

## **Visual arts and intercultural encounters: the tangled histories of Africa and Europe**

*Inaugural Lecture by Prof Bernadette Van Haute, 13 November 2018*

To write an inaugural address proved to be an agonising experience. According to the Vice Principal Professor Moche, an “inaugural address is first and foremost an academic paper in which the new professor gives vent to her latest knowledge of, views about and insights into her area of specialisation, current research and/or occupation”. My Unisa colleagues, on the other hand, advised me to give a more informal talk because the audience consists not only of academics but also of family and friends who have come to support you in this fine hour of glory. I finally settled on a compromise: I will explain the choices I made in the course of my academic career and share with you some of my research findings to illustrate what drives my passion for art history.

The title of the lecture reflects not only my interest in exploring the ways in which artists visualised intercultural encounters in their art. It also captures my own entanglement in the histories of Africa and Europe. Throughout my academic career my research interests oscillated between the arts of Africa and Europe. For my Master’s degree in Ethnic Art I studied the wooden sculpture of the Bambole, Boyela and Walengola – three ethnic groups of central Zaire (now DRC). For my doctoral studies at Unisa I wanted to continue to research African art but by then (early 1990s) revisionist art history was in full swing and to speak on behalf of the “other” was sharply criticised. This forced me to focus on European art, more specifically the art of seventeenth-century Flanders. Professor Phillips already mentioned my accomplishments in that field as well as related research projects.

Yet the passion for African art never ceased and I continued to teach it on both undergraduate and postgraduate level. For my latest research project I decided to return my attention to early modern European art and combine it with my interest in Africa. The topic I finally settled on was the representation of Africa and the black African in seventeenth-century Flemish art. The purpose of the study was not merely to theorise the power imbalance between centre and periphery (as in postcolonial discourse), but to provide insight in the extent and nature of the relationship between northern Europe and Africa as seen through the eyes of the artist. Instead of positing black and white as binary opposites I was more interested in analysing the processes of intercultural exchange and the ways in which these interactions found expression in the arts. This type of research is in my view useful in order to better understand the processes of colonisation and hence to frame new ways to decolonise art history – an objective that is high on Unisa’s agenda of transformation.

The first step was to find artworks featuring African subject matter. The Menil Foundation established a research project focused on the ways in which blacks have been portrayed in Western art. This project has resulted in the publication of a series of books on *The image of the Black in Western art*. Yet these books only represent a small selection of the holdings of the Menil Archive. Aided by a generous research grant from the College of Human Sciences I travelled abroad to conduct research in the Menil Archive at Harvard University (Cambridge, USA), the Warburg Institute in London and the Rubenianum (Nationaal Centrum voor de Plastische Kunsten van de 16e en 17e eeuw) in Antwerp. The material I found in the archives was astonishing, both in terms of numbers as in the types of artworks depicting black Africans.

Many questions crop up when investigating artworks of this nature. One of the artists I selected to investigate was Peter Paul Rubens who painted various works containing depictions of black Africans and of African animals. One wonders whether he ever saw these people and animals and if so, how, where and why these encounters took place. Did the court in Brussels play a role in inviting ambassadors and diplomats from Africa? The Southern Netherlands (now Belgium) were in Spanish possession hence the intercultural exchange between Spain and Flanders also needed attention. Other questions that arose had to do with ownership: was the artwork commissioned? If so, by whom was it commissioned and for what reason or occasion? If not, who was interested in buying and displaying such artworks? Could a certain pattern be established in the art market?

I identified different themes to engage with. A first theme was “Black *tronies* in seventeenth-century Flemish art and the African presence” (Van Haute 2015). The second theme I chose to investigate was “Anthony Van Dyck and the trope of the black attendant” (Van Haute 2016). What I would like to focus on tonight is a comparison between Rubens and Van Dyck of the ways in which they portrayed the black African in their work. I will show you head studies or *tronies* made by Rubens and Van Dyck’s representation of black Africans in selected works to demonstrate their different interpretations. This also testifies to the ambivalent perception of the racial other in Flanders at that time.

In order to put my ideas in their proper context I first need to elaborate briefly on the prevailing conditions in seventeenth-century Flanders and, more specifically, the actual presence of Africans in Flanders. According to Debrunner (1979:34), soon after the Portuguese had started exploring the African continent in search of trading opportunities, the first African slaves were shipped to Portugal in 1436. The Portuguese traded in return with

goods obtained from the Spanish possessions of the Netherlands. This explains the early presence of Africans travelling with these merchants in Flemish trading cities such as Ghent, Brussels, Antwerp and Bruges (Schreuder 2008:23). Two well-known artworks are often cited as evidence of the presence of black people in Flanders in the early sixteenth century. They are the *Portrait of Katherina* (1521) drawn by Albrecht Dürer<sup>1</sup> and the *Portrait of an African Man* (1520-25) painted by the Haarlem artist Jan Mostaert<sup>2</sup> while in Antwerp or Mechelen.

The Portuguese maintained a brisk trade with Antwerp in the course of the sixteenth century. The African products that were shipped to Lisbon were mostly transported to Antwerp, the main distribution centre for African raw materials, turning the city into the most powerful colony of Portuguese merchants (Denucé 1937:42). These foreigners brought with them their families, fashions and customs, including their African servants. Some of these Africans staying in Antwerp were 'free blacks' employed as servants; others were slaves owned by Spanish and Portuguese masters (Goris 1923: 541-44).<sup>3</sup> Antwerp did not take part in the slave trade (Denucé 1937:79) and the city's law actually prohibited enslavement (Blakely 1993:226). In practice, however, it was entirely possible to keep and sell slaves (Haarnack and Hondius 2008:90-91). Whether free or enslaved, these black servants had a very low social status. To have an African servant became a fashion which proved particularly popular in the Spanish Netherlands in the sixteenth century (Debrunner 1979:92).

The Duke of Alva's introduction of two new taxes in 1571<sup>4</sup> was the deathblow for the Antwerp trade as it caused a great number of merchants to leave the city (Denucé 1937:82). The decline was gradual and inevitable until the Treaty of Munster in 1648 when the northern Netherlands (also commonly called Holland) gained its independence and took control of international trade relations. Dutch colonial expansion explains the growing presence of Africans in the northern Netherlands in the course of the seventeenth century (Massing 2011:229). In Antwerp, on the other hand, despite its collapse as a major economic centre, the first decades of the seventeenth century were still marked by the fortunes that were made in the previous century. Although their numbers had dwindled considerably, there was still a large contingent of Southern European merchants.

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<sup>1</sup> Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Katherina* (1521). Drawing, 20 x 14 cm. Florence, Gabinetto del Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Mostaert, *Portrait of an African Man* (1520-25). Oil on panel, 30,8 x 21,2 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. SK-A-4986.

<sup>3</sup> See also Kolfin 2008:71; Massing 2011:233, 236.

<sup>4</sup> The two taxes concerned were the tax of the 10<sup>th</sup> penny on the sale of movable goods and the tax of the 20<sup>th</sup> penny on real estate, both to be paid by the seller. Denucé (1937:82) is of the opinion that it was the Duke of Alva's taxes, not the religious issue, which caused the revolt.

Despite the presence of African people in Antwerp, knowledge of the African continent and its peoples was nevertheless limited in the Southern Netherlands. The concept of “Ethiopia” was geographically vague and could mean India as well as Africa (McGrath 2008a:94; Kaplan 2010:107). From a religious point of view Europeans had a positive image of Ethiopia as it was ruled by Christian kings (Schreuder 2008:22). Various biblical narratives, such as the one of Philip the Evangelist baptising the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:27), led to the theological association of Ethiopian blackness with openness to the Christian message. Black people were seen to represent the Gentiles – “the people who, unlike the Jews, were ready to recognise Christ, coming to him even from the remotest lands” (McGrath 2008b:52). The prime protagonist of this notion was the black King who had come from afar to adore the Christ child and accept the Christian faith in order for his spiritual darkness to be lightened by Christ (McGrath 2008b:266). Roman Catholicism which enjoyed zealous support in Flanders, had a policy of more openness to welcoming “outsiders” compared to Protestant Christianity (Hondius 2014:150-51).

As an artist Rubens had an unusual interest in the imagery of dark-skinned people. In my view this interest was fuelled by his personal experiences in Italy between 1600 and 1608. The first surviving black *tronie* made by Rubens is the *Study of an African Man with a Turban*<sup>5</sup> which was created in Rome.<sup>6</sup> The oil sketch on paper is of a bearded African man wearing a turban. This head study is a palimpsest as it is executed over an older text at right angles to the image on a large sheet originally used for accounts (Vander Auwera 2008:185). The term *tronie* in old Dutch designates a study, drawn or painted, of a facial expression (Van Hout 2012:35). Studies of heads were made from models and collected by seventeenth-century artists not as portraits but as examples of certain types of faces and facial expressions depicting various psychological states. Moreover, by representing the model from various angles these studies could be used for multiple purposes. Head studies were especially useful to artists who ran a workshop with the help of studio assistants (Van Hout 2012:35).

