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Images of Blacks Refracted in a White Mirror

By GRACE GLUECK

LEAD: When white American artists looked at black Americans, what did they see? Stereotypes, like banjo players, watermelon eaters, slaves and idlers? Or dignity and purpose? All of the above, as evidenced by a and idlers? Or dignity and purpose? All of the above, as evidenced by a complex new show, "Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940," to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington on Saturday.

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In an interview, Mr. McElroy said, 'All art is by nature a political statement. It represents a way of life in society primarily as seen by the majority culture, and in the case of blacks, influenced by the subjects' lack of access to money, education and social power. So the show is clearly a statement about the politics of black life in American society."

While it was being organized. "Facing History" was criticized by the head of one prominent black institution, who refused to lend a painting to the Corcoran on the grounds that such a show should present a more positive image of blacks, done by black artists. In refusing to lend "The Banjo Lesson," by the 19th-century black painter Henry O. Tanner, William R. Harvey, president of Hampton University in Hampton, Va., complained that the show did not include works by black artists depicting "images that are both real and positive."

Works by four major black artists of the 19th century, Edmonia Lewis, Joshua Johnston, Edward Bannister and Robert Duncanson, are included in the show, however, along with some by 20th-century black artists. But because no other representative Tanner could be found, the exhibition now lacks a painting by the artist - a student and friend of Eakins's -who is widely regarded as the most talented black painter of the 19th century.

"We are showing black artists to provide a contrast between blacks looking at themselves and the majority culture looking at blacks," Mr. McElroy said. "Yet their images are not ideologically separate from those of the white artists. Their techniques and values were based on mainstream culture. Conscious efforts to cret a 'black' style didn't occur until the 1960's."

Mr. McElroy believes that the exhibition conveys the "spiritual strength of people who managed to survive in spite of terrible odds. When you look at this show, you won't feel subjected to a "negative experience," he says. "The paintings are too beautiful and the points they make are too strong in presenting the complexities of African-American life."

To help the viewer better "read" the hidden messages in paintings that do not seem obviously pejorative, the show is heavily annotated, with wall texts, a brochure and, of course, the catalogue, which has an introduction by Mr. McElroy and also by Henry Louis Gates Jr., W.E.B. DuBois Professor of Literature at Cornell University.

Seeking the Subtext

The show is the latest and one of the most ambitious in a series of endeavors to examine the perception of blacks by artists reflecting a majority culture, and the first to be done by a black art historian. Two earlier exhibitions mounted by Sidney Kaplan, now professor emeritus of American literature and American art at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a founder of the W.E.B. DuBois

department of Afro-American studies there, served as important preludes. One was "The Portrait of the Negro in American Painting" at Bowdoin College, in 1964, which included about 60 paintings, mostly by white artists, covering the period from 1715 to the 1960's. The other was "The Black Presence in the Era of Revolution, 1770-1800," a 1973 show of documents and pictures at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. (a revised and expanded book based on the catalogue has recently been issued by the University of Massachusetts Press.) There is also the massive research project begun some 20 years ago by the Menil Foundation of Houston, which has so far produced four volumes of documentation and interpretation of the portrayal of blacks in Western art. The last one, published in 1989, was "The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the American Revolution to World War I," by the English historian Hugh Honour. Another Menil publication, "Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years," 1988, by Karen C.C. Dalton and Peter H. Wood, was accompanied by a touring show that originated at the Menil Collection in Houston last year. Mr. McElroy credits both these books as offering 'startling insights that have dramatically revised our understanding of how white artist and audiences have historically viewed black subjects."

From Caricature To Eloquence

The 120 objects in the Corcoran show include paintings, sculptures and works on paper, by such stellar names as John Singleton Copley, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Frederic Remington Charles Demuth and Jacob Lawrence. But there are also relative unkowns, among them Thomas Ball, Charles Deas, Edward Troye, Christain Mayr and Joseph Decker.

The approaches range from outright caricature, like Edward Potthast's "Brother Sims's Mistake," which pokes fun at a black church congregation, to precise and eloquent obsrvation, as in Saint-Gaudens's head of a Civil War soldier, a study done for a monument commemorating the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, the first black volunteer unit, which fought with distinction during the Civil War (and whose history is told in the current movie "Glory").

The subjects run from such serious matters as abolition, exemplified by Eastman Johnson's tense "Ride for Liberty - The Fugitive Slaves," to lighthearted revelry, as in Reginald Marsh's high-energy "Tuesday Night at the Savoy Ballroom." A famous icon is Copley's big, dramatic "Watson and the Shark," 1778, now seen as an allegory of the American Revolution. But there are also simple paintings like Harry Roseland's "Wake Up, Dad," in which an elderly man dozng in a church pew is nudged awake by his wife. All in all, the show gives a penetrating reading of blacks viewed by whites: as inferiors and equals, as individuals and abstractions, as figures of fun and of respect, as workers and passive bystanders, as childlike dependents and strong role models.

The Thinking Behind the Show

In hatching "Facing History," Mr. McElroy said, he first thought of assembling negative images in popular art, racist ephemera consisting of broadsides, cartoons, sheet music, posters, dolls and so forth. In fact, he and Jane Livingston - who as chief curator and associate director of the Corcoran recruited him for the project - amassed a huge file pertaining to both fine and popular art. "If we'd used the racist ephemera, we would have had something like 450 items in the show, and it would have been a much more frightening exhibition," Mr. McElroy said. "So we decided to confine it to fine art." Besides, Ms. Livingston says, "in the fine arts there is a more complex and layered reality. Poltical cartoons and other popular imagery by definition are somplistic and very often jingoistic, whereas a cultured, conscious artist is a synthesizer, an assimilator and an interpreter of his own time. He brings to his work a rich communal background. In our age we've had so much fine art drawing on popular art that we tend to forget the mission that the artist has assumed in other societies and at other times."

But, while the show is full of beautiful paintings, it still has the potential for controversy, says Ms. Livingston, no stranger to controversy herself. It was she who booked the show of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe that was canceled by Christina Orr-Cahall, the Corcoran's former director, last summer. In protest over the cancellation, Ms. Livingston resigned her post in September - to take effect this month. It will be remembered that the Mapplethorpe show, which contained photographs of homosexual and sadomasochistic practices, was partly financed by the National Endowment for the Arts and was wiped from the Corcoran's schedule to avoid heightening a Congressional battle shaping up over the Endowment's grant-making policies. "Facing History" has also been given a grant by the Endowment - to the tune of $75,000 - but will presumably not result in the firestorm generated by the Mapplethorpe show.

Mr. McElroy - confined to a wheelchair since the summer of 1987, when an automobile accident left him a paraplegic - served for eight years as a curator and then assistant director at the Bethune Museum-Archive in Washington, which is devoted to the history of black women in America. Now working toward a Ph.D at the University of Maryland, he conceived the idea for "Facing History" five or six years ago after studying the 19th-century artist William Sidney Mount in a class on genre painting.

"He was one of the first to portray African Americans," Mr. McElroy said, "and I'd heard that his work was positive or neutral. But it seemd to me that though he created paintings depicting African Americans in a sympathetic and natural manner, they didn't break from the idea of blacks as minstrels, servants, entertainters, members of the slave class. I thought after that it would interesting to look

at other American artists."

Decoding the Shark

Fueled by the efforts of scholars before him, Mr. McElroy gives complex readings of well-known works. No one who sees the show, for instance, is ever again likely to view John Singleton Copley's famous "Watson and the Shark," as merely a dramatic painting of a rescue attempt. Commisioned by Brook Watson, a rich Englishman with strong slave-trade connections, it depicts an incident from Watson's youth in which, while swimming in Havana Harbor, he lost a leg to a shark.

In the painting, we see young Watsn floating helplessly on his back in the water, the shark's jaws agape nearby, as a group of men in a dory try to rescue him. The key figure in the boat is a black man, his face contorted in concern, as he holds one end of a lifeline flung out to the victim.

There has been some argument over the interpretation of the balck man's role. Albert Boime, a professor of art history at the University of Claifornia at Los Angeles, notes that the black figure holds the rope in an "unsailorlike" fashion, between the wrong fingers. The "disjunction between the prominent compositional location and passive narrative role of this figure," he has written, "is a telling feature of the racism of both patron and painter. The black crew member prefigures the classic token black, a metaphorical allusion to some abstract principle of humanity, but this black is unable to function in the real world dominated by whites."

An 'Offensive' Interpretation

On the other hand, Sidney Kaplan, a self-styled neo-Marxist, dismisses Mr. Boieme's reading as "offensive." He adds: "I look at the rope in the black man's hand as an umbilical cord between him and Watson. Copley paints an exquisite painting of a black man, who lowers the lifeline. Whatever his reasons, he gives him an honorific position, the dominant one in the painting."

Mr. McElroy - taking cues from Hugh Honour and Albert Boime - decodes the work this way: its complex subtext, he suggests, includes a strong element of remorse on Watson's part for his role in the slave trade - hence the nobly portrayed black man, who is seen as his "Doppelganger." At the same time, he writes in the catalogue, the painting is a "conservative polemic" in that the presence of Wastons's body "also plays on images of dismemberment that were routinely employed by artists to warn of the loss of power that would result from impending revolt of colonial territories from the British Empire."

"Still," he says, "as important as it is to see the allegory, it's also one of the earliest images in which an African American is viewed as pivotal to, and an equal participant in, a dramatic event."

A case of an artist's softening his experience of black male authority is William Sidney Mount's 1845 work, "Eel-Spearing at Setauket," depicting a young white boy and a black woman eel-fishing in a Long Island pond. It was based on a childhood memory of the artist's, Mr. McElroy says. But the person who taught Mount eel-fishing, he points out, was in reality a black man named Hector. Satifying his own "proscriptions against images of assertive African American men," the curator writes, Mount "deemed an image of a black man teaching a white youth too great a risk in a commissioned painting."

High Marks For Homer

Like other scholars in the field, Mr. McElroy gives good grades to Winstow Homer and Thomas Eakins for their portrayals of blacks, saying that their mature works "represent a high-water mark in 19th-century artistic expression of African-American identity, offering a alternative to the penchant of typing that, with a precious few exceptions, marked the development of American art." Even though Homer's "Watermelon Boys" of 1876, depicting three youths - two black, one white - eating watermelons in a field, would seem to perpetuate a common stereotype first popularized in minstrel shows of the 1850's, Mr. McElroy finds that Homer's use of the image "predates the explicitly derogatory linking of the watermelon with blacks that developed in the 1880's after the collapse of Reconstruction."

Eakins's outlook was broader than the "simplistic nostalgia of the implicit racism that dominated most post-Reconstruction images of blacks," Mr. McElroy notes. But in his painting "Will Schuster and Blackman Going Shooting," 1876, in which a black guide poles a canoe while a white hunter takes aim, "the whtie man in named while the black man is identified only in terms of race" Hence Eakins's "unspoken subtext," according to Mr McElroy, is to stress the difference between whties and blacks "in terms of an interdependent but clearly hierarchical economic relationship.

Esthetics Versus Politics

But - perhaps mindful of some critics