



Black Women in the Rijksmuseum's Sixteenth- and Seventeenth- Century Collection

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Black people have featured in western art for centuries. Despite their lengthy presence, it is only in recent decades that interest in the depiction of Africans in western art history has begun to grow. The basis for this was laid in the late nineteen-sixties in the ten-volume book series *The Image of the Black in Western Art*.² This series came about when the French collectors John and Dominique de Menil, responding to the increasing racial segregation in the United States, commissioned a number of authors to investigate this subject. The series became a reference work for anyone who wanted to gain an insight into the context and interpretation of Black people in western art, and for a very long time was one of the few publications on the subject.

Since 2005 there has been a number of publications and exhibitions which have convincingly demonstrated that far more people of African descent have been pictured in western visual art than was previously thought.³ In the literature, however, the focus has been primarily on the depiction of Black boys and men. We see them early on in scenes of stories from the Bible, in a leading role such as the Black king in the Adoration and the Queen of Ethiopia's eunuch being baptized by St Philip the Apostle, or as a nameless bystander. In the seventeenth century,

< Detail of fig. 3

Black men were sometimes placed in the centre, not as individuals, but as a *tronie* – a character head – often with a turban, an ostrich feather and a cloak with a valuable clasp.⁴ From then on, they were also increasingly often pictured as servants, subordinate to the white person beside them. Artists gave them a number of stereotypical features: curly hair, a round forehead, a flat, broad nose that tilts up, large white teeth and full lips.⁵

In an entry in the recently published *Routledge Companion*, titled *Black Women's Cultural Histories*,⁶ attention is paid exclusively to the Black woman. Art historian Paul Kaplan, for instance, writes about the depiction of the Black woman in early modern European art (1300-1700), in which he notes that Black women were often pictured naked.⁷ He thinks that at some times this alludes to primitiveness, while at others it has a highly erotic charge. So far, there has not been any systematic examination of the way Black women were rendered in visual art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This article is an explorative inventory of the works in the Rijksmuseum collection. We have chosen the sixteenth century because it was in this period that a specific pictorial tradition of non-European people emerged.⁸ Supplementing this are works from the seventeenth century, because from

1620 onwards there was a growing fascination with lifelike representations of Black people, which changed after 1660 in the face of colonial slavery.⁹ After the trans-Atlantic slave trade got underway, slavery dehumanized Black people to such an extent that they were depicted with stereotypical features, and because Black people in pictures had stereotypical features they were not thought of as individuals in real life. Although the images of Black women in the Rijksmuseum collection cannot be seen by definition as *pars pro toto* for the depiction of Black women in western art, with the ninety-three examples we found, we can nevertheless talk of a corpus with which something substantial can be said about the image of the Black woman.¹⁰ In which genres is she shown? Are there specific roles in which she appears more often? And how is she pictured? We found works on paper (primarily prints), three paintings and a terracotta model for a tympanum. Decorative works, among them a cabinet (inv. no. BK-16434) and an ivory figurine (inv. no. BK-NM-9785) in which Black women are rendered as ornaments, fall under a different pictorial tradition and are not considered in the present article.¹¹ We have therefore confined ourselves in this article to a selection of the works on paper and the paintings, in which Black women are an integral part of the story orchestrated by the artist. The tympanum is included as an example of the way that this image is incorporated into architecture. They are arranged by genre: illustrations to travel journals, allegorical scenes, stories from the Bible and individual portrayals.

In searching the Rijksmuseum's collection database, we used the search term 'woman' in combination with 'African' or 'Black'. To the results of these searches we added objects that we knew ourselves. All the same, it is likely that not all the objects with an

African or Black woman have been found. People of colour often remain invisible, even when they are standing right in front of us in a painting. This happens above all when they are not pictured alone. If a Black woman in a work is shown surrounded by white people, the title and description often relate to the white group only. This is important, because if a Black woman is not specifically described, she cannot be found with the search function either.¹² As we shall demonstrate in this article, the Black woman seldom appears in the centre of the picture. Her role is usually that of an onlooker observing the central story.

The African Woman Seen Through the Eyes of European Travellers

As early as 1434, the Portuguese sailed along the coast of Cape Bojador, on the north coast of the Western Sahara, and it became evident to white Europeans that the skin of this population group was darker and their appearance differed from the Islamic North African. In the early modern era, travel journals written by Portuguese, Spanish and Italian explorers were an important source of information about the world beyond Europe. These diaries were usually produced in print, with illustrations, so they were easily and swiftly circulated. Many reissues often followed. The first travellers also shared ethnographic passages in letters to family and friends, reports to benefactors and ship's logs.¹³ In these last, European merchants noted down all sorts of practical information, including newly discovered shipping routes, flora and fauna, and the trade goods that could be found in a particular location.¹⁴ They also described the local inhabitants, their customs and habits, paying special attention to their appearance and their clothes. This information



Fig. 1
 JOHANN THEODOR
 DE BRY AFTER
 ANONYMOUS,
*Women of Different
 Peoples*, 1602.
 Engraving,
 145 x 218 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. RP-P-BI-5265.

was sometimes based on their own observation, but was more often taken from earlier travel journals.

