of shared heritage—as well as those of race, color, and identity—through the vehicle of great art.

The exhibition experience is built around two main sections. Section 1 addresses conditions that frame the lives of Africans in Europe—slavery and social status, perceptions of Africa, the representation of Africans in Christian art, blackness and cultural difference, as well as the aesthetic appreciation of blackness. Then in Section 2 the individuals themselves come to the fore—often through portrayals from life—first as slaves and servants, followed by the surprisingly wide range of free and freed Africans living ordinary lives, and finally African diplomats in Europe and African rulers, present in Europe through their portraits commissioned for great princely collections, images that may assert cultural difference and a keen understanding of self-representation in a way denied to others. The exhibition ends with the mesmerizing figure of St. Benedict the Moor, the Renaissance African-European with the greatest impact today.

The origin of the project was research undertaken in 2000 in response to a query as to the museum's position on the conflicting claims concerning the identity of the child in the Walters' painting by Jacopo Pontormo, then called *Portrait of Maria Salviati and a Child*, datable to ca. 1539 (no. 64). Formulating the wider issues from the perspective of her identity and indeed the nature of the public response to that identity has informed the current exhibition project. The parameters of research were altered by a "game-changing" conference organized at Oxford University (2001) by Kate Lowe and Thomas Earle, "Black Africans in Renaissance Europe." Over time it became clear that there were more than enough evocative, potentially borrowable objects to create an exhibition that could generate public conversation on racial identity. The Amsterdam exhibition *Black Is Beautiful* (2008) raised important questions that continue to benefit the field, and *The Image of the Black in Western Art* project, edited by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and now generously hosted by the DuBois Institute at Harvard University, has become a major force. Nevertheless, by adopting an approach highlighting the roles of individuals of African descent

FIG. 1 *New Map of Africa.* From Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp: Aegidius Radeus, 1592, first edition 1570). Engraving and watercolor; 41 × 53.5 cm. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (92.104)

in the European Renaissance, an approach looking back to the work of Hans Werner Debrunner (1979) and further back to Joel Augustus Rogers (1952), the perspective of this project remains distinct. Unfortunately, it also remains truncated, as financial pressures forced the reduction of this publication by a third, eliminating important contributions on peoples of African ancestry in English and Spanish literature, in Christian Art, the portrayal of black servants, and the perception of Africa. It is hoped that these essays can be assembled elsewhere.

The chronological period covered by the exhibition is the "long sixteenth century" (ca. 1480–1610). In the last decades of the 1400s Africa became a focus of European attention as it had not been since the Roman Empire. On the one hand, markers of Africans' intensified engagement with Europe in the 1480s include the 1484 arrival in Lisbon of a Congolese delegation led by Prince Kasuta and the establishment of a residence in Rome for the numbers of Ethiopian pilgrims and scholars. On the other hand, the European thirst for new markets and sources of commodities drove an extension of trading routes established by Portuguese explorers in the mid-1400s down the west coast of Africa; in 1497 Vasco da Gama edged up the continent's east coast, en route to India. The revelations this brought as to the shape of Africa marked one of the pivotal moments in the growth of European knowledge of the continent, to be vastly augmented in the following century and epitomized in Abraham Ortelius's *New Map of Africa* (fig. 1).[1] Arguably the most influential map of Africa from the 1500s, it was published in 1570 as part of the first systematic atlas of printed maps, *Theater of the World* (*Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*). Its fifty-three maps encompass seven representing Africa as a whole or as individual regions. The contour of the continent now has a familiar look, and while many internal place designations remain generalized, as "Kingdom of the Blacks" (*Nigritarum Regio*) written large across West Africa, others are specific, as the insertion of Simbaoe (Great Zimbabwe) in southern Africa. Subsequent editions were expanded and updated, incorporating as many as nineteen maps of all or part of the continent.

