Drawing on much recent scholarship, this chapter aims to highlight the visibility of women of African descent in European art from the end of the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and Baroque eras (1300–1700). While such visual representations are less numerous than those of Black African men, they are nevertheless relatively common, with hundreds of surviving examples. Most (though not all) of the examples I am about to cite are illustrated in the multiple volumes of the *Image of the Black in Western Art* (new edition, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, since 2010) or in the project’s photo-archive, a major research resource. Several important textual references to Black women (from epic, drama, and lyric poetry) will also be incorporated into this discussion. In this chapter, I use “Black” and “African” to denote people (and images of people) associated with Africa south of the Mediterranean rim.

While the European iconography of Black women during this period includes elements that are still all too familiar, contrasting idealized white “beauty” and white dominance with notions of Africans’ supposed inherent subordination and physical imperfection, this visual disparagement of the appearance of Black women is far from universal in the European artistic record. Starting in the early 1500s, some European artworks celebrate the beauty of Black women, and especially within mythological and allegorical subjects, Black female bodies came to be eroticized and sometimes idealized. At the same time, Black women saints were venerated in a few regions of European Christendom, and this era also witnessed part of the very early development of Black Madonna imagery, a phenomenon still significant in modern religious practice.

The four centuries between 1300 and 1700 witnessed the growth of a Black European population, largely (though not entirely) fueled by the importation of enslaved African people through both the West African and the North African slave trade. That growth was irregular in both time and space, with the greatest concentrations to be found in Iberia and Italy, but even in the more northerly regions (Scotland, Germany), a Black presence is attested. The proportion of women and men among these enslaved populations varied, but there were always women present. When domestic service was the principal type of labor required of the enslaved, as it frequently was in Europe, women were often preferred. Nevertheless, in European images of dark-skinned Africans, men are distinctly more prevalent. There are two obvious reasons for this: the general preponderance of male figures in Early Modern art and the salience of the African Wise Man (in depictions of the Adoration of the Magi story) as an exemplar of holy Blackness.
in religious art. In the many European images (from the 1520s on) of African pages attending on adult white European men and women, the gender of the attending figure is not always easy to determine, but it appears that boys were much more often depicted than girls. The Afro-European population was in general a marginalized one, and on the evidence of imagery, Black women were even more marginalized.

Despite this, Black women are hardly invisible in earlier European art, even if their presence has been regularly ignored until quite recently. They appear in a wide range of roles and in many different media. Some of the artists who created the works cited in this chapter are unidentified, but others are famous names (Dürer, Velázquez, Mantegna) in the history of art. The production of images containing representations of Black women was not confined to a single European region, though Italy and Germany loom large (as with images of Black men).

**Sacred subjects**

Medieval artists and their audiences in northern Europe were well acquainted with the concept of a Black Queen of Sheba (Hall 2000, 360–5). The Queen's story, told in the Old Testament (1 Kings chapter 10), describes her as a powerful and wealthy ruler of a far-off land (usually identified with southwest Arabia or the adjoining northeast coast of Africa) who makes a long journey to visit the Hebrew King Solomon, to whom she presents precious gifts. The biblical tales make no mention of skin color, but as early as 1181, Nicholas of Verdun’s Klosterneuburg Altarpiece (IBWA 2:1:120–3, fig. 103) (a metal and enamel work for a church near Vienna) depicts her with an emphatically dark complexion. Other such images followed, including an Austrian manuscript illumination from ca. 1330–1 (IBWA 2:2:41–3, fig. 11), where she is accompanied by two Black female attendants. However, after 1400, images of the Queen much more often portray her with light skin, and only some of her attendants (variably male and female) retain an African appearance.

It seems likely that the Black Queen was displaced by the growing importance of the Black Wise Man/King in Adoration of the Magi imagery. The Queen herself survives as a Black woman mostly in a rather rare apocryphal scene where she is shown (and condemned) for encouraging Solomon to worship a pagan idol (IBWA 2:2:68–70, figs. 43–5). These xenophobic depictions of African womanhood, which suggest that Solomon has been corrupted by the attractions of an exotic Other, can be linked to a range of further images from the later 1400s in northern Europe: a Foolish Virgin (from a biblical parable) shown as Black on Berne Münster (Switzerland) from 1466–80; a demonic dark-skinned woman assisting at a corrupted or “black” version of the mass in the Dutchman Hieronymus Bosch’s Temptation of St. Anthony (c. 1500); and in an early fifteenth-century French illumination of Christine de Pisan’s treatise on Fortune, a figure described and depicted as a crowned female Janus with a lucky face (white) and an unlucky face (black) (IBWA 2:2:101–3, fig. 82). Here, the unfavorable side of fortune is not only dark-skinned but also articulates several of the period’s stereotypically African physiognomic features: large turned-up nose, emphatic cheekbones, prominent lips. The abstract European fear of darkness as “unfortunate” meets ethnically specific xenophobia. While in the 1300s and 1400s, European rulers and intellectuals had been intrigued by new knowledge of the Black Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, the pejorative imagery just cited might reflect a longstanding European association of blackness with the demographics of the Islamic world and thus with a civilization which Europeans viewed as their bitter religious and geopolitical rival.