Illustrations were added to these descriptions to help the reader understand the content of the text. These images were part of a pictorial tradition that had existed since the thirteenth century, in which a particular order and consistent subjects always appeared.¹⁵ Classifying people on the basis of their dress springs from the tradition of costume books, in which the world, and in particular its inhabitants, are described on the basis of costume. For a long time it was the goal of these descriptions and illustrations to categorize peoples according to the degree of civilization shown by differences in dress, attributes and poses.¹⁶ At the end of the sixteenth century, attention shifted from civilization to social stratification: the emphasis came to lie on the hierarchy within the group in which clothing and accessories

reflected first and foremost a person's social position in their own society.¹⁷

The first Dutchman who actually travelled to Africa himself and had his story published was Pieter de Marees. At the end of the sixteenth century he went as a trailblazer to the west coast of Africa, where he stayed for a year. In 1602, after his return to the Republic, he published his book *Beschryvinghe ende Historische Verhael van het Gout Koninkrijk van Gunea*¹⁸ with wide-ranging descriptions of the regions he had visited.¹⁹ In his report, De Marees describes the population of the west coast of Africa from his European perspective. He paid particular attention to the appearance of African women and what sort of clothing they wore.²⁰ They are 'of a coarser nature and stronger complexion ... than the Female persons in our European countries'.²¹ They have 'fine white shining teeth like ivory' because



Figs. 2, 3, 4
 ANONYMOUS AFTER
 ANDRIES BEECKMAN,
*Khoi-khoi Woman
 with Suckling,
 African Woman
 with a Child and
 the Branch of a Tree
 and African Woman
 with a Hand Drum*,
 c. 1675-1725.
 Watercolour on
 paper, approx.
 320 x 200 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum, inv. nos.
 NG-2016-37-12, -9
 and -11, purchased
 with the support of
 the Johan Huizinga
 Fonds/Rijksmuseum
 Fonds.

they clean them with small sticks, and 'these white teeth in their black faces suit them very well.'²² He was far from happy, however, with their sexual morality: 'The women are also very inclined to indecency and whoring.'²³ In his view it was only when the Europeans arrived that they began to be ashamed of their nakedness.²⁴

De Marees's text is accompanied by prints made by Johann Theodor de Bry. De Bry was not on the expedition himself and based his illustrations on texts from a variety of travel journals, augmenting them with ideas of his own.²⁵ De Bry's pictures deal not so much with the degree of civilization, but rather refer to the way clothes and attributes reflect a person's position in the social hierarchy. The illustration 'Vrouwen van verschillende volkeren' (Women of Different Peoples) (fig. 1) shows, for instance, that the more clothes a woman wore, the higher her rank. In the middle, according to the accompanying description, stands the wife of a king (woman A), in a long skirt, with a chain around her neck and a fan in her hand. The most skimpily dressed woman (woman C), without any accessories, is an Akobahiro.

What that means becomes clear when we look at one of the other images by De Bry printed in 1602 (inv. no. RP-P-BI-5249) which shows three men. The word Akoba appears beside the letter A. The legend reads 'Letter A, a picture of a slave'. This means that the Akabahiro in our sheet is an enslaved woman.²⁶

From the mid-seventeenth century on we also begin to see images made *in situ* that served as examples for illustrations. Andries Beeckman, for instance, based his work on sketches he had made on the spot. Around 1652 he had become a soldier with the Dutch East India Company (VOC), but before that he was already a painter. We do not know how many trips he took or how long they lasted. His drawings and paintings were often copied later and used in travel diaries and painted series.²⁷ As well as a number of his paintings, the Rijksmuseum also has a small collection of watercolours made after his depictions by a painter unknown to us; Beeckman's originals are in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.²⁸ It is a series depicting the costumes of peoples in Africa and Asia, which includes three African women.

One of the drawings (fig. 2) shows a woman with a child.²⁹ A naked Khoi-khoi woman, with a loincloth, carries her child on her back, suckling it at the same time. This is a well-worn cliché about Khoi-khoi women (belonging to one of the tribes in western south Africa) that was known from a print in the 1634 book by the English traveller Thomas Herbert, *Some yeares travels into Africa and Asia the Great*.³⁰ A similar image of the African woman could already be seen in one of the prints by De Bry in De Marees's work, with four women in Guinea (inv. no. RP-P-BI-5251), which was inspired in turn by the work of the merchant and traveller Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1596).³¹ In the text accompanying De Bry's illustration she is described as 'Hiro ... she is very accommodating and rather too much inclined towards men'.³² This representation already had a longer pictorial tradition, which led to the production of even more clichéd illustrations.

The other drawings seem to have been made after an observed individual. One of them is likewise of an African

woman with a child (fig. 3). She is dressed in a length of yellowish-brown fabric that at the same time is a sort of sling for the baby on her back. She wears a necklace of red beads and holds the branch of a tree in her hands. On the verso there is a note 'The Queen of Madagascar'. This inscription is not on Andries Beeckman's original.³³ A third drawing (fig. 4) is of a semi-naked African woman, with a length of blue-and-white striped fabric around her waist, a white bead necklace around her neck and pearls in her ears. She holds a hand drum.³⁴ Where Beeckman saw these women is unclear. We know that he had been to the Cape of Good Hope and Madagascar, but he could also have seen them in Batavia.³⁵ Beeckman probably also used the originals after which these drawings were copied, in his painting *The Castle of Batavia* (fig. 5). There is an African woman, sitting behind a cloth with goods set out on it. Semi-naked, wearing a red skirt with a string of white beads around her neck and pearls in her ears, she bears a strong resemblance to two

Fig. 5
ANDRIES BEECKMAN,
*Three Market
Women*, detail of
*The Castle of
Batavia*, c. 1662.
Oil on canvas,
108 x 151.4 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-19.





Fig. 6
 ESAIAS BOURSSE,
*Six Workers with
 their Baskets*, 1662.
 Leaf from a sketch-
 book, grey ink,
 148 x 196 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
 NG-1996-6-95.

of the women in the costume series. It is unclear what this woman's status is and whether the amount of clothing she wears refers to her social status. The market woman to her left is fully dressed and the person to the right of her has a naked torso and bare legs. However, Beeckman's drawings and hence the work he made after them, are still firmly rooted in the European pictorial tradition of the way other peoples should be represented. Although they were most likely made after sketches done on the spot, he has shown them more as types and examples of a group than as actual individuals.