Again in the same overall time frame, beginning in the late 1400s, three large historical shifts of peoples were taking place. Muslim Berber, Arab, and black African populations originally from North Africa were pushed out of Spain, where they had ruled for centuries, many returning to North Africa. The Ottomans, a Muslim Turkish dynasty, expanded their territorial dominions, toward Eastern and Central Europe and across North Africa, where Ottoman and European (more specifically Habsburg) interests would conflict sharply, calling for intense diplomatic efforts. Most significantly, the importation of Africans into Europe as slaves, from markets in West and also North Africa, gradually supplanted the trade in slaves of Circassian

or Slavic origin. The result was a growing African presence in Europe, some of the evidence for which is found exclusively in the visual arts. For example, the distinctly individualized portraits of two black men incorporated by Gerard David into his *Adoration of the Kings* (no. 1, cover), establish their presence in Antwerp around 1515, probably initially as slaves of Portuguese merchants, as was Katharina (no. 55), drawn there in 1521. However, to round out their lives, their probable manumission (slavery had no legal standing in the Netherlands), we will need more than the few archival documents presently known.

Conditions remained largely stable until the early 1600s, allowing (within the constraints of ingrained prejudice) for a gradually more nuanced view of blackness and of persons of African ancestry as well as for more varied roles for them and especially for their children within society. For reasons that are not entirely clear, around 1608–10 there occurred a series of political and cultural "events" in disparate locations that each in its own way seemed to signal a new level of acceptance and status for Africans in Europe, to pick four: the elaborate arrangements made by Pope Paul V to receive the Congolese ambassador known in Europe as Antonio Manuel, Marquis of Na Vunda (who, however died upon arrival, see Lowe, "Ambassadors," pp. 104–5, and fig. 46); Morocco and the Dutch Republic sign a landmark treaty establishing trade relations, the first between a European country and a non-Christian one; the Spanish playwright Enciso writes a play celebrating the life of the black humanist Juan Latino; Philip III of Spain orders a silver casket for the bones of Benedict the Moor (canonized in 1807). However, while these events may appear to presage a new era of normalization, with the perspective of time they look more like markers of the end of an era.

In the 1600s, the focus of European attention shifted toward the Americas and Asia, while ever-increasing demands for cheap labor, especially in the American colonies, meant that slavery became specifically associated with black Africans as it had not been in the past. With familiarity, the exotic otherness of "Africa," her "astonishing novelty" so vividly highlighted in Martin de Vos's 1589 *Allegory of Africa* (no. 2, from a series of the Four Continents)[2] and its accompanying poem, becomes simply the "other" and more commonly subject to exploitation. While the poem cites "the eternal pyramids" as the manifestation of this "novelty," the composition balances the mental achievement of the past in the form of pyramids (actually obelisks are depicted, in a typical confusion of the time) with perceived extra-ordinary strangeness and savagery of the present, manifested in a winged serpent and to the rear, naked natives standing before caves.

Indeed, this ambivalence toward forces beyond control is a thread running through many aspects of Europeans' perceptions of Africa, whether it is the incredible ferocity of the "monstrous" crocodile, assumptions about exaggerated sexuality, or the vast sterility of the Sahara: to Europeans it was all extraordinary in its excess. For Renaissance artists and authors, Cleopatra VII of Egypt exemplified the dangers of excess in high places. Her life as pharaoh, with its cast of Roman emperors and generals subjected to dramatic twists of fate and emotional pathos, was perfectly suited to the revived theatrical genre of classical tragedy as in *Cléopâtre Captive* (1552–53) by Étienne Jodelle[3] or Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (by 1608).[4] In the arts she was rarely the resourceful ruler but a voluptuously beautiful woman (often nude) committing suicide following that of her lover Mark Antony.[5] In a lovely bronze statuette by Niccolò Roccatagliata (no. 22),[6] Cleopatra leans into the asp's embrace, the dramatic undulations of the poisonous snake underscoring her destructive sexuality by referencing Eve's fall. Perhaps the

medium played a role. The color of Cleopatra's skin is not known, but she apparently had Egyptian blood as well as Greek.[7] Renaissance painters and playwrights generally represented her as European, but Shakespeare has her describe herself as "with Phoebus's amorous pinches black [blackened by the rays of the sun god Phoebus Apollo]" while Antony's friend Philo refers to her as "tawny," in a passage implying an alignment of darker skin with sexuality.

