A Visible Difference: Skin, Race & Identity 1720-1820

Suggested Response

**Overall activity:** To write/present a critical analysis, of an image or group of images, that illustrates the different ways in which the concept of race was represented visually during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

**Methodology**

Although there are a variety of ways to address this activity – and not all of them are formal - there are still some key points to consider when interrogating visual material:

- **Necessary picture information:** Where is the image from? Who executed it? What medium is it produced in? If this is a print or engraving, is this the original image or is it copied from another source? If this is a painting, what is its provenance? – who previously owned it? Is it in a collection now?

- **Context and background:** Why was the image produced? Who was its intended audience? Was the image commissioned? What was the social/political environment within which the image was produced? Was the image censored? How was the image exhibited or used?

- **What do we see:** Exactly who or what is in the image? How is the image composed? Are things in proportion or has scale/perspective been distorted? What is the sitter wearing? If this is a painting, is it framed? Can you see obvious signs of the artist’s technique?

- **Your response:** How do you personally feel about the image? Does it create particular emotions in you? What do you personally think the artist was trying to achieve, and do you think they were successful at that? Are there connections/parallels that can be made with other artists/ historical periods/ artistic media?

**My Approach**

My professional research is focused around the representation of African people in English visual culture – in particular, satirical prints (caricature). This means that I spend a lot of time thinking about stereotypes and looking at the exaggeration of physical forms. It also means that I have to negotiate the tenuous relationship between artistic licence and broader social/political agendas.

For me, the image I have chosen for my approach to this activity is an interesting extension of these themes. I have decided to look at an engraved book illustration of an African child named Mary Sabina, who had a rare skin-pigmentation condition named piebaldism – resulting in white patches on her skin and hair. When I first stumbled upon the painting of Mary Sabina (see
below), I was fascinated by the striking nature of the portrait and her skin condition, which in turn made me ask questions about this child, and what her life might have been like. It also occurred to me that the portrait, although beautifully executed, functioned in a similar way to ethnographic photographs produced from the late 19th century – where sitters from different countries (and also with similar skin conditions) were objectified, standing naked (sometimes with forced smiles), so that their image could be consumed by European audiences.

Mary Sabina’s portrait certainly presented me with intellectual challenges and after finding out a little bit more about her story, I found this engraving of her, which I think would be great to explore with you.

**Mary Sabina: The Variegated African Damsel**
The image above is striking. Its representation of a little African girl with patched skin, surrounded by exotic artefacts and holding a parrot, is highly unusual. As a viewer, I want to know who this child is and what she is trying to tell me.

About the Image
The image is actually an engraving. In this labour-intensive printing process, an artist scratches/engraves the reverse image he wants to produce (solely using lines) into copper or steel. Ink is placed into the grooves, and then the image is pressed back onto paper. On the bottom left hand corner of the image you can see the words ‘de Seve del’, which indicates that the artist Jacque de Sève designed/engraved (‘delineavit’) the plate used to produce the image. On the bottom right hand side are the words ‘Carl Guttenberg fe’ which indicates that the plate was printed/produced (‘fecit’) by Guttenberg.

The child represented in the portrait is called Mary Sabina. We know this because the engraving is an illustration from the supplement to the fourth volume of George Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* (1777). In this text, the esteemed French naturalist, names her during an exploration of the subject of what he calls ‘les Blafards’ or ‘White Negroes’. If your French is up to it, you can read and search this text online at: [http://www.buffon.cnrs.fr/](http://www.buffon.cnrs.fr/)

This is not the only image of Mary Sabina. In his text Buffon notes that the engraving was produced after a painting, which was sent to him via the Mayor of Dunkirk – a man named M. Taverne. Mr Taverne had kept the painting in his care for 26 years following its confiscation from an English ship travelling from New England (in America) to London. This is certainly a colourful story, but there are several recorded versions of this painting. One is in the Hunterian Museum collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in London (see below).
The Hunterian portrait offers some information about Mary Sabina’s background. An ornate painted plaque on the lower right hand corner of the portrait notes that she was born on the 12th October 1736 on a Jesuit plantation called Mantua, in the city of Cartagena in South America (now Colombia). Her parents were enslaved Africans called Martiniano and Patrona. In fact, in the background of the painting there is a small hut with the word ‘Mantua’ written below it.

This portrait, which was painted anonymously, offers the only ‘concrete’ information about what Mary Sabina looked like and where she came from. In the absence of historical records, the artist’s work becomes invested with the importance of an “eye-witness” statement and yet we can clearly see that the way in which Mary has been portrayed utilises some creative license.

**A Little Background**

Describing Mary Sabina’s skin to Buffon, M. Taverne writes:

“From the figure of the spots the child may be likened to a dappled or piebald horse, and the black and the white are blended imperceptibly by a mulatto tint”.

It seems that the words we use to describe people have a lasting impact on the way they are viewed. The term ‘piebald’ is most commonly used to describe animals, in particular horses, whose bodies are covered in black and white patches. The word, which means ‘parti-coloured,’ draws its roots from the French word ‘pie’ and the Latin word ‘Pica’ for the magpie bird. One of the meanings for ‘bald’ was “one who is streaked with white”. The application of these words to describe human beings is now considered offensive and outdated, yet they have had an impact on the way conditions like piebaldism have been interpreted.