Another person who drew on the spot was Esaias Boursse, a midshipman with the Dutch East India Company.³⁶ During his stay in Colombo on the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1662, he made 116 drawings of the people he encountered there. He depicted them with individual characteristics and was interested in what they did and wore.³⁷ In one of his drawings women stand

together in small groups. Some of them are semi-naked, others are pictured with a long wraparound cloth (redda) and a head covering (fig. 6). Boursse drew most Asian women dressed, while women who look more African are more often semi-naked. This might say something about their social status, since the African women were most likely all enslaved, uprooted to work in this colony.

On the basis of these images, we can say that the illustrations in the travel journals and the separate drawn depictions showed, above all, the hierarchy of the local population: the more clothing, the higher the status. For some African women nakedness was an inherent element of their lifestyle. In the texts to these illustrations, however, their nakedness was linked to lewdness and indecency, which led to a value judgement in Europe. Nakedness, with the associations of promiscuity and indecency, became engrained for the depiction of the allegory of Africa.

The Allegory of Africa

Artists often used women to personify continents in allegories; for centuries they all had white features. This was a long tradition that went back to Classical Antiquity. The correct attributes were more important than a specific appearance in conveying an abstract idea.³⁸ In loose prints from the sixteenth century, Africa is generally represented by a woman with European looks, whose skin is sometimes darker.³⁹ In the print *Africa* by Julius Goltzius after Maerten de Vos from 1575-1610 (fig. 7) a white woman personifies the African continent. She sits in a carriage pulled by two lions, surrounded by animals including a crocodile, elephants and ostriches, and holds a parasol and a tambourine. Save for an earring and a fillet in her hair, she is nude. A large uptilted nose, prominent lips and curly hair were designed to give the white woman an 'African' appearance. We see a similar image in other sixteenth-century prints in the collection: a semi-naked woman, with these features, leans back and is encircled by animals that are found on the continent.⁴⁰ Around the end of the sixteenth century, artists endeavoured to make the women who depicted Africa actually look like African persons. This is quite evident in the print by Adriaen Collaert, likewise after Maerten de Vos, from 1586-91 (fig. 8). Since artists might have encountered Africans in Europe, they were probably better acquainted with how they looked.⁴¹ At the same time this print, compared with the former, can also be perceived as more eroticizing in the way the Black woman leans back and positions her legs.

In 1593 the Italian Cesare Ripa published *Iconologia*, a pattern book for visual artists and craftsmen, which became a major influence on the depiction of allegories. It was translated into Dutch in 1644. In it, Ripa recommended using an (as good as) naked Black woman to portray Africa:

A black Woman, almost naked, having curly, bushy hair, wearing on her head, instead of a helmet, the trunk of an Elephant, around her neck a string of corals, likewise two in her ears, holds with her right hand a Scorpion, and with the left a Horn of Plenty full of sheaves of corn. To the side stands a very savage Lion, and on the other side there are some Adders and venomous Snakes. ... She is shown naked because the region does not overflow with exceptional riches. ... The black curly hair, corals at the neck and ears, are typical ornaments of the Moors.⁴²

In part because of the immense popularity of this reference work, the version described by Ripa remained influential in the way continents should be pictured until well into the eighteenth century.⁴³ The prescribed image of a semi-naked or completely naked African woman, with beads around her neck and earrings in her ears, a cornucopia and beside her a lion and snakes, is manifest in the allegorical scenes in the Rijksmuseum's collection. In *African Landscape* (inv. no. RP-P-OB-61.894), made by an anonymous printmaker in 1650-1700, the continent is represented by a semi-naked African woman with a horn of plenty under her arm and a scorpion in her other hand. An elephant can be seen in the background, there is a lion beside her and in front of her are snakes poised to strike.

As well as on loose prints, allegories also appear frequently in the margins of maps. Carel Allard's map of Africa dating from around 1690, shows a semi-naked Black woman leaning back, wearing a cloth around her waist and a string of beads around her neck, surrounded by animals and fruit (inv. no. NG-501-54). Although naked, on this map and in the aforementioned prints Africa is depicted as an autonomous figure.

page 42

Fig. 7

JULIUS GOLTZIUS
AFTER MAERTEN
DE VOS, *The Four
Continents:
Africa*, 1575-1610.
Engraving,
282 x 222 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-1978-157,
gift of A. Begheyn,
Nijmegen.

Fig. 8

ADRIAEN COLLAERT
AFTER MAERTEN
DE VOS, *The Four
Continents:
Africa*, 1586-91.
Engraving,
208 x 258 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-BI-6062.





Fig. 9
FRANS FRANCKEN II,
*America, Africa
and Asia*, detail of
*Allegory of the
Abdication of the
Holy Roman Emperor
Charles v in Brussels*,
c. 1635-40.
Oil on panel,
132.6 x 170.7 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-112.

The Representation of the Continents

Africa as allegory is usually one element of a four-part series or of a single depiction with allegories of the other continents. An important example of a joint representation is the title page of the *Theatrum orbis Terrarum*, the first printed world atlas, published in Antwerp in 1570. There is a copy in Utrecht University Library.⁴⁴ Europe sits atop the architectural structure on a throne beside a terrestrial globe, she wears an imperial crown and holds a sceptre and crosier. One level lower, to the left of the title, we see Asia, opulently dressed in clothes and jewels, with incense in her hand. On the right stands the semi-nude Africa, with a branch of the balsam tree in her hand. America, without clothing, lies below, holding a bow and arrow and a decapitated head, a reference to the ideas of cannibalism taken from the reports of travels in South America.⁴⁵

The personifications of Africa and America are shown semi-naked. This iconography reflects the way Europe viewed the world: Europe as the most civilized, ruling over the other continents; Asia comes next and is regarded as reasonably civilized; Africa and America stand at the bottom and are seen as the most uncivilized.