The tendency to emphasize the baser natures of famous men and women of the African past helps to illuminate a taste of Italian scholars and inkwells and oil lamps (nos. 8, 9) for the worktable made amusingly in the shape of the head of an African slave, imitating utility vessels of antiquity. The evince casual disregard, whether beautifully or crudely modeled. So for the Renaissance collector, African exoticism had multiple sides: It would prompt disdain as well as profound fascination (for which see the essay on blackness, pp. 35–59).

The immensity, voluptuous strangeness, and seeming unknowability of this continent so close and yet so far from Europe offered a fundamental challenge to Europeans in the 1500s. Representations evoking these qualities would unavoidably influence their perception of people of visibly African ancestry in their midst.

NOTES

1. On the atlas, see Paul Binding, *Imagined Corners: Exploring the World's First Atlas* (London: Review, 2003), www.orteliusmaps.com/ort_background.html.

2. Ann Diels and Marjolein Leesberg, *The Collaert Dynasty*, part VI, *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700* (Rotterdam: Sound & Vision Publishers in cooperation with the Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, 1993–[2005]): no. 1316.

3. For Jodelle's play, see E. Balmas and M. Dassonville, eds., *La tragédie à l'époque d'Henri II et de Charles IX* (Paris: Olschki, 1986); Charles Mazouer, *Le théâtre français de la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 2002). Other plays of the period include François Rabelais, *Cléopâtre dans l'Hadès* (1553); Robert Garnier, *Marc-Antoine* (ca. 1578); Mary Sidney, *The Tragedy of Antonie* (ca. 1592); Nicolas de Montreux, *Cléopâtre* (1594).

4. See Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

5. On Cleopatra in the art of the Renaissance, see Céline Richard-Jamet, "Cléopâtre: Femme forte or femme fatale? Une place equivoque dans les galleries de 'femmes fortes' aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles," in *Cléopâtra dans le miroir de l'art occidental,* ed. Claude Ritschard and Allison Morehead, exh. cat. (Geneva, Musée Rath, 2004), 37–52; Philippe Boyer, "Cléopâtre vs. Lucrèce: Du suicide comme vecteur de rapprochement," in ibid., 53–57; Brian A. Curran, "Cleopatra and the Second Julius: Egypt and the Dream of Empire in High Renaissance Rome," in *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 167–87. The informative range of images in *Cléopâtra dans le Miroir de l'Art* does not really address portraiture, small sculpture, or the decorative arts, so attention may be called to Venetian, *Portrait of an Unidentified Woman as Cleopatra* (ca. 1580?), Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (acc. no. 37.534); Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, called Antico, *Bust of Cleopatra* (1519–20), bronze, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (acc. no. 64.2174); Severo da Ravenna, *Cleopatra Committing Suicide* (1530?), bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (10.9.2). Francesco Xanto Avelli, *Dish with Marc Antony and Cleopatra* (1542), maiolica, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (acc. no. 95.371).

6. Manfred Leithe-Jasper is preparing a publication on this piece to appear in 2012.

7. The Ptolemies married within their own (Greek) family, but Cleopatra's father's mother was apparently an Egyptian from elite circles, so Cleopatra had Egyptian blood. She was the first of her dynasty to study and use the Egyptian language. See Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, eds., *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially the citation from Plutarch on her appearance (210), and portraits now thought to be her, most prominently no. 198, a marble portrait from the Staatliche Museum, Berlin, which is consistent with the summary portraits on her coins. Günther Höbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (London: Routledge, 2001), 223, 231–56.