It has been suggested that there could be a connection between Rubens’s sketch and the visit paid to the papal court by the black ambassador from the king of Kongo (Vander Auwera 2008a:185). Kaplan (2010:160) reports that Antonio Manuel, also known in Europe

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *Study of an African Man with a Turban* (1608). Oil on paper laid down on panel, 54 x 39,3 cm (paper), 47,3 (wood). Formerly Collection Christopher Norris, London; present location unknown.

<sup>6</sup> The suggestion that Rubens made the oil sketch during his stay in Italy is maintained by Vander Auwera (2008:185), McGrath (2006:97-98) and Massing (2011:279).

as the Marquis of Ne Vunda, was sent by his uncle King Alvaro II of Kongo as an envoy to the Pope in 1604. However, he only reached Rome in 1608 where he was eagerly awaited by Pope Paul V. The Pope arranged an elaborate protocol for the entrance of Ne Vunda and his retinue during the first week of 1608, including a procession on 6 January, the Feast of the Epiphany. Unfortunately the long journey had taken its toll and Ne Vunda died a few days after his arrival in Rome on the evening of 5 January 1608. Hence the 6 January procession became a funerary one, described by Kaplan as quite splendid:

Ne Vunda's body, accompanied by several members of his entourage, was taken to the great early Christian basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore rather as if his cadaver were one of the Three Kings coming to adore Mary and her Child (Kaplan 2010:160).

By all accounts this visit created quite a stir and it is clear from the Pope's arrangements that he wanted to use this opportunity to propagate the power of the Church. By parading the Africans in the streets of Rome it could be demonstrated how far the arms of the Roman Catholic Church reached, embracing the people of Africa in its fold. At that time Rubens was in Rome working for the Oratorian Fathers on the altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova (Jaffé 1977:89-91), so it is entirely possible that Rubens was among the spectators witnessing the procession. What is important about the scenario suggested here is that the event in Rome sensitised the artist towards the African subject. If such respect was shown by the Pope for the African ambassador, one can understand why the devoutly Catholic artist usually represented his black figures with dignity and sympathy, as in this case.<sup>7</sup> This Italian experience would have a lasting effect on Rubens when he returned to Antwerp. He actually used this very study for the figure of the black king Balthazar in the painting of the *Adoration of the Magi* (Prado, Madrid)<sup>8</sup> started in 1609.

Rubens often made head studies for use in his workshop in Antwerp (Wheelock 2005:186). Around 1615 he invited an African model in his studio to pose for his *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man*. It represents an African head seen from four different angles and has been hailed as one of the most evocative and lifelike renditions of a black subject. The model is an adult African with closely cropped hair, a moustache and small goatee. On the left (View 1) the man occupies half of the picture plane. His body is positioned frontally while his head is turned to the right and tilted upwards. We see him again (View 2) higher up and further back – hence smaller in size – with only part of the white collar visible but now his

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<sup>7</sup> See also Vander Auwera 2008:185.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *The Adoration of the Magi* (1628-29). Oil on canvas, 355.5 x 493 cm. Madrid, Prado, inv. P001638.

face which is creased into a broad smile is turned to the left. On the right-hand side of the composition, at the bottom and closest to the viewer, he is shown in three-quarter view (View 3) staring straight to the right, his shoulders at an angle with the picture plane. Higher up on the extreme right the man is posed in full profile (View 4), looking straight ahead to the left. According to Held (1982:151), Views 1 and 3 were painted first and since they filled a major part of the available surface, Views 2 and 4 had to be squeezed into the remaining space.

Rubens's interest in painting black people was not only driven by his admiration for the robust physique of dark-skinned people as he himself confessed (Rubens 1773:4). Another incentive was the fact that the rendering of dark skin presented artists with a new technical challenge (Vander Auwera 2008:185). In *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* the artist tackled the challenge with his typical inventiveness and virtuosity. The thin paint application, subtle use of colours and attention to detail resulted in a remarkable realism. In order to paint the dark skin in all its gradations the artist's palette ranged "from light beige to grey-brown, greenish-brown and red-brown, red, white and a deep dark brown" (Kolfen 2008:78).