Significantly, more admiring images of dark-skinned women in the later 1400s tend to eliminate the secondary physiognomic elements of African identity (lips, nose, cheekbones, tightly curled hair). A Dutch Bible of ca. 1465–70 includes the rare subject of the Black Bride from the
Old Testament’s Song of Songs ("I am black but beautiful O ye daughters of Zion") embracing her allegorical spouse (IBWA 2:2:157–9, fig. 136). The Bride’s brown skin and earring differentiate her from her similarly dressed pale handmaidens. Solomon is the lover with whom she converses, and this biblical passage may have helped generate images of the Black Queen of Sheba, also rumored to be Solomon’s lover. The Black Bride – better known in biblical exegesis than in imagery – may also have played a role in the still only partly understood early development of Black Madonna imagery.10

Very dark-skinned images (typically sculptures) of Mary holding an equally dark-skinned infant Christ were abundant throughout Europe by the 1700s, but any hint of the reigning stereotype of African facial features or hair is exceedingly rare in these works. Many of these venerated sacred sculptures, which often date back to the twelfth century, had featured white skin before 1700, though at least one example, that of Le Puy in central France, seems to have had dark skin (and perhaps recognizably African features) already in the late fifteenth century.11

(Many of these works were destroyed during the French Revolution, while others have been profoundly altered over the centuries, complicating the problem.) However, most Europeans did not explicitly connect Black Madonnas with African identity before 1700.

While Renaissance art had no widely distributed, powerful, sacred Black African female protagonist to rival the African Magus/King of the Adoration story, there were some regional cults of Black women saints. In northern Germany (Brandenburg and Saxony), the veneration of a Black African version of the Roman-Egyptian soldier saint Maurice flourished, and just before the collapse of this cult (due to the spread of Lutheranism), a corresponding female figure (St. Fidis, said to be the sister of Maurice) emerged.12 In sixteenth-century Iberia, and later in the Americas, a little-known early Christian Ethiopian saint, Efigenia, received new emphasis, and Afro-European confraternities (lay religious associations) were devoted to this daughter of an Ethiopian king.13

Servitude and the erotic

But these noble or princely women, ideals of holy Black femininity, had little to do with the reality faced by the enslaved African women who began to arrive in Europe in the late Middle Ages. Only intermittently, however, do the visual arts afford us a view of the kind of ordinary domestic labor African women were compelled to perform: a glimpse can be seen in several early sixteenth-century Portuguese and Italian sacred pictures (IBWA 2:2, figs. 195, 198 and 3:1:124–6, fig. 54). Much more common, beginning around 1470, are images which record the place of Black women at aristocratic courts and households. Along with Black men and boys (who appear much earlier in these pictorial roles), Black women were, to put it bluntly, fashionable accessories to the wealthy and powerful, suggesting the reach of European hegemony across the globe.14 Perhaps the first Black maidservant of this type visible in European art looks down from the ceiling of Andrea Mantegna’s camera picta in the Ducal Palace of Mantua (finished by 1474) (IBWA 2:2:213, fig. 190). This work almost certainly records a specific individual, as the rest of the room is crowded with likenesses of the ruling Gonzaga dynasty and their retainers.

Roughly two decades later, Isabella d’Este, daughter of the ruler of nearby Ferrara, married into the Gonzaga family, and she immediately sought to obtain young Black girls for her entourage (Kaplan 2005). An adolescent African girl was regarded as insufficiently dark in complexion, so early in 1491, Isabella asked her agent in Venice to procure a young and especially dark-skinned Black girl between the ages of one-and-a-half and four. After being thwarted in a bidding war for a whole free African family, including a wife and little girl, by her mother Eleonora
duchess of Ferrara, Isabella quickly obtained from a Venetian orphanage a two-year-old Black girl; and in 1497, Isabella purchased another enslaved little Black girl for her sister Chiara.