This image of Europe as the ruler of the world also appears in the allegorical painting that Frans Francken II made around 1635-40 of the abdication of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor (fig. 9). The emperor sits on a throne; at the right stand crowned allegories representing his European domains. Lower right kneel three women who from left to right personify America, Africa and Asia. They offer the emperor riches, underlining his status as the ruler of the world. The Black woman who represents Africa has on an 'Oriental cap', decorated with a Bird of Paradise



Fig. 10
 ANONYMOUS
 AFTER NICOLAES
 PIETERSZ BERCHEM,
*Geographia totius
 orbis: Allegorical
 Depiction of the Four
 Continents*, 1650-1790.
 Engraving, hand
 coloured and
 heightened with gold,
 433 x 301 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. RP-P-2005-94,
 purchased with the
 support of the
 F.G. Waller-Fonds.

Fig. 11
 ARTUS QUELLINUS I
 (WORKSHOP OF),
*The Four Continents
 Paying Homage to
 Amsterdam*, 1650-53.
 Terracotta,
 90 x 415 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. BK-AM-51-3,
 on loan from the
 City of Amsterdam.



feather and pearls, which she also wears around her neck and in her ears. A crocodile sits beside her. Since the publication of Collaerts's print after De Vos (fig. 8), this was the animal emblem with which Africa was pictured.⁴⁶

Even if Europe did not have a dominant role in the iconography presented, the differences between the continents remain clear. In a depiction of *Geographia totius orbis*, the geography of the whole world, produced after around 1650 after a drawing by Nicolaes Pietersz Berchem, we again see allegories of the continents together (fig. 10). On a triumphal carriage sits the personification of the *Geographia totius orbis* with a mural crown on her head, a key in her left hand and a sceptre in her right. To the left of her chariot walks a naked (?) Black woman holding a cornucopia and scorpions, with an elephant behind her; she is the personification of Africa. Ahead of her, Asia is pictured in a red robe with a camel. Standing opposite are Europe in a blue and yellow gown, with a horse, and a semi-naked America with an armadillo. They seem to be pictured equally, although Africa is only partially visible because of her

position beside the carriage. Moreover Africa and America walk behind Europe and Asia and are again shown semi-naked. According to Ripa himself, this nakedness represented the fact that Africa was not really thriving. More probable, the absence of clothes here was conceived as barbarism, as Kaplan observes in his article.⁴⁷

In his research into the depiction of continents, the historian Michael Wintle says that the naked bodies of Africa and America can also be seen as a reference to the fertility of the land and as something that has to be protected or preferably exploited.⁴⁸ In line with this latest view are the depictions of the continents in the tympanum of Amsterdam's town hall, made in 1650-53; there is a terracotta model of it in the Rijksmuseum's collection (fig. 11). In the centre sits the personification of Amsterdam flanked by those of the four continents, who offer her their wares. Here again, Africa is depicted as a Black woman, semi-naked with a lion and an elephant at her side and helpers who pack goods in a bag, bale, chest, barrel and tusks. This image of Africa, in the heart of the Dutch Republic, shows how Africa was seen: as a place of abundance, where much profit could be made. It is an image that cannot be separated from the trans-Atlantic slave trade which was then in full swing.



Other Allegorical Images

Besides the female personification of the continent of Africa, Black women are also found in the Rijksmuseum's collection as an allegory of Night and Darkness. Ripa writes nothing about this in his book. In 1589 Jan Harmensz Muller made a series of engravings about the Creation to a design by Hendrick Goltzius, which includes two Black women. On the first day of the Creation – the separation of light and dark (fig. 12) – Darkness is portrayed as a naked Black woman with a cloak of stars and Light as a naked young white man with an aureole. Darkness is shown as subordinate to Light, who plays the lead role and occupies two-thirds of the image. On the fourth day of the Creation – the formation of the sun, moon and stars (inv. no. RP-P-OB-32.157) – the sun is depicted as Apollo as the sun god with a bow and a quiver of arrows. Time, with a clock on her head, holds his cloak. On the right stands the moon, depicted as the moon goddess Diana. Behind her stands a Black woman as the

personification of the stars at night, in the shadow and partly behind the crescent moon, with a cloak of stars around her shoulders.⁴⁹ She fills the same supporting role as the allegory of Time, but is pushed further into the margin. In her depiction as Night and Darkness, the Black woman stands in the shadow of the white figure as well.

Scenes from the Bible

We see a more literal depiction of the Black woman in scenes from the Bible, such as *Bathsheba at her Toilet*, painted by Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem in 1594 (fig. 13). We are watching Bathsheba as she is being bathed by two naked servants. One of them is a Black woman, who carefully washes her mistress's legs. The subject was popular with artists because nudity was permitted in this case. According to Kaplan, the presence of the Black woman, which in scenes like this first appears in the sixteenth century, makes the painting even more erotic: 'Sexually provocative white figures in both religious and mythological paintings are increasingly accompanied by Black women attendants who are either nude or scantily clad'.⁵⁰

The depiction of this Black woman seems to be an exception. It appears from examples in other collections that Black women as Bible figures are usually dressed. This has to do with the fact that in biblical scenes Black women are presented as people. They are individuals like the Queen of Sheba, painted by Peter Paul Rubens (1620), or Moses's Ethiopian wife Zipporah, painted by Jacob Jordaens (1650), who were portrayed as Black women, even though there is nothing in the Bible about the colour of their skin.⁵¹ Artists like Rembrandt and Jan Lievens created extra space for them as nameless onlookers at biblical events. Here again, they are real women in everyday clothes, not essentially different in appearance from the white

Fig. 12
JAN HARMENSZ
MULLER AFTER
HENDRICK
GOLTZIUS,
*The First Day of the
Creation: Of Light
and Darkness*, 1589.
Engraving,
diam. 268 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-1891-A-16284.



Fig. 13
 CORNELIS CORNELISZ
 VAN HAARLEM,
*Bathsheba at her
 Toilet*, 1594.
 Oil on canvas,
 77.5 x 64 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. SK-A-3892.



bystanders. In the Rijksmuseum collection there are two etchings after a painting by Lievens, *The Raising of Lazarus*, from 1630-31 by Lievens himself (inv. no. RP-P-OB-12.859) and from 1644-50 by Jacob Louys (fig. 14), in which a Black woman is present. Christ stands praying by Lazarus's open grave. To his right stands a Black woman holding the shroud. She wears a dress and has a scarf around her head. A Black figure has been chosen here, although there is no literal indication for it in the Bible. In his rendition of the *Visitation* (1640), now in the

Detroit Institute of Arts, Rembrandt painted a Black woman holding the Virgin's cloak; this maid is dressed, but pictured barefoot.⁵² There was a reason why Rembrandt painted a Black woman in this scene. In her article on this work, the art historian Shelly Perlove argues that the presence of the African woman is of great significance:

Her unprecedented inclusion invokes the universality of the new faith and her access to it, particularly as conveyed by Rembrandt's unique staging, his use of light evoking the dawn of Christianity ...



Fig. 14
 JACOB LOUYS
 AFTER JAN LIEVENS,
*The Raising of
 Lazarus*, 1644-50.
 Etching, 410 x 319 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. RP-P-H-P-12.

The expectation that the non-believing African will embrace Christianity has its origins in Psalm 68:31, which foretells that 'Ethiopia [Africa] will soon stretch out her hands unto God'.⁵³

In his study of 'Rembrandt's Africans', the art historian Elmer Kolfin suggests that by including Africans in his religious works he was citing this Psalm to convey the idea that they were the first to recognize Christ.⁵⁴

The Black Woman in the Low Countries

It is not particularly strange that painters like Rubens, Jordaens, Rembrandt and Lievens featured Black women in their works. More and more Africans settled in towns and cities in the Low Countries. We know from the research in the notarial archives and baptismal and marriage records by the historian Mark Ponte that from 1620 onwards, a community of some eighty Black people settled in Amsterdam close to

Rembrandt's workshop.⁵⁵ This group came from the whole 'Atlantic' – from countries in the African mainland, such as Angola and Congo, from islands like Santiago (Cape Verde) and Sao Tomé, from Brazil and from the Caribbean. Some settled temporarily, but others stayed in Amsterdam permanently. It is difficult to pin down their social status. On the one hand it was not legally possible to enslave people in the Republic and they were officially recognized as free people. On the other hand, however, we have to ask how much freedom these people actually had. It is probable that a considerable proportion of the Black women (and men) who were brought to Amsterdam were kept in a disguised form of slavery. This notwithstanding, according to Ponte women played an important role in their community. They were witnesses at one another's wedding and baptism celebrations and were sometimes matchmakers. A witness said of a woman named Francisca that she 'lodges all the black men who come here to the city in her house and she matches them with

Black women'.⁵⁶ It is likely that groups of African descent also lived in other towns and cities.⁵⁷ This phenomenon has yet to be sufficiently investigated.

It is difficult to say what these women looked like. Unlike white women, there are, as far as we know, no examples of Black women who commissioned portraits of themselves in the early modern era in Europe.⁵⁸ This is not to say that they were not portrayed individually. Most of the examples of the individual depiction of Black women were made as *tronies*.⁵⁹ There are seven such images of Black women in the Rijksmuseum collection. In 1630, Rembrandt and Lievens both made two etchings of a Black woman (inv. no. RP-P-OB-754 and fig. 15, and RP-P-OB-12.589 and fig. 16 respectively). According to art historian David de Witt, they used a sculpture or drawing rather than a live model.⁶⁰ As such, these etchings were first and foremost exercises in depicting the physiognomy of a Black woman and the woman's features are exaggerated. In both, the emphasis is far less on what they are wearing,

Fig. 15
REMBRANDT
VAN RIJN,
*Bust of a Black
Woman*, c. 1630.
Etching, 98 x 77 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-P-OB-755.

Fig. 16
JAN LIEVENS,
*Bust of a Black
Woman*, 1625-74.
Etching, 73 x 61 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-OB-12.589.



and they do not have any jewellery either. Rembrandt's woman does have a feather in her cap.⁶¹

There is a similar feather in the headdress of the *Black Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (fig. 17), made by Cornelis van Dalen II after Govert Flinck between 1648 and 1664.⁶² A Black woman wears this headdress decorated with pearls as well; she also has pearls in her ears and around her neck. This woman wears a costume and is meant to look 'exotic'. In this example, the artist created a contrast

between light and dark: the pearls and dress stand out boldly against the skin. It was not easy to capture Black skin realistically on paper in etchings and engravings. With white skin it is enough to indicate the outlines and the skin can be left blank. With dark skin, the skin has to be filled in, but this entails a risk that the grooves cannot hold any more ink if they are placed too close together. It has to be clear that the artist wanted to represent Black skin, and not a white person standing in the shade. In Rembrandt's



Fig. 17
 CORNELIS VAN
 DALEN II AFTER
 GOVERT FLINCK,
*Bust of a Black
 Woman with a String
 of Pearls*, 1648-64.
 Engraving, 273 x 219 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum.
 inv. no. RP-P-BI-6756.



print (fig. 15), for instance, he engraved the Black woman without hatching in the contours of her face. As a result, her skin does not look black.

