Distorted Reflections: The Visual Depiction of Africa in European Art

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Abstract
The last years have seen a growing interest in how European writers throughout history have written about Africa and Africans, and a number of studies of this subject have been published. 1 The question of how we have seen and see Africa has by and large been left unanswered, and by going into a historical analysis of how European pictorial artists have depicted Africa I shall try to give a preliminary answer.
Distorted Reflections: The Visual Depiction of Africa in European Art

The last years have seen a growing interest in how European writers throughout history have written about Africa and Africans, and a number of studies of this subject have been published.¹ The question of how we have *seen* and *see* Africa has by and large been left unanswered, and by going into a historical analysis of how European pictorial artists have depicted Africa I shall try to give a preliminary answer. Preliminary because of the
brevity of this article compared to the historical period and vast geographical area I seek to cover. In the same way the view of history on which I base my analyses of some pictures may seem too general and unsupported, but I am nevertheless sure that certain tendencies are quite clear and are reflected in the pictures I analyse.

DELIMITATION OF THE PICTORIAL MATERIAL

The delimitation and organization of the number of pictures on which I base my analysis of the European depiction of Africa are two-sided. On the one hand there is an external point of view with regard to the pictorial material, and on the other an internal. The external organization of the material is a mainly statistical exposition of the frequency of depictions of Africa and the context in which they are found. It is obvious that a simple matter like the very number of depictions of Africa is of great importance if one wants to say anything about the degree of contact between Europe and Africa. One extreme is of course no contact at all and consequent ignorance, but I must hasten to add that this does not mean that no pictures of Africa or Africans can be found. What is typical of pictures from periods with little or no contact is that they have no relation to reality whatsoever, but rather are projections of the European’s subconsciousness as may be seen in the fabulous monsters of antiquity and the middle ages. The other extreme is the flood of written and visual descriptions of Africa which went together with the creation and establishment of the British Empire. The number of depictions in itself does not say anything in an absolute sense of how close a contact there has been at a given time, but must be seen in relation to the total pictorial production. Another external aspect which must be taken into account is the question of what genres are to be included in the analysis. This question is among other things historically determined, as for instance the importance of photography is insignificant or non-existent before 1850, just as the importance of oil painting is
Blemmya or the headless monster, which Pliny the Elder recounts lives along the Niger: ‘Blemmyae sine capite sunt atque os et oculos in pectore gerunt.’

minimal in the twentieth century. In other words, the selection of the material to be analysed will not be made from aesthetical or traditional art historical criteria, but rather from the wide area called visual communications.

The other group of criteria is the internal, which has to do with the motifs of the pictures. The representative part of the picture must naturally in one way or another be connected to that part of reality to which Africa belongs in the European mind. As it will take us too far within the bounds of this article to deal with all aspects of Africa such as topography or animal life the subject will be limited to the black African himself. On the other hand, this does not mean that one should be unaware of the circumstances that make the European see Africa as one big diamond mine or safari park and completely disregard the African himself.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PICTORIAL MATERIAL AND THE HISTORICAL PERIODS

The pictorial material to be analysed covers seven centuries and in the following pages it will be connected to the historical progression in the relationship between Africa and Europe. The analyses of a limited number of typical depictions will be closely interwoven with the historical periods, but the internal tradition within the specific genres of art forms must necessarily be taken into account. More is permitted within satirical comics than say in an oil painting, though an entirely innocent joke still remains to be seen.

The relationship between Europe and Africa may for our purpose be divided into six partly chronologically concurrent periods, namely:

1. Ignorance and the beginning of contact: fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.
2. (Equal) trade partners: sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.
3. The slave trade: late seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
4. The integration of Africa into the capitalist world market or colonialism: nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first period where only little happens covers a little less than two centuries, viz., the fourteenth and fifteenth. Until the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1486 and later sailed up along the East coast of Africa to find the sea route to India Europe’s knowledge of Africa only consisted of legends, and the few depictions from the fourteenth century tell us more about Europe than they do about Africa. In his ‘The Mocking of Christ’
Giotto depicts an African, but his function in the painting is simply to add an exotic touch and point out that the action takes place in Jerusalem. You do see an authentic African, but not in Africa. In a map from 1375 of the Kingdom of Mali this happens, but the African in question is of a legendary nature, namely Prester John, who has been created by the European wish to find a strong Christian ally in the crusades against Islam.

In the late fifteenth century after the Portuguese contact with East Africa the African is seen more often in art. He is still not seen in his natural surroundings, but is from now on found in the traditional motif of the Magi. It is important to notice that the

![Image of The Magi, late fifteenth century]

Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Magi*, late fifteenth century. In this Dutch painting the only difference between the Magi is the colour of the African king. His face and hair is typically European. Apparently the artist has only heard about, and not actually seen an African.
three magi are only differentiated with regard to age and race and not with regard to status. In this picture the connection between subservient status and black race has not yet been established.