It seems likely that Mantegna’s masterful 1492 drawing, *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (see Figure 4.1), alludes to Isabella and her obsession with African girls. A maidservant to the Jewish heroine is mentioned in the biblical Book of Judith, but no text implies that the servant is African; and the prior iconographic tradition contains no trace of a Black serving girl. Mantegna was eager to please Isabella, and the highly finished drawing may have been a gift to her. The maidservant, unlike Judith, is not idealized and may well be based on a life study, but she is clearly a subordinate character – smaller, younger, frumpier, more compositionally marginal, without Judith’s confidence and strength. Mantegna went on to produce three other versions of this composition, and it was recorded in a print, which no doubt helped spread the innovation of the Black maidservant – the motif later appears in works by Correggio, Titian, Paolo Veronese, and other artists (Kaplan 2005, 145–7, fig. 31).

While at least one African woman in Italy, the mother of the illegitimate Alessandro de’ Medici, first Duke of Florence, became linked in a more intimate way to a ruling dynasty, it is in German art that we see evidence of a more elevated status of Black women at court. Two elaborate sacred paintings, of ca. 1515 and 1530, incorporate handsome and finely dressed Black women in groups of ladies-in-waiting to duchesses (of Calenberg in the north, and Bavaria in

*Figure 4.1* Mantegna’s 1492 *Judith and Her Maidservant*, Florence, Uffizi.
These women are as elaborately arrayed as their white counterparts, and they show the same pious and respectful attitudes to the saintly figures who dominate the works. But while many European images of Black women are derived from the actual presence of individuals of color, there are others which are detached from that social reality. The Masque of Blackness, a spectacle produced at the English court in 1605, included the queen and her white ladies-in-waiting dancing in blackface in the roles of the daughters of Niger, who make a pilgrimage to worship an allegorical white sovereign denoting James I. The spectacle survives in imagery only through drawings made by the production designer, Inigo Jones; dark skin was clearly essential, but it does not look as if any other physiognomic features associated with Africans were imitated (see Figure 4.2) (IBWA 3:1:242–6, fig. 130).

Figure 4.2 Inigo Jones, Daughter of Niger, from “Masque of Blackness” 1605, Derbyshire, Chatsworth House. The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.
James and his queen, Anne, had previously ruled Scotland, where there was a tradition stretching back at least a century of both Black women at court and also blackface pageantry.\(^{16}\) (Here, as elsewhere in Europe, Black courtiers comprised both enslaved and free people — manumission was common across the continent, especially at the death of slave-owners.) For example, during a tournament held in 1507 and 1508 in Edinburgh, a performer (either an actual Black woman or a local person in blackface) was dressed up as a noble lady to whom the tournament itself was dedicated; at the final banquet, a mechanical cloud transported her into the heavens. But it is likely that this chivalrous veneration was a parody. No extant works of visual art record it, but the court poet William Dunbar reveals his anti-Black misogyny in verses on this “black ladye with the big lips.” Though he feigns praise, her lips and nose are made to seem grotesque, and he compares her to beasts such as apes, toads, and cats. At the end of the poem, she becomes a sexual prize: victorious knights will win her embraces, while the losers must humiliate themselves by kissing her behind. Both revulsion and desire are apparent here, and there were in fact several earlier epic poems in which erotically potent Black ladies figure.\(^{17}\) Some members of the audience for the *Masque of Blackness*, it is relevant to note, were repulsed by the blacked-up queen and her entourage. Especially in the British Isles, developing notions of aristocratic female beauty which prized pallor (“fairness”) in women may have had an impact on these reactions.

Nevertheless, already in the early 1500s, eroticized images of Black women begin to proliferate, though it is not always easy to gauge their implications. The numerous Black women (and a few men) distributed among the entirely naked male and female personages of the enigmatic central panel of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500–10) are just as difficult to interpret as the work as a whole, but it seems likely that they are meant to amplify the sensuality of the work (*IBWA* 2:2:261–8, figs. 248–53). (They might be connected to European reports of unembarrassed exposure of the body among African and Native American populations.) The fully clothed figure of an African woman who holds up the coat of arms of a Swiss family (Basel, stained glass, 1521) shows off her décolletage, and her earrings and turban mark her as an exotic Other (*IBWA* 2:2:28, 30, fig. I.14). [In the 1520s, the wearing of earrings was still dismissed by older Europeans as a “Moorish” fashion (*IBWA* 3:1:109).] Sexually provocative white figures in both religious and mythological paintings are increasingly accompanied by Black women attendants who are either nude or scantily clad. In Marco Bigio’s *Three Fates* (Siena, c. 1535) (*IBWA* 3:1:133–4, fig. 60), the Fates themselves are white, but just behind them stands an equally nude Black woman who squeezes milk from one of her breasts. (Medieval science recommended the milk of Black nursemaids as especially nourishing.\(^{18}\)) Likewise, the Dutch Cornelis van Haarlem’s *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1594) (Spicer 2012, 41, fig. 16) depicts a white beauty attended by a shapely, unclothed Black woman.