The two women (figs. 18, 19) the Bohemian artist Wenceslaus Hollar etched in 1645 in Antwerp, where Black people must also have settled, are not pictured as 'exotic', and their skin is realistically rendered. One woman looks out at us. Her little white cap is trimmed with lace, as is her collar. The other woman looks to the left. Her hair is scraped back under a simple white cap. A few curls have escaped at her neck and she wears a plain white collar. No turbans, no pearls, no feathers. This is not about their costumes, as was the case in the series 'National Costumes of Women from Different Lands' that Hollar had made in the years before, but about their individual overall appearance. At the same time, he has not given their ages or noted that he pictured them from life.⁶³ We will never know who they were or why Hollar made their images. Nevertheless, in comparison

with the rest of his oeuvre and the examples by Rembrandt, Lievens and Van Dalen, these etchings look most like individuals and give the impression of having been etched from life.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The Rijksmuseum's collection was largely amassed on the merits of the artist. Curators have never before specifically collected with reference to women in general, either as maker or subject. And certainly not women of colour. The fact that Black or African women are sometimes pictured is more coincidence than policy. In 2021 the museum embarked on a catch-up effort to collect more images of and by women. The inventorying in this article can contribute to this.

If we look at the image of the Black woman in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the basis of the pictures present in the Rijksmuseum's collection, we must perhaps conclude that we have no idea what Black women really looked like. This is not really strange when we realize that

Figs. 18, 19
WENCESLAUS
HOLLAR, *Portrait*
of a Young Black
Woman with a Lace
Cap and Matching
Collar and Portrait
of a Young Black
Woman with
a Cap, 1645.
Etching, 79 x 59 mm
and 62 x 46 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. nos.
RP-P-08-11.591 and
-11.590.



Fig. 20
 FEDERICO ZUCCARO,
*Portrait of a Young
 Black Girl*, 1550-1609.
 Red and black chalk,
 163 x 133 mm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
 RP-T-1949-552.

Black women never commissioned their own portraits, and so were always the object of a work. As such they often did not depict real women, but represented the continent of Africa, an 'exotic type' or occasionally a figure from the Bible. In general, therefore, the image of Black women served an idea of civilization that artists wanted to convey to their public, as we saw in travel journals, allegorical images and religious scenes. In these depictions they were naked, dressed only with accessories like earrings and necklaces, and in some cases surrounded by wild animals. The dominant image of the Black woman was that of an 'exotic' sexual woman. It persisted because it was repeated so regularly as there were few other pictures of Black women drawn from life against which it could be compared. From the seventeenth century onwards, there were Black communities in the Low Countries. What the women in these communi-

ties and in their daily lives may have looked like can be seen in two prints of Antwerp women that Hollar made. With their white caps and collars they might not have looked very different in their dress from their white neighbours. But this everyday portrayal, at least in the Rijksmuseum's collection, is the exception.

The pictures of Black women discussed here were primarily made by Dutch and Flemish artists or created and collected in a Low Countries context. This context influenced the image of the Black woman that came about in the Low Countries. This process might have been different elsewhere in Europe. We find a clue to this – an exception in our own collection – in the shape of a drawing of a young Black girl that the Italian Federico Zuccaro made in the second half of the sixteenth century (fig. 20). The girl wears an earring and a cap from which her curls peep out; her hair is parted in the centre and she has an upstanding collar. It is a tender, almost intimate drawing of a young girl that must have been done from life; unfortunately, there are no further indications that explain who she was. In contrast to printmaking, drawing is a medium that lends itself better to representing reality. However, there are no other such drawings of Black women in the Rijksmuseum's collection. This Italian drawing is a very early example of a realistically pictured Black woman, possibly because Black people settled earlier in Italian and other Southern European cities than in cities in Northern Europe. It is therefore relevant to investigate by means of research in other collections what image of Black women existed in other parts of Europe.

ABSTRACT

The few studies of the depiction of Black people in Western art have focused primarily on the rendering of Black men. This article discusses the depictions of Black women in the Rijksmuseum's collection, specifically in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the moment that Europeans and Africans met until about 1660, when representations became increasingly stereotyped. Black women in this period are depicted in a number of genres. The illustrations in travel journals and separate drawn records are concerned primarily with the differences in status between local inhabitants: the more clothes they wore, the higher their status. Yet the texts accompanying these depictions link nakedness to barbarity and lewdness. That nudity was retained as the way to represent allegorical Africa, in the form of a nearly naked Black female surrounded by wild animals, as was also prescribed in the iconographic manual by Cesare Ripa. When she was positioned in the company of the other continents, she was assigned a subordinate role as being less civilized and ripe for the taking. The Black woman also has a minor part as the allegory of Night or Darkness. In Biblical scenes the Black female is an individual character in some cases while in others she is a bystander, like white onlookers. There are no examples known of Black women who commissioned portraits themselves. There are, however, *tronies* that were intended to represent African facial features and a black skin, sometimes including an 'exotic' costume. Two etchings of Black females in everyday clothing might depict members of the Black communities that had settled in Antwerp, like they did in Amsterdam. Such illustrations made from life are too few in number, however, to express with subtlety the image of the Black woman countering the predominant image of her as an 'exotic', sexual apparition. It is possible that this analysis can be adapted on the basis of research into depictions in other – non-Northern-European – collections.

