Representations of Africans in 18th and 19th Century Art & Literature in England and France

In the visual arts one encounters African subjects. This project will consider the period from the late Middle Ages until the French revolution. (l'ancien régime) These included page children who worked as servants in homes, African slaves, and African kings in Epiphany scenes. This summer project was focused on the representations of African page children and the African king in the Epiphany Scene.

My research this semester was comprised of many steps. First, I collected engravings and drawings of African page children using the book Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe as a guide. This initial search was then broadened using WorldCat, the Internet and electronic databases. I then arrived with a total of 125 works of art. The majority of them are from France but I also collected works from Germany, Holland, and England. This sample is broad enough to come to valuable conclusions. The next step was to complete an iconographic study and a comparative analysis of these visual representations. This was accomplished through the use of an excel worksheet in which we looked at several features of each work. Among these characteristics are: artist, date of work, other people shown, boy/girl, more than one African subject, and their manner of dress. In so doing we were able to see patterns and differences between the various artists of the above-mentioned countries and centuries. Some of our findings include: the usage of more page boys than girls, girls usually depicted with other women, shoes mostly hidden, and when shown usually on boy pages, turbans and hats mainly worn by girls and collars most often worn by boys. It is also interesting to note that women represented in an outside space.

Linked with this is another relevant aspect. The women with whom the page girls portrayed are usually found in intimate and private scenes: they often touch the slave girls on the hand, are hugging or using other aspects of physical touch. The women with whom the page girls are portrayed are sometimes depicted in the nude or partial nude, this is found especially in bathing scenes. One never sees men displayed in this manner. They are rather represented in official or more public settings linked with the army, and hunting scenes. (When women are in an outside scene it is usually in a garden.) Slave boys are more often painted next to men and surrounded by a large group of people or as part of a family portrait. In almost half of the representations of pageboys one encounters animals, especially dogs and rarely exotic animals. Both are portrayed in the periphery of the core of the subject. In only one case, a page girl was found with a dog.

Another component of this project was the collection of Epiphany scenes. Unlike the portrayals of slave children, which are represented in a variety of ways, the African king follows the standard stylistic rules established for the representation of the Epiphany. Twenty-five paintings were found and because of this small sample the conclusions are not yet final. However, we can conclude that the African king is often represented standing to the side of the holy family but also rarely kneeling. The turbans worn by the Magi are very similar to the turbans worn by the pageboys. But unlike page children they are often portrayed wearing robes or toga style outfits rather than suit style outfits. Their shoes are more often seen

Univ of Utah - Undergrad Research Abstracts Journal

http://content.lib.utah.edu/cdm/printview/collection/UROP/id/146/type/...