

Shades of black

Seated on an Amsterdam terrace in 1930, Jimmy Lucky is the epitome of cool. Sporting a dapper trilby and bow-tie, he leans back on his white chair and adopts a wary gaze. Perhaps he needed to be guarded: Jimmy's ancestors were, after all, slaves from an infamous sugar plantation on the Suriname River. He himself worked tirelessly as a boxer, a barman, a tap-dancer, a waiter and a musician. Nola Hatterman, who painted this detailed portrait, shows Lucky with one fist clenched and a cold glass of beer waiting on the table. Behind him, an open newspaper is filled with announcements of performances - including a reference to "Sonny Boy", a song by Al Jolson who became legendary in 1927 when he "blacked up" to play the lead role in the first talking film, *The Jazz Singer*.

Hatterman's portrait is among the highlights of *Black is Beautiful*, a breakthrough show at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. More than 130 exhibits testify to the presence of black individuals in the Low Countries from 1300 to the present day. Ignored by historians for too long, images of black people have played a fascinating role in the works of Dutch artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt, Jordaens and Karl Appel.

One of the most extravagant paintings on view is of an elegantly dressed king adoring the Virgin and Child, executed by Maarten de Vos for a high altar in 1599. It is dominated by a young black monarch who wears a Roman emperor's lavish costume. Glittering with ornamental weapons, he holds out his hand to offer a spectacular gift: a spiral shell cup filled to the brim with mother-of-pearl. Because he is wearing a dark breastplate, the king seems almost naked beneath his costly white mantle.

Over the next century, leading artists vied with each other to portray ever more impressive black potentates. Rubens's oil study for an elaborate 1609 Adoration in Antwerp Town Hall is another mesmerizing image. Clad in a brilliant white turban contrasting dramatically with his face, this imperious African ruler is painted with sympathy and understanding.

Jacob Jordaens, who worked with Rubens before establishing himself as a major artist, gave the black king an almost heavenly significance in his 1644 Adoration. Raising an immense robe, the monarch leans forward to gaze at the holy infant while a cheerful black page carries a burning brazier beside him. Jordaens wanted to hail the black Magus as a pagan who had journeyed from distant Ethiopia to worship a child unrecognised by Jews close to home. So the painting is highly programmatic: the artist ensures that the holy star shines down from the sky directly on to a lamp held by the Ethiopian king's other black attendant.

The works often seek to tell a story or challenge stereotypes. Jordaens, who attentively studied the Bible, loathed hypocrisy and argued for Christian charity. In this spirit, he painted Moses with an Ethiopian wife with the aim of helping people to accept the woman as a fellow human being.

Other portrayals of black women include a bold painting from 1650 by Jan Boeckhorst (another of Rubens's pupils) of Solomon welcoming an emphatically black Queen of Sheba. The artist appears to have taken his cue from the words uttered by the Black Bride in the Song of Solomon: "For I am black but beautiful". Boeckhorst's immense painting also wittily challenges the convention that servants in the wealthiest white households should be black. With great daring, he insists on portraying the Queen of Sheba's train-bearers as white.

Not all the exhibits have such enlightened meanings. A marble statue of an African boy, carved in 1704, wears a municipal crown in the form of a castle. But its exact symbolism is no more apparent than that of the medallion round his neck or the turtle beneath his foot. Perhaps the sculptor, Johannes Claudius de Cock, was simply carrying out the eccentric and baffling demands of a fanciful patron.

Time and time again, portraits of Dutch grandees feature black and anonymous subservient figures. Take, for example, the boy securing a rope of pearls around the arm of Margaretha van Raephorst as she poses in 1668 for a portrait by Jan Mijtens. A young black page holding

Willem II's helmet in Romeyn de Hooghe's etching looks overwhelmed by the task of preparing this armoured commander for the battlefield.

So it is a relief to discover Rembrandt's vibrant pen and chalk drawing of a drummer and a commander, probably sketched from life during elaborate wedding festivities at The Hague in 1638. Although black trumpeters and drummers were retained as symbols of Dutch aristocratic power, Rembrandt gives these performers a semblance of independent life. Mounted on mules and beating kettle-drums, they do not, for once, appear overshadowed by a white master.

As we approach the modern era, black people are increasingly portrayed in their own right. By the time Isaac Israels painted Battling Siki, the first black boxer to become widely famous in the Netherlands, a turning-point has been reached. Resting in the ring, this Senegalese champion is shown at the peak of his career around 1914-15.

In 1995 Marlene Dumas made an even more memorable lithograph of Naomi Campbell. Tensely entitled "Supermodel", it closes in on the face of the first black model ever to make the covers of Vogue and Time Magazine. The sensuality of her lips is countered by the melancholy in Campbell's listless eyes. She seems world-weary, as if overwhelmed by the unceasing pressures of celebrity. Black may be beautiful, but this haunting portrait implies that peace of mind is a more desirable goal.

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