A subservient position was not always required, especially in works of art on a smaller scale. The late Renaissance rage for carved cameos encouraged images of Blacks, as the onyx stone used frequently had a dark layer.\(^{19}\) Heads of Africans are common, both male and female, and one of the loveliest (Milan?, late sixteenth century) depicts a Black woman adorned with a crescent moon, the symbol of Diana herself (see Figure 4.3) (*IBWA* 3:1:151–4, fig. 76). Indeed, ancient art had sometimes represented Diana in dark stone, and a ca. 1520 astrological fresco in Mantua had shown this version of the goddess with dark skin and features of African type (*IBWA* 3:1:103–4, fig. 41). Furthermore, a bronze statuette depicting a standing nude woman, of uncertain authorship (Italy?, France?, Low Countries?, late sixteenth century), used the darkened patina of the material, confirmed by the conventional marks of an African face, to represent a Black woman at her bath (in the mode of Venus) (Spicer 2012, 51, 128, fig. 40).\(^{20}\) This work must have been popular, as many castings survive today. Its Mannerist attenuation of the body’s proportions was then much esteemed and can also be found in an African female nude
embodying the concept of Night in a 1594 engraving designed by Hendrik Goltzius (Black Is Beautiful, 53–6). While the normative canon of female beauty in this era increasingly stressed light skin (“fairness”), the piquancy of dark skin was also appealing to some, as in Giambattista Marino’s poem in which the white male author professes himself a “slave” of an alluring (and presumably enslaved) Black woman (IBWA 3:1:172; Hall 2000, 346–9).

The nudity of the Black Woman at Her Bath statuette is elegant and classicizing, but there were already early signs of a coarser, hypersexualized approach, probably encouraged by the slave trade’s burgeoning exploitation of the labor and sexuality of Black women, especially in colonial outposts. A disturbing picture by the Bologna painter Bartolomeo Passarotti (c. 1580) (IBWA 3:1:154–7, fig. 79) combines grotesque, lascivious figures from the white underclass with an equally grotesque and lascivious Black couple, whose tongues protrude from their mouths. All are in the grip of drink, and the picture alludes to an ancient bacchanal, but the setting is clearly contemporary and proletarian. Dark skin had long been associated with female lustfulness in European science and medicine (Biller 2005, 483–7). In a troubling Dutch picture of the seventeenth century, by Christian van Couwenbergh, the sexual humiliation and apparent rape of a Black woman by white men is the theme, yet it is treated as a comic event. No doubt, the rapid expansion of the Dutch slave trade in these years affected the dehumanization of the Black woman in this painting. These works bring us closer to the norms of racist iconography as it developed more fully from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.

**Anthropology, allegory, and individuality**

The increasing European global hegemony of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also led to the rise of European images (especially prints) categorizing the peoples of the world in a
mixture of triumphalist and proto-anthropological modes. Black women, of course, appeared in this imagery. In a 1509 woodcut (after a design by the German Hans Burgkmair), the inhabitants of “Guinea” (West Africa) include a woman adorned only in jewelry, suckling a child (IBWA 2:2:272–5, fig. 257). The man and children in this composition are also naked, the absence of clothing signifying an uncivilized state rather than erotic attraction. The costume books and illustrated travel treatises of the later 1500s, however, usually clothed exemplars of Black African women, especially if they were meant to signify members of the upper echelons of African society (IBWA 3:2:49–50, fig. 32).

In allegorical images, nudity returns, as for example in the famous title page to Abraham Ortelius’ influential atlas, the Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (first ed. Antwerp, 1570) (see Figure 4.4) (IBWA 3:2:77–9, fig. 50). This composition illustrates the four continents with female figures: Europe and Asia are lavishly dressed, while America is naked and Africa nearly so. The point was to emphasize the distinction between civilization and barbarism, and as the Atlantic world came more and more to be defined by the enslavement of Africans in the seventeenth century, Black women (and men) are depicted with little or no clothing with ever greater frequency. One of the justifications for the slave trade was that it supposedly redeemed Africans from barbarism (in social and religious terms), and nakedness was a prime symbol of that state.
In the course of the 1600s, a much more explicit visual symbol of white hegemony over Black populations emerged: the slave collar. While Black men were the normative bearers of this device in visual representation, toward the end of the century, it began to be applied to women, as in a 1688 picture by the Swiss Gregor Brandmüller.26 The enslaved woman, apparently a nursemaid to four little white boys, is naked from the waist up save for the shining silver collar. This brutal painting anticipates the genre of the “mammy” which later developed in the United States.