Piebaldism is a genetic disorder that causes an absence of melanoocytes or ‘tanning cells’ in patches across the body (including a white forelock in the hair). It is not a condition exclusive to people of African descent, but is particularly dramatic and especially visible on black skin. Because piebaldism in Africans was so striking and rare in the 18th century, people with this condition drew the close attention of the medical community, as well as travellers who witnessed examples of the condition in Africa and the West Indies.

The 18th century witnessed an intense period of travel, discovery, and trade with unexplored parts of the world in Africa, Oceania and the Americas. During this period of colonial expansion, European investigation into the bodies and cultures of people from difference parts of the world became a commonplace. Captain Cook’s first voyages into the South Seas in 1768, for example, amassed a wealth of new cultural knowledge. Cook employed an artist named William Hodges to document the peoples that they encountered on their journeys (See: [http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/package/30/home.php](http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/package/30/home.php)). A Tahitian man named Omai (right) was one of the many people they encountered.¹

The Enlightenment age also witnessed the development of the natural sciences, of which Buffon was one of its most respected proponents. Taxonomy, or the categorisation of human, animal, mineral and plant life, was the period’s most significant project.

¹ The English artist Sir Joshua Reynolds painted a portrait of Omai after he arrived in England in 1774 and became the talk of high society. Go to the Tate website ([http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/reynolds/roomguide8.shtm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/reynolds/roomguide8.shtm)) where this painting is currently on show and note the difference between this Hodges portrait and the incredibly refined Reynolds version – where Omai is transformed into an ethereal ‘noble savage’.
The Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, who is thought to be the founder of ‘systematic taxonomy’, outlined his influential views on race in the tenth edition of his work *Systemae naturae*, published in 1758. He believed that mankind was comprised of four very distinct races: Europeans, Africans, American Indians and Asians. The theory, known as ‘Polygenism’, demonstrated how each race was a species of its own. Linnaeus attributed each race with particular qualities, representing the European and the African as extreme opposites:

The Homo Afer (African): “Black skin, black, curly hair, an ape-like nose, and swollen lips; was phlegmatic, crafty, and careless; ruled by authority”.

The Homo Europaeus (European): “White skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, was sanguine, very intelligent, a discoverer, and ruled by religious custom”.

The Dutch anatomist named Petrus Camper believed that racial differences could be measured. In 1768 he presented his first theory on the human ‘facial angle,’ which proved that the ‘protrusion’ of an African’s jaw was more pronounced than a European’s and therefore closer to the jaws of apes. Ironically, Camper was a ‘monogenist’ who believed in one source for humanity. He openly opposed slavery and famously stated that: “All of us are black, only more or less”.

Determining why and how human beings were different was always a challenge and each theory was fraught with complex contradictions. When addressing the reasons why Africans were dark skinned, some believed the skin’s darkness was a result of climate. Some drew on old religious myths. Others, who had performed dissection on skin, spoke of a gel or “juice as black as ink” between the layers of the skin.

Generally, the theories on Africans that developed over this period were predominantly negative, and they sought to demonstrate difference as a range of distinct extremes – opposites in black and white.

Returning to Buffon, he includes Mary Sabina and an African albino woman named Genevieve in an additional supplement to his writing on the varieties of the human species. They are categorised under the heading “Blafards & Nègres blancs” or ‘White Negroes’, followed by a section on physical deformities entitled ‘Monsters’. Buffon did believe that human beings came from one species and that they acquired their differences according to climate, nutrition and ways of living. However, he refers to ‘les Blafards’ as “unfortunate deviations from the general standard” suggesting that their extreme differences made them less than human.

**Reading the Image**

In her painted portrait, Mary Sabina is presented standing almost naked (except for a white sash around her hips) and oversized in a non-descript landscape. The colour of her skin is starkly contrasted and the gold pearl-drop earring and coloured beaded necklace and bracelets that she is wearing, further highlight this. She holds a parrot on her left index finger and, with her right-hand finger, she points us to the white area on her chest.

In contrast, the engraving represents Mary as fully naked. Although she is still holding a parrot and wearing jewellery, de Sève has chosen to represent her as part of a sort of Native American still life. Bringing her indoors, with an open window behind, she is surrounded by “foreign” items. Behind her is a woven umbrella, on her right is an American Indian headdress, and on the floor in front of her are some pots, fabric and a sharp tomahawk (native American axe).

Instead of pointing to herself, as in the Hunterian portrait, she gestures to the native headdress – an allusion that, I think, encourages the viewer to acknowledge her Colombian origins.
Interestingly by not pointing to her chest her pose looks almost statuesque, which further highlights her role as an exotic “object” – and also challenges the whole notion of how portraiture functions. She is smiling and looking directly at us, but in this image we are being “informed” about her as a “wonder of nature” from the New World and the parrot that obediently perches on her finger articulates this.

There are also facial and bodily differences between Mary’s painted portrait and the engraving represented in Buffon’s book. I don’t think this necessarily means that Buffon’s child is not Mary, but it does raise questions about the extent to which artists created their own views of difference by ‘designing’ the body and the skin.

Although I find this engraving really fascinating, it doesn’t take long for me to become aware of Mary’s visual objectification – both for her foreignness and also because of her skin condition. Her nakedness as a young girl (where most European portraits would only show children clothed) is disturbing, yet it also illustrates enlightenment ideas about nakedness being linked to the savage and uncivilised. As a consequence I become implicated in a process of looking at difference that is specifically European and also, I think, inhumane. Does this make me, or anybody else who researches these images, the same as those early colonisers and Enlightenment thinkers? What do you think?

Cited Images:

