

David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2010. Six volumes published to date, \$95.00 • £69.95 • €75.00 each.

This new edition of *The Image of the Black in Western Art* is the revised and updated version of the volumes first published between 1976 and 1989. The idea of the project dates back to the early sixties, when it was first initiated by French-born patrons of the arts, John and Dominique de Menil. The de Menils were a French-born wealthy white couple that had escaped German-occupied France in the 1940s and came to live in the Southern United States. Here, in the wake of the civil rights movement, they established an archive of photographs, commissioning photographers and art historians to collect and arrange visual material that represented Africans and people of African descent, covering a time span from Ancient Egypt through to early twentieth-century North America. The original series of books - which consisted of five volumes - emerged from this collection.

The project was based on the assumption that art could be seen as an effective tool for social change. It may thus be placed in line - as the editors of the new edition do - with the project of the “New Negro”, a term derived from and popularized through Alain Locke’s essay in the anthology of the same name, back in the 1920s. The purpose of the figuration of the “New Negro” was to transform the image and, more importantly, the self-perception of Black writers and artists. This was also the purpose of the first edition of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. It meant to show a wide range of visual representations of black people in “Western Art” from perspectives that countered a contemporary repertoire of racist images of blackness.

After the death of the de Menil’s in 1997, the Menil foundation decided to discontinue the publication of the series even though it had not been completed; most of the sixteenth through the eighteenth century had not been covered in the existing volumes. In the 1990s, the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University took on the task of completing the project. It decided to expand the series and publish five additional volumes comprised of material from the archive that now contains more than 30,000 images, with search for more continuing.

For the new edition, the written material of the five original volumes has been thoroughly revised and complemented by new essays. The visual material was extensively re-photographed to meet state-of-the-art standards in reproduction. Out of the five new volumes, those three that have been published cover the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. The publisher has announced the publication of a ninth volume on the twentieth century and a “companion volume on the image of the black [not in “Western” but] in African art”.

Considering its history of publication and republication, the series can itself be construed as a meta-archive that marks the ways in which conceptualizations of representations of racial difference have changed over the last fifty years in art history. As Dominique de Menil wrote in her initial preface to the first volume, she wanted to show that visual representations of black people by ‘master artists’ could display the formers’ humanity, thus countering racist notions of black inferiority. From the perspective of a white patron of the arts, the benevolent

intentions of such an approach in the wake of the civil rights movement - not unlike those of a Carl Van Vechten during the Harlem Renaissance - were not necessarily in question; it remains an ambivalent perspective, nonetheless, as it did not address questions of hierarchical looking relations and of agency in visual representation. The first edition risked conflating the category of race with blackness, and thus risked keeping hierarchical racialized looking relations in place: it dealt primarily with images of blackness in a western canon of art not explicitly marked but considered as white. It also imposed a modern black-and-white take on racial representations in the first place, which did not exist in such a binary way prior to the European Enlightenment. This insight is particularly pertinent for Ancient Egypt, as Jeremy Tanner writes in an essay in the first volume on "Race and Representation in Ancient Art: Black Athena and After": "[W]hile concepts of race are relevant to antiquity, the modern bipolar classification of 'black and white' is not, and [...] this raises serious problems both for Afrocentrist readings of ancient art and for some of the claims about the absence of racism in classical art developed in [the first edition] of *The Image of the Black*. Contemporary interpretive models in art history have turned away from looking at images as straightforward *indexes* of black social presence in antiquity. Rather, they explore the cultural construction of highly varied racialized *representations*, and how and why such constructions were mobilized in different times, places, and contexts" (Vol. I, p. 1). Such is self-reflective scholarship at its best.

Conceptualizations of the terms featured in the title, "Image", "Black", "Western", and "Art", all have become contested throughout the previous decades, and the introductory chapter in particular, which is featured in every volume, provides a good survey over the revisions that these concepts have undergone in cultural studies and art historiography during the last years. None of these concepts can be seen as distinct, autonomous, and singular any more. The notion of an implicitly homogenous white "West" has largely been contested with references to 'differences within' and cultural contact without. "Black" has become a contingent and historicized category. And what constitutes an "Image", considering that images are produced in particular social and cultural contexts from particular locations? Art can be anything other than an oil painting. It can be a household object re-contextualized in a museum space. The volumes of the series do an impressive job in removing images of blackness from the tombs of the White Cube of European museums, eternally frozen in racist gazing. Through sound introductions and thematic essays, they historicize the images they show and particularize the stand-points from which images are always already created in the first place.

Considering the monumentality of this publishing project, the editors' modesty seems understated: "[I]t is a preliminary study of an enormous field, with ramifications that can in some cases only be touched upon even in the most carefully researched and edited volumes," (vol. I, p xiv). Most carefully researched these images are indeed, and impressively reframed in the context of current scholarship on race and representation. When all volumes of *The Image of the Black in Western Art* are finally available, they will provide an indispensable visual and textual archive for further critical work on the subject.

As I first saw the announcement of the new edition of *The Image of the Black in Western Art* - a glossy portfolio with reproductions of images and texts of the volumes - I was completely awe-struck by the project. A publishing endeavor that de-

served praise for its sheer ambitiousness in advance. Now that the first volumes of the series are available, the project proves a landmark in art history indeed. It will be an essential holding for any library.

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