While in most cases, the enslaved status of Black female figures in a European image can only be fully confirmed by the inclusion of some explicit attribute like the slave collar, there are many works where either the context or the image itself strongly implies enslavement. One of these is Albrecht Dürer’s exquisite silverpoint drawing of a Black woman (1521), now in the Uffizi in Florence, inscribed “Katherina, twenty years old” (see Figure 4.5) (IBWA 2:2, 3:1). Like Mantegna’s 1492 Judith and Her Maidservant (see Figure 4.1), this is a finely finished drawing, not a casual sketch. It has many of the features of a commissioned portrait – name and age, bust-length 3/4 pose, a profound seriousness of expression. It cannot be described as a genre study or sketch for future use – Dürer’s prints and paintings depict many Black men but no women.

Yet Katherina could not have commissioned the work, since Dürer’s diary makes it clear that she was the servant of the Portuguese business consul in Antwerp, and as at this point Portugal was the epicenter of the European slave trade, she was almost certainly enslaved. Her lightly sketched outfit is respectable, as those of the enslaved in wealthy households often were. Her downcast eyes model appropriately humble behavior for members of her sex and class, yet her expression also seems to manifest her own melancholy at her difficult fate. Dürer has been able to see and make a kind of loveliness for this face that both avoids idealization and yet makes Katherina’s beauty unmistakable to the European viewer. The inclusion of her name in the

Figure 4.5 Albrecht Dürer, Katherina, 1521, Florence, Uffizi. The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.
inscription is precious to us today, as it is one of very few of any Black subject in a European work of this era to have been preserved.

Nearly a century later, Diego Velázquez painted two versions of a composition usually known as the *Kitchen Maid* (see Figure 4.6) (IBWA 3:1:202–4, fig. 112).27 These works are part of Velázquez’s production of genre scenes of the urban poor during his early years in Seville, a global commercial center and a major slave entrepôt. In the version now in Dublin, Christ’s revelation of his resurrected self to two of his apostles at Emmaus is blurrily visible in the background; in the other, the Black serving-woman is alone. In both, the labor of washing up is balanced by a poignancy of expression. The Dublin picture paradoxically foregrounds a socially marginal individual (in terms of race, class, and gender), with holy male figures consigned to a liminal space behind. The message is clear: Christ’s offer of salvation is to all, including those of the lowest status. Like Dürer’s *Katherina*, Velázquez’s composition endorses the humanity of Black women, but even these generally sympathetic works stress humility as well. The notion of a potent Black femininity is increasingly rare in European art toward the end of the Early Modern period.

Although the Image of the Black in Western Art project has been of inestimable help in bringing to light the iconography of blackness in the European tradition, many more Early Modern individual images of Black women remain to be discovered, and the intensive analysis of these images and their relationship with the social realities of the period is still at a preliminary level. In the next stage of research, among the most vital questions to address are the distinctions between the depiction of Black and white women, and the connections to the representations of Asian and indigenous American women. Through such comparative studies, a more distinct characterization of the European image of Black women is likely to emerge.

**Notes**

Edited by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; see especially vol. 2, parts 1–2, and vol. 3, parts 1–2; cited as *IBWA* in the following. The two versions of the photo-archive are housed at the Hutchins Center at Harvard (also digitally available on Artstor) and the Warburg Institute at the University of London.

Charles Verlinden, *L’esclavage dans l’Europe médiévale*, 2 vols. (Bruges: De Tempel and Ghent: Rijksuniversiteit, 1955–77); T.F. Earle and K.J.P. Lowe, eds., *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). While people of color had been present in Europe well before 1300, especially in areas like Spain and Sicily, which had once been controlled by Islamic powers, their numbers expanded after 1300 in many other areas.


*IBWA* 2:1:193, fig. 166.


However, half a century later, a Dutch painter illustrated a scene from an ancient novel with a lustful Ethiopian king and queen, whose features and expressions are caricatured; see IBWA 3:1:325–6, fig. 188.


Stephanie Leitch, Mapping Ethnography in Early Modern Germany; New Worlds in Print Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63–99.

Alain Parent, Une autre Amérique (La Rochelle: Le Musée, 1982), 34, no. 6.


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