NOTES

- 1 In this article, the terms Black and African are used to refer to people (with an origin) in Africa to the south of the Sahara. We will call the women African, if it can be said for certain that they lived there or came from there, Black if they were part of the African diaspora and had African forebears. We use Black with a capital letter when referring to the community and black with a lowercase letter when referring to the colour black.
- 2 David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates and Karen C.C. Dalton (eds.), *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 3: *From the 'Age of Discovery' to the Age of Abolition*, part 1: *Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*, Cambridge 2010 is important to this article.
- 3 For instance Thomas F. Earle and Kate J.P. Lowe, *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, Cambridge 2005; Elmer Kolfin and Esther Schreuder (eds.), *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (De Nieuwe Kerk) 2008; Joaneath Ann Spicer et al. (eds.), *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, exh. cat. Baltimore (The Walters Art Museum) 2012; Elmer Kolfin and Epcó Runia (eds.), *Black in Rembrandt's Time*, Zwolle 2020.
- 4 Epcó Runia, Stephanie Archangel and Elmer Kolfin, 'Inleiding', in Kolfin and Runia (eds.) 2020 (note 3), pp. 7-9, esp. p. 7; Elmer Kolfin, 'Zwart in de kunst van Rembrandts tijd', in *ibid.*, pp. 12-37, esp. p. 30.
- 5 Epcó Runia, 'Stereotypen', in Kolfin and Runia (eds.) 2020 (note 3), pp. 42-43, esp. p. 42.
- 6 Janell Hobson (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, New York 2021.
- 7 Paul H.D. Kaplan, 'Black Women in Early Modern European Art and Culture', in Hobson (ed.) 2021 (note 6), pp. 44-56.
- 8 Ernst van den Boogaart, *Vreemde verwanten: De wereld buiten Europa 1400-1600*, Nijmegen 2020, pp. 7-8.
- 9 Runia, Archangel and Kolfin 2020 (note 4), p. 4.
- 10 A rough search for the Black man has already brought up more than 350 objects.
- 11 The depiction of a Black woman on the tapestry *Les Pêcheurs* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-1968-21), in the series *Les Anciennes Indes* (c. 1692-1723), has not been included; it is discussed at length in, among others, Kolfin and Schreuder (eds.) 2008 (note 3), cat. no. 51, and Rebecca

- Parker Brienen, *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil*, Amsterdam 2006.
- 12 About five years ago, the subject ‘persons of African origin’ started to be added to the descriptions of objects. This makes the search slightly easier.
- 13 Van den Boogaart 2020 (note 8), p. 113.
- 14 Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*, Cambridge 2016, p. 24.
- 15 Van den Boogaart 2020 (note 8), p. 135.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 302.
- 18 Pieter de Marees, *Beschryvinghe ende historische verhael van het Gout Koninckrijck van Gunea anders de Gout-Custe de Mina genaemt liggende in het deel van Africa*, 1602 (Description and historical story of the Gold Kingdom of Ghana otherwise called the Gold Coast of Mina situated in the part of Africa; edition Samuël Pierre L’Honoré Naber), The Hague 1912.
- 19 Stephanie Archangel, ‘Alsof het maar beesten waren’, in Kolfin and Runia (eds.) 2020 (note 3), pp. 66-81, esp. p. 70.
- 20 ‘cleedinghe sy draghen’. De Marees 1602 (1912) (note 18), p. 36.
- 21 ‘van grover natuer ende stercker complexien (...) dan de Vrouwen personen in onse Landen van Europa’. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 22 ‘schoone witte blinckende tanden als yvoor; ‘seer fray dese witte Tanden in hun swert aensicht’. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 23 ‘Het Vrouwe volck is oock seer gheneycht tot oncuysheydt ende hoererye’. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
- 25 Ernst van den Boogaart, ‘De Bry’s Africa’, in Susanna Burghartz (ed.), *Inszenierte Welten: Die west- und ostindische Reisen der Verleger De Bry 1590-1630/Staging New Worlds: De Bry’s Illustrated Travel Reports 1590-1630*, Basel 2004, pp. 95-157, esp. pp. 108-18.
- 26 This is confirmed by the editorial notes by Naber in De Marees 1602 (1912) (note 18), p. 313.
- 27 Erlend de Groot, ‘Tussen Batavia en Amsterdam’, in Menno Jonker, Erlend de Groot and Caroline de Hart (eds.), *Van velerlei pluimage: Zeventiende-eeuwse waterverftekeningen van Andries Beeckman*, Nijmegen 2014, pp. 9-26, esp. p. 20.
- 28 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Album du Paulmy (c. 1658-64), inv no. BNF, EST-389, nos. 31, 10 and 30 respectively.
- 29 Erlend de Groot in Jonker, De Groot and De Hart (eds.) 2014 (note 27), cat. no. 40.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *Itinerario, voyage ofte schipvaart naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien* (Itinerarium, voyage or boat trip to East or Portugal’s India), Amsterdam 1596, p. 132, figs. 60, 61. University Library Utrecht, signature AB:T fol 133 (Rariora).
- 32 ‘Hiro ... die is seer gherieffelick ende totten mannen wat te veel ghenegen’. De Marees 1602 (1912) (note 18), p. 313.
- 33 ‘De koningin van Madagaskar’. Erlend de Groot in Jonker, De Groot and De Hart (eds.) 2014 (note 27), cat. no. 37.
- 34 De Groot in *ibid.*, cat. no. 39.
- 35 De Groot in *ibid.*, cat. no. 37.
- 36 Lodewijk Wagenaar and Mieke Beumer, ‘Esaias Boursse’s “Tijckenboeck”: A Pictorial Catalogue of People Working and Living in and around Colombo, 1662’, *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 67 (2019), no. 4, pp. 312-31.
- 37 This categorization is based entirely on their appearance. Unlike De Bry, for example, Boursse gave no indications about who they might have been and where they came from.
- 38 Freyda Spira, ‘Allegories of the Four Continents’, in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (2021): https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/alfc/hd_alfc.htm (consulted August 2022).
- 39 Kaplan 2021 (note 7), p. 45.
- 40 Cf. Johann Sadeler I after Dirck Barendsz., *Africa*, 1581, engraving, 185 x 232 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-7439.
- 41 Epcó Runia, ‘Vóór Rembrandt’, in Kolfin and Runia (eds.) 2020 (note 3), pp. 84-87, esp. p. 86.
- 42 ‘Een swarte Vrouwe, by nae naeck, hebbende gekrulde en uytgespreyde hayren, houdende op haer hoofd in plaets van een Helm, een snuyt van een Elephant, aen den hals een snoer met korallen, gelijk oock twee aen de ooren, houd mette rechter hand een Scorpioen, en mette slincker een Overvloets hooren vol van koorenvruchten. Ter sijden staet een seer wreede Leeuwe, en van d’ander sijde staen eenige Adders en venijnige Slangen. ... Zy wort naeck gestelt, om dat dit deel niet van sonderlingen rijckdom overvloeyt. ... De swarte gekrulde hayren, korallen aen de hals en ooren, zijn eygen ciersels van de Morisken.’ *Cesare Ripa: Iconologia of Uytbeeldinghen des Verstants*, translated by Dirck Pietersz Des, Amsterdam 1644 (introduction by Jochen Becker), Soest 1971, p. 604. For the use of the word moor, see Valika Smeulders, ‘Paulus: Moor in de Republiek’, in Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Valika Smeulders (eds.), *Slavernij*,

- exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 2021, pp. 122-45, esp. p. 128; Ernst van den Boogaart, 'Christophle le More, lijfwacht van Karel v?', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 53 (2005), no. 4, pp. 412-33, esp. p. 412.
- 43 Spira 2021 (note 38).
- 44 *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, Antwerp 1579 (Abrahamo Ortelio, excud. Christophorus Plantinus), Utrecht University Library, signature KAART: *VIII*.A.a.8 Rar Lk.
- 45 Michael Wintle, 'Gender and Race in the Personification of the Continents in the Early Modern Period: Building Eurocentrism', in Maryanne Cline Horowitz and Louise Arizzoli (eds.), *Bodies and Maps: Early Modern Personifications of the Continents*, Leiden 2021 (*Intersections*, vol. 73), pp. 39-66, esp. p. 41.
- 46 Elizabeth McGrath, 'Humanism, Allegorical Invention, and the Personification of the Continents', in Hans Vlieghe, Arnout Balis and Carl Van de Velde (eds.), *Concept, Design and Execution in Flemish Painting (1550-1700)*, Turnhout 2000, pp. 43-72, esp. p. 62 and figs. 11, 12; Gregory Martin, 2022, 'Frans (II) Francken, *Allegory of the Abdication of Emperor Charles v*, c. 1635-c. 1640', in *Flemish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum*, online coll. cat. Amsterdam: hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6674 (consulted November 2023).
- 47 Kaplan 2021 (note 7), p. 51.
- 48 Wintle 2021 (note 45).
- 49 Kaplan 2021 (note 7), p. 49.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Queen of Sheba Comes before Solomon with a Large Following Bringing Numerous Gifts*, 1620, London, the Courtauld Institute of Art; Jacob Jordaens, *Moses and his Ethiopian Wife Zipporah*, c. 1645-50, Antwerp, Rubenshuis, inv. no. RH.S.095.
- 52 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *The Visitation*, 1640, Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. no. 27.200.
- 53 Shelley Perlove, 'Rembrandt's *Visitation*: The African Woman at the Dawn of Christianity and Colonialism', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 14 (2022), no. 1, pdf pp. 1-44, esp. pp. 6, 18: DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2022.14.1.3 (consulted November 2023).
- 54 Elmer Kolfin, 'Rembrandt's Africans', in Bindman, Gates and Dalton (eds.) 2010 (note 2), pp. 271-306 and 376-85, esp. p. 294.
- 55 Mark Ponte, "'Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen": Een Afro-Atlantische gemeenschap in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam', *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15 (2018), no. 4, pp. 33-62.
- 56 'al de swarten die hier ter stede comen, aenhou in haer huijs, & die coppelt aen Swartinnen'. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 54, note 94.
- 57 Ibid., pp. 51-56.
- 58 No examples of this can be found in the Rijksmuseum's collection, and as far as we know there are none in the collections of other major museums.
- 59 Franziska Gottwald, *Das Tronie – Muster, Studie und Meisterwerk: Die Genese einer Gattung der Malerei vom 15. Jahrhundert bis zu Rembrandt*, Berlin 2011.
- 60 David de Witt, 'Zwarte aanwezigheid in de kunst van Rembrandt en omgeving', in Kolfin and Runia (eds.) 2020 (note 3), pp. 88-119, esp. pp. 96-97.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Kolfin 2020 (note 4), p. 34.
- 63 Cf. with two prints by Hollar *Portrait of a Man from Tsenacommacah (Virginia), America* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-OB-11.592) and *Portrait of a Turkish Man with a Moustache and a Turban* (inv. no. RP-P-OB-11.593) on which *ad vivum* is noted.
- 64 Kolfin 2020 (note 4), p. 34.