Around 1620 Rubens made another study of a *Head of a Moor*, now in Glen Falls.<sup>9</sup> It shows a single black man's bust, his head turned to the left and seen in three-quarter view. Wearing a simple white shirt he bows his head and lowers his eyes in a moving expression of sadness. It was Julius Held (1982:153) who suggested that the model is the same man who posed for the Brussels picture. In this case the serious young man, aged by about five years, seems to have been captured by the artist in an unguarded moment. Seeing that Rubens used the same model within a time span of five years it is clear that the African man was living in Antwerp, probably as a servant in a wealthy family (Held 1980:612).

The Flemish perception of black Africans was ambivalent and this is no clearer illustrated than by a comparison between the serene and dignified head studies of Rubens and various paintings of Anthony Van Dyck. I examined Van Dyck's use of the motif of the African attendant in his oeuvre in order to establish patterns and strategies of representation of the racial other. What I discovered was the artist's paternalistic interpretation of a trope that was adapted to the tastes of his patrons as determined by the fashion of the time and place. By considering the iconography in conjunction with the reception of the works I revealed the varying connotations of the motif demonstrating the artist's wit in developing early visual forms of racial humour.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *Head of a Moor* (ca. 1620). Oil on panel, 45,7 x 36,8 cm. Glen Falls, New York, The Hyde Collection, Bequest of Charlotte Pruyne Hyde, inv. 1971.40.

The young Van Dyck was introduced to the representation of black figures in the workshop of Rubens where he was employed on several occasions between 1615 and 1620 as an assistant (Van der Stighelen 1994:29). It can be assumed that he was present at the modelling session when Rubens made his *Four Studies of the Head of a Black Man* in 1615. The Getty picture of *Four Studies of a Male Head*<sup>10</sup> may indeed have been Van Dyck's first attempt at making a head study of black models. His personal encounter with black Africans awakened a preoccupation with African people as representatives of a vastly different culture. In my view this early experience in Rubens's studio had a decisive influence on his subsequent portrayals of black Africans in his early history paintings and portraits. In stark contrast to Rubens, Van Dyck displayed a decidedly paternalistic attitude in visualising the racial other.

The first painting by Van Dyck in which a black attendant appears is his *Drunken Silenus*<sup>11</sup> executed around 1620 in Antwerp. The theme refers to an episode from the Midas story when Silenus was once captured by Phrygian peasants and led before King Midas (McGrath 2008b:202). The composition is clearly based on Rubens's painting of the same subject (ca. 1617-18).<sup>12</sup> Van Dyck maintained the central image of the drunken Silenus, depicted knee-length as an old, bearded, corpulent man wavering to the left, in the company of a group of revellers including an Ethiopian. Yet he deviated from Rubens in what Susan Barnes calls a "decidedly competitive twist ... display[ing] a different cast of characters and an altogether different mood" (Wheelock et al. 1990:106).

The change in characters is reflected not only in Silenus, whose thighs are covered with hair, but particularly in the young bacchante on the left "whose long, flowing hair and wide-eyed gaze hint at the frenzy for which the maenads were known" (Wheelock et al. 1990:106). Moving to the right the rest of the cast consists of a bearded man gulping down the wine from an earthenware jug. Next to him stands a dark-skinned bearded figure who sticks out his tongue as he fixes his sight on the pitcher, longing for a sip of wine. His inebriated state is made clear by the fact that he leans heavily on the already slumping Silenus, placing his long-fingered hand on Silenus's naked shoulder. His right hand clutches the dark blue cloth which has slipped from Silenus's back towards the nymph whose cheek he touches in the

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *Four Studies of a Male Head* (ca. 1615). Oil on wood, 25.4 x 64.8 cm. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 71.PB.39.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *Drunken Silenus* (ca. 1620). Oil on canvas, 107 x 91,5 cm. Monogrammed on the pitcher: AVD. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, 1017.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *Drunken Silenus* (ca. 1617-18). Oil on panel, 205 x 211 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

process. On the extreme right appears a young man who stares intently at the beautiful bacchante on the opposite side.

It has been stated that Van Dyck focused on the emotional content of the scene by a sensitive approach to gestures and facial expressions (Wheelock et al. 1990:108). However, his treatment of the black man sticking out his tongue is far from sensitive. There is no subtlety in this portrayal of drunken thirst: it is a very basic and physical expression of behaviour which typifies the man as rude and uncivilised.<sup>13</sup> This approach is comparable to the depiction of the peasant in genre painting popularised by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (*The Wedding Dance*).<sup>14</sup> The social function of the peasant genre was to satirise the lower classes and rustics for the amusement of an urban elite (Van Haute 1999:20-21). In the same way that peasants were presented as exemplars of human depravity, carnality and foolishness, the black man exemplifies the ethnic other whose excessive and coarse behaviour elicits laughter because it is a deviation from social norms (Meyer 2000:320).

The use of the black man as a comic element is an additional feature that sets Van Dyck apart from Rubens. The latter also used the black attendant in his depiction of the drunken Silenus but he never went so far as to ridicule the man by making him act in a demeaning manner (Van Haute 2015:25). In more sympathetic fashion Rubens preferred to portray the Ethiopian as a satyr who grins mischievously as he playfully pinches the thigh of Silenus. Van Dyck thus alters the mood more poignantly by displaying a penchant for satire which can be read as paternalistic behaviour.

What does this notion of paternalistic behaviour actually mean? Because the concept of colour is present here as an ethnic marker (Erickson 2000:315), the approach of Van Dyck needs to be explored in light of contemporary critical race theories – but with specific focus on the European experience of blackness. Dienne Hondius (2014:2) points out that “because Europe lacked a significant black community, different forms of stereotyping and blackness developed” when compared “with the American history of race relations”. In line with the notion that definitions of race vary according to time and place I selected as theoretical framework the thesis of Hondius’s expounded in her book *Blackness in Western Europe: Racial patterns of paternalism and exclusion* (2014). Hondius (2014:2) argues that

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Kaplan (2015) notes that “sticking out the tongue had long been a gesture of obscene disrespect in European culture”. I thank Paul Kaplan for sharing his manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Wedding Dance* (1566). Oil on canvas, 119.4 x 157.5 cm. Michigan, Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts.



paternalism, as the most pervasive pattern of behaviour in European race relations, “dominates European racial discourses”. She conceives of racial paternalism as a theory that explains the power structures between white Europeans and non-white Africans. It is a concept that assumes superiority on the part of white Europeans who perceive black Africans as inferior (Hondius 2014:3-5). Taking the concept of paternalism one step further, I argue that Van Dyck used humour to cloak his patronising attitude towards black Africans.

The type of humour encountered in Van Dyck’s paintings is termed ethnic or racial humour. According to Christie Davies (1982:383), “ethnic jokes delineate the social, geographical and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group. By making fun of peripheral and ambiguous groups they reduce ambiguity and clarify boundaries or at least make ambiguity appear less threatening.” In line with this theory, Van Dyck can be identified as a member of the central ethnic group, namely the European elite, which upheld certain social and moral standards and, in the smaller circle of Flanders, supported the Counter-Reformist efforts of the Brussels court. The black Africans, on the other hand, were considered by this central group as ambiguous outsiders who had come to Europe, even though in limited numbers, as non-Christian slaves or servants. The moral boundaries of the European elite defined what was acceptable behaviour of its members and what was transgressive behaviour characteristic of the outsiders. The role of humour is to “police these boundaries” by mocking the unacceptable behaviour of the ambiguous other (Davies 1982:384). Hence the artist would portray the black attendant with traits that he would not wish to recognise among his peers. Racial humour can thus be identified as a pattern of paternalism aimed at rendering the black African less ambiguous and less threatening.

The motif of the black attendant appears again in *The Continnence of Scipio*<sup>15</sup>, a theme belonging to ancient history. Van Dyck painted this work during a brief stay in England at the court of James I, from October 1620 to February 1621 (Barnes et al. 2004:136). It was in all probability made for the Duke of Buckingham. The picture illustrates the moment when, after capturing New Carthage, the young Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus was presented with a beautiful maiden as a prize of war. Learning that the girl was betrothed to the Celtiberian chieftain Allucius he returned her unharmed to her fiancé. The bride’s parents brought a ransom of golden vessels but Scipio gave it to Allucius as a wedding gift. The story is an illustration of the virtues of statesmanship, chastity and justice (Barnes et al. 2004:135).

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *The Continnence of Scipio*(ca. 1620-21).Oil on canvas, 183 x 232,5 cm. Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford, JBS 245.

Among the attendants bearing the gold for the girl's ransom is an African servant with nude torso carrying a casket under his left arm. In this instance the black man has a smile on his face and looks out at the viewer. Moreover, he extends his right arm towards the girl's skirt, so close that his hand nearly touches her left hand with which she has gathered up her skirt. The very fact that he looks at the viewer turns him into a commentator on the scene depicted, adding a theatrical quality. Placed opposite Scipio at the other side of the painting the black servant functions as the exact opposite of the virtuous statesman: by reaching for the girl's skirt at the height of her bottom and making a provocative gesture with his long fingers he seems to personify the vice of lustfulness.

Here Van Dyck relied on the stereotyping of the black man as a womaniser to comment on and offset the uprightness and chastity of the Roman general. The sexual stereotyping of people of dark skin colour was current in literature. Moreover, this adaptation of the motif betrays a particular facet of the artist's character. Julius Held (1994:63-64) describes Van Dyck as a man who not only lived "the life of a cavalier and engage[d] in conspicuous consumption" but was also known for his "sexual appetite". Given this inclination he did not shy away from giving visual expression to rather risqué and sexually explicit imagery. It can thus be deduced that Van Dyck intended the motif of the grinning black man as a humorous anecdote spicing up the narrative.

Examples of religious themes featuring a black attendant are Van Dyck's two versions of *Saint Sebastian Bound for Martyrdom* (Munich and Edinburgh).<sup>16</sup> Legend has it that when Sebastian, an officer of the Praetorian guard in the time of Diocletian (3<sup>rd</sup> Century), revealed to be a Christian he was ordered to be shot with arrows (Hall 1987:276). The artistic convention was to portray Sebastian as a solitary figure, his body pierced with arrows as seen in Rubens's version of *Saint Sebastian*.<sup>17</sup> Van Dyck, on the other hand, chose to depict a rather unusual episode from the saint's martyrdom, when he was being tied to a tree. The motif of the black attendant has been added on the extreme left, his body pressing against the back of the soldier who pulls Sebastian towards the tree. The African man seems to be cast in the role of executioner: his arms outstretched, he holds in his raised left hand the bow and in the other hand the arrows with which Sebastian is about to be shot. However, Van Dyck downplayed his participation in the execution by making him only the bearer of the instruments of death and turning him into a messenger. As in *The Contenance of Scipio* he

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *Saint Sebastian Bound for Martyrdom* (ca. 1621). Oil on canvas, 223 x 160 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Sebastian* (ca. 1614). Oil on canvas, 200 x 128 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.

turns his head looking out towards the viewer to comment on the scene enacted. In the present context, however, his gleeful face appears to be a rather incongruous element.

The central theme of the painting is the transcendent power of the Christian faith (Wheelock et al. 1990:140). The light beaming down on Sebastian is the light of Christ which the Roman soldiers fail to see. In seventeenth-century Antwerp the Jesuits used the symbolism of light to enhance the triumph of true religion – the light of Truth. Black, in contrast, was identified with the forces of darkness (Massing 2011:316). In this case the aim of the artist was to highlight the folly of non-Christians for living in spiritual darkness. This assumption is underscored by the extreme paleness of Sebastian's skin in comparison with the Roman soldiers and the blackness of the African attendant. Moreover, Van Dyck portrayed the African non-believer with a grin on his face, mocking the Christian faith of Sebastian. His deviation from artistic tradition must be seen in light of the fact that the painting was not destined for public, sacred display in a church, but made for domestic consumption (Eaker 2015:181). Hence the artist was at liberty to add a motif that church authorities may have found objectionable.

The first portrait by Van Dyck featuring a black servant is the one of *George Gage with Two Attendants*<sup>18</sup> (ca. 1622). The main subject of the portrait is the Englishman George Gage, who was an agent for Sir Dudley Carleton in collecting art abroad. Interestingly Gage met Van Dyck in Rubens's studio as early as 1616-17 and may have been instrumental in bringing Van Dyck to London in 1620-21 (Barnes et al. 2004:187-88). The artist painted the portrait very soon after his arrival in Rome, in February 1622, before Gage ended his Roman sojourn in July 1622 (Barnes et al. 2004:188).

The portrait captures the sitter in a momentary movement of conversation (Barnes et al. 2004:188). David Bindman (2010:250) describes it as “a bargaining encounter between Gage, on the left, and a dealer offering him a classical statue”. Gage leans languidly on a stone pedestal, his head turned towards the dealer and his elegant hands gesticulating in a manner that matches his facial expression. Further back in between Gage and the dealer appears a sturdy dark-skinned servant who points with his right hand to the statue while looking straight at the viewer and “grinning cynically” (Bindman 2010:250). The significance of this black servant in the context of a portrait is quite different from the history paintings seen so far. I propose a reading of the black servant grounded in the historical context, more

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *George Gage with Two Attendants* (ca. 1622). Oil on canvas, 115 x 113,5 cm. National Gallery, London, NG49.

specifically the personal relationship between the artist and the sitter. It is also in line with the black man's appearance in earlier works by Van Dyck as a commentator and moralising agent.

The scene is set in Italy – where slavery was commonly practised – hence the fact that the art dealer made use of a strong black servant or slave to handle the heavy statue is not at all unusual. It actually enhanced his status as merchant. The servant points emphatically to the piece of antique sculpture which is the object of negotiation. On closer inspection there are clear correspondences between the classical statue and George Gage in both posture and dress. Their bodies are slanted to the right, their right arms are slightly lifted and their faces are turned to the right. Like the cloak which is draped loosely and elegantly over Gage's left shoulder, a swath of drapery is arranged over the statue's left shoulder. Even their hair style looks similar. This repetition of visual forms establishes a clear link between the main sitter and the classical statue.

Apparently as a result of his extensive travels in Italy over the years George Gage had become thoroughly familiar with the Italian ways and had adapted "the ease, the grace, the aplomb – in sum, the *sprezzatura* [nonchalance] – that was the essential quality of the Italian courtier" (Wheelock et al 1990:160). By turning the sitter into an imitation of the classical statue Van Dyck mocked the Italian mannerisms of the Englishman. He used the black servant as a grinning commentator to make his humorous intentions very clear. Probably the two men had developed a friendly relationship since their first meeting in Antwerp which explains why the artist felt at liberty to poke fun at George Gage.

The following year when he was in Genoa, Van Dyck was commissioned by Giacomo Cattaneo to paint a portrait of his wife Elena Grimaldi (Barnes et al. 2004:189). Faced with the fact that she was a noble woman he revised the trope of the African servant and adapted it to the sitter's personal circumstances. The portrait of *Marchesa Elena Grimaldi (1623)*<sup>19</sup> shows the aristocratic patron standing on the terrace of her palace in the company of a black page who holds a red parasol above his mistress's head. Given Genoa's involvement in the slave trade it is most likely that the boy was part of the sitter's household (Massing 2011:225). Since the black page was an ostensible sign of Genoese artistic and social fashion (Kaplan 2010:180), Elena may have insisted that he be incorporated in the portrait in order to highlight her social standing.

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *Marchesa Elena Grimaldi (1623)*. Oil on canvas, 246x 173 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1942.9.92.

Looking closely, the young servant appears to have long pointed ears like those of a satyr. The motif of the satyr may have been inspired by the oeuvre of Rubens, namely his painting of *Nature Adorned* (1615).<sup>20</sup> Here Silenus is portrayed in the company of a laughing black man with satyr-like ears. McGrath maintains that Rubens included Ethiopians as followers of Bacchus on account of their association “with natural exuberance and fecundity, the gifts of Nature and the Earth” (2006:117). Surprisingly in the case of Elena Grimaldi the classical reference to the Ethiopian satyr may have similar connotations: the cuffs of Elena’s dress are red and so is the parasol – red being a colour that signifies the sitter’s pregnancy (Barnes et al. 2004:190). In her right hand Elena holds a sprig of orange blossoms which may be seen as the botanical equivalent of human pregnancy. In view of these references to pregnancy – not least her explicitly swollen abdomen – it is safe to state that the black page is more than just a marker of social status. Through the subtle but witty reference to the Ethiopian satyr as a symbol of fecundity the black page serves to comment on, protect and celebrate the blessed state of the sitter.

After Van Dyck left Italy for Flanders he seems to have lost interest in the motif of the black attendant and did not use it again except in some later court portraits when he was instructed to do so.<sup>21</sup> During the winter of 1634-35 he spent some time in Brussels painting portraits of Flemish and foreign nobles living near the Brussels court (Vlieghe 1994:201-2). One of these foreign nobles was Princess Henriette of Lorraine, the widow of the prince of Pfalzburg and Lixheim (Wheelock et al. 1990:278-80). Henriette and her sister Margaret of Lorraine were both in exile in Brussels when Van Dyck painted their portraits in 1634 (Massing 2011:225). The full-length court portrait of *Henriette de Lorraine*<sup>22</sup> shows her in the company of a black page who has, in comparison with Elena Grimaldi’s servant, been reduced to a small boy.

The recently widowed sitter wears an exquisite, white embroidered petticoat and black dress which contrasts sharply with the bright red outfit of the black boy. The gold brocade of the background is repeated in the page’s gold earrings – a well-established attribute of Africans (Kaplan 2010:109) – and a heavy gold chain worn diagonally across the chest. The boy

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel, *Nature Adorned* (ca. 1615). Oil on panel, 106,7 x 72,4 cm. Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

<sup>21</sup> Van Dyck did not make portraits with black pages in his English period (1632-1641) (Bindman 2010:249-50).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Van Dyck, *Henriette de Lorraine* (1634). Oil on canvas, 213,4 x 127 cm. Inscribed (lower left): *Henrietta / Lotharinga Princeps de Phalsburg, 1634* and (lower right): *Ant. Van Dyck Eques Fecit*. The Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood.

turns his head sideways in order to look up at his mistress who rests her hand affectionately on his shoulder. Van Dyck further enhanced the notion of the boy's subservience by pushing him behind the woman, making him only partly visible. While this strategy enforces the woman's white superiority (Erickson 2009:27, 34), her caring for the infant adds a positive note to her attitude towards the African.<sup>23</sup>

A new element is the page's offering of a gilt platter with pink roses, apparently picked from the garden seen in the background. This flower is symbolic of the beauty of the sitter whose colouring and skin texture are similar to those of a rose (Filipczak 1990:65). Through the addition of this attribute the black page pays tribute not so much to Henriette's wealth and nobility as her beauty.<sup>24</sup> Seeing that the portrait of *Henriette de Lorraine* was commissioned for the collection of King Charles I both the artist and the sitter would have ensured to stress all her assets to best effect.<sup>25</sup> In this formulation of the motif of the black attendant Van Dyck's paternalism has reached its fullest expression by reducing the black servant to an infant who is only partly visible and has become "an appurtenance himself like the things he bestows" (Erickson 2009:33).

"Van Dyck's use of symbols and allusions has often been ignored" alongside the "considerable sense of humour" in these aspects of his art (Stewart 1990:69). The African attendant is one of those symbols that testify to the artist's sense of humour. Yet his witty allusions were at times so troubling and risqué that they have indeed been continuously overlooked in Van Dyck scholarship. Or, one could argue, they have been purposefully avoided on account of the sometimes blatant paternalism evident in the artist's representation of the black subject that could be interpreted as racial prejudice. Having looked at various works featuring a black attendant it is clear that Van Dyck's use of the trope was motivated by aesthetic concerns, issues of patronage and display, social ambitions and religious values. Depending on a combination of these factors he would adjust his articulation of the black attendant without, however, ever abandoning his patronising tone. Van Dyck's strategies of representation resulted in original conceptualisations of the black African which set him far apart from his Flemish contemporary Rubens.

By contrasting the works of these two famous Flemish artists I hope to have demonstrated that by digging into the past and reading visual images carefully in their specific context, art

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<sup>23</sup> As Hondius (2014:5) remarks, "racial paternalism has the assumption of not only superiority but also care".

<sup>24</sup> Filipczak (1990:65) maintains that "whatever other significance such portraits might have, they were always lessons in beauty".

<sup>25</sup> The painting was commissioned either by Henriette who gave or sold it to Endymion Porter weeks or months later, or by Porter himself as a gift for Charles I (Barnes et al. 2004:329-30).

history can contribute significantly to the history of race and racism in early modern Western Europe. Reading the past in this manner helps us understand the world today from a much broader perspective. Art engages with our humanity, our society, whoever we are and wherever we are. It enriches, challenges and delights us all at the same time. That is why I devoted my career to the study of art and its history. For me it was a fascinating journey and I hope that by sharing some of my research findings I may have touched a familiar note or sparked an interest in the vast potential of the visual arts, then and now. Thank you, dear family, friends and colleagues, for joining me tonight to listen to my story and to celebrate with me the ultimate achievement for any academic – to become a full professor. Thank you.

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