The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw a significant rise in the number of depictions of Africans. Africa was becoming important as a trade partner. Africa was in no way inferior to Europe as her well-organised kingdoms could easily cope with the European trade posts on the coasts. The primary interest pre-industrialised Europe had in Africa was still trade, and the thing sought after was luxury goods. Only few slaves were sold to Europe, where they were part of the representative façade of the courts. Africa's relationship to Europe had a dual expression in the art of this period because of the character of the European class society. On the one hand there are the portraits of African ambassadors and kings which are indistinguishable from European representative portraits. On the other hand the European

Ambassador from the Congo (1641). This African nobleman could with no difficulty take part in European court life on equal footing with other nobles.
view of Africans that was to continue till today started to be formed in this period. In the visual arts the African is represented in a different fashion from the European. This development starts within the representative courtly portrait, where the cringing African servant becomes a fixed (formal) element.

(Drawing.) The courtly portrait celebrating the prince tends to follow a certain pattern. The African is placed behind or under the European noble or prince, and his form is often partly covered. The direction of the gaze goes from the African to the prince, who ignores his servant.
This pattern is found in a large number of portraits within this genre. Here Jacob D’Agar’s *Louise de Kéroualle*, 1699. The ideological implications of the African girl who offers a crown to the duchess are obvious.

With the introduction of the sugar industry to the West Indies and the consequent demand for labour, Africa’s relationship to Europe was radically changed as it now became a supplier of slaves. According to one estimate the extent of the slave trade was such that whereas in 1650 18-20 per cent of the world population was African in 1850 it had dropped to between 8 and 9 per cent.² Through the triangular trade the slave trade was one of the major
sources of the original accumulation of wealth in Europe, which made industrialization possible at the same time as it destroyed the African societies, partly by removing the productive part of the population and partly by causing almost uninterrupted wars. The economic 'necessity' which created the slave trade was followed by an ideology that sought to justify it. The descriptions of trade with Africa now incorporated a value judgement. African societies were described as the negation of everything human and decent; African religions were made into evil superstitions; forms

Thomas Stothard's *The Black Venus' Voyage from Angola to the West Indies* (late eighteenth century) may be said to be a slightly idealised version of the slave ships. The picture shows a lie about the status of female slaves and at the same time it removes the slave trade from reality and takes it into a mythological and classical sphere. The spectator is reminded of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* rather than of his own historical reality.
of governments were described as despotism, and the more blood-thirsty aspects of life in Africa (which often were the results of the slave trade) were brought into the foreground. The African himself was dehumanised, and often seen as the product of his subconscious lusts. The consequence of these myths was that it was not only justifiable but even desirable to keep the African as a slave because in this way he was brought into contact with his superior white masters and his spiritual salvation was more assured by leading him into Christianity and civilization. In depictions of Africa from this period one scene of bloodshed runs into another. Often this is crudely done, but it may also take the form of innuendo as in ‘A Scene on the Niger’, where the scene of bloodshed is only a tiny detail in the picture and not the main action.

Captain Allen, *Scene on the Niger* (1832). Note the decapitation on the left hand side. One must assume from this illustration that decapitations are so common in Africa that nobody even seems to take notice.

With this conception of Africa at the back of his mind it is small wonder that the European saw himself as the black man’s saviour, and what is then more natural for the black man than to show his
gratitude and devotion. The affectionate black servant or slave became a commonplace of this period. Formally it is significant that the African nearly always is below the European in the picture.

As slavery became less economically necessary and the abolitionist campaign (albeit prompted essentially for economic reasons by the Free Trade advocates) started, one of its means of propaganda was to show the reality of the slave trade through pictures which emphasized the slave traders' cruelties. William Blake did this consistently in his illustrations of J. G. Steadman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1793. He did not depict the slave drivers as Arabs, as was
usually done, but as Europeans. Blake’s understanding of the fact that the oppression of the Africans was connected to the oppression of himself and his class can be pictorially detected in the similarity between manacled and distorted Europeans and Africans in his engravings and etchings. Blake’s sense of solidarity with the rest of oppressed humanity is brought forward clearly in the plate called ‘Europe, supported by Africa and Asia’ where the motif of the Three Graces is changed into an expression of interracial harmony. That Blake, in contrast to many abolitionists, was not paternalistic towards the Africans can also be seen in the
poem from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* called ‘The Little Black Boy’ where it is the black boy who leads the white to God, and not the other way around. The paternalist view of the abolitionist movement is reflected in the Wedgwood medallion, which became its symbol. The medallion depicts a kneeling and manacled African slave, and it says ‘Am I not a man and a brother’. The kneeling African nevertheless belongs to the pattern found in the courtly representative portrait where a standing African seldom is found. The indignation against slavery had a stronger expression in Turner’s ‘The Slave Ship’, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy with this descriptive title, ‘Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying – Typhoon coming on’. This painting is a fitting reply to ‘The Black Venus’ Voyage’.

W. Blake, *Europe, supported by Africa and Asia* (1793), from Steadman’s Narrative.
Turner, *Slave Ship*, 1840. The blood red colours and the storm in the background of the painting stand as a comment on the drowning slaves in the foreground.

The somewhat paternalist views of the abolitionist movement could painlessly continue into the new historical period, the integration of Africa into the capitalist world market. The political manifestation of the economic integration was colonialism, and the age of imperialism or of the monopoly stage of capitalism had an overt political manifestation in the Scramble for Africa, which culminated in the Berlin Conference in 1885. As the capitalist countries had moved into the monopoly stage free trade became impossible, and the European great powers divided Africa between them, so that they each could have monopolistic control over their area. The picture of Africans that Europe now needed was one of children, who could not rule themselves. It follows that Africans were still regarded as inferior human beings whose savage and disgusting customs ought to be removed by colonial administrators and missionaries. However, Africa was not seen as
In the Danish satirical magazine *Klod Hans* No 14, 1917, the Danish West Indies are caricatured as negro children with thick lips who have to be led by the hand by their Uncle Sam. Their Danish parents are waving goodbye.

the white man’s grave anymore. Just as they exported their capital to Africa, so gradually Europeans started to export the emotions which could not express themselves within a narrow European class system. In ‘The Snake Tree’ (1867) which is an illustration by Riou of Jules Verne’s *Five Weeks in a Balloon* Africa is still a threat, whereas in Rousseau’s ‘The Snake Charmer’ (1907) Africa is depicted as an area from which one can profit emotionally and artistically as well as economically. The exotic landscape is an expression of beauty and poetry. The petit-bourgeois artist in Europe was able to identify with an unreal Africa, and this tendency tells us something about the ambivalent position of the
Riou, *The Snake Tree*, 1862. Africa as a threat with allusions to the Fall.

Rousseau, *The Snake Charmer*, 1907. Reminiscent of *The Snake Tree*, but here the Pan-like piper is in harmony with nature like a Romantic poet.
Two connected illustrations from Burne Hogarth’s *Tarzan of the Apes*. The pictorial parallel between the dancing apes and Africans is typical of the racialist stereotypes, which are often found in children’s comics.
artist as a bohemian living outside bourgeois society, just as it tells us that the African is reduced to a secondary reflection of the European's suppressed emotional life. This reflection does not always have the positive aspects of emotional freedom; more often the African is depicted as the negative aspects of the European subconsciousness, e.g. Freud's Id, and he then represents aggressions and pure sexuality. Quite often the black colour of his skin is taken as an external sign of sin and wickedness. At any rate he is less rational than the European, like a child, or he may be completely dehumanised and depicted as a slow evolution of the ape.

Around 1960 the colonialist stage of imperialism started to change into neo-colonialism. One of several reasons for this was that the economic integration of Africa into the world market had now been completed through the political and military force of colonialism. It now became possible to grant the colonies formal political independence without endangering the economic relations. Another decisive cause was that the U.S.A. after the Second World War appeared as the strongest economic power, and it therefore wanted to extend its influences both economically and politically to the reserves of the now weaker colonial countries. The formal political independence demanded a new ideological stance to Africa, as she now should appear as the equal of Europe. The contradiction between political equality and economic exploitation is ideologically reflected in the contradiction between official representative pictures like 'Poul Hartling and Chief Akotoh' and the image of Africa found in other visual media such as comics and films where the old imperialist patterns and stereotypes are still flourishing. The internal traditions of these genres do not fully account for this fact.

The alternative to neo-colonialist exploitation may be to break loose from the imperialist world and set up a socialist state, quite often through a violent revolution. This freedom struggle seldom finds a visual expression in the imperialist world outside of those groups who have allied themselves with the anti-imperialist struggle. The quantitatively insignificant visual material with the
In this official press photo (1971) the former Danish foreign secretary Poul Hartling and the Ghanaian Chief Akotoh are on the same pictorial level.

freedom struggle as motif may either depict oppression and exploitation, or the struggle itself and visions of complete independence from imperialism.

The tendencies found in my analyses of European pictures of Africans should hopefully have shown some of the parts of the ideology that surrounds Africa in the European mind. The European image of Africa is to a very large extent determined by the historical and economical relations between the two continents, and this fact has given rise to a discrepancy between reality and ideology, which conserved and still conserves that exploitation which has been a decisive part of Europe’s relationship to Africa. An awareness of this fact should not only be limited to the analysis of written texts but also to the whole visual field that surrounds us.
This photo from the back of a Danish socialist book (Det lankede Afrika) contains both elements of the struggle and of future victory. These two elements are expressed through two traditional symbols, a gun and a young African mother with her child, but the agitational effect of the photo mainly stems from their startling juxtaposition.

NOTES

1. Among others:
   Fanon, Frantz, Black Skin White Masks, Paladin, Bungay Suffolk, 1973.


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*Les A. Murray*: The Boeotian Strain
*Gareth Griffiths*: Experiment with Form in Recent Australian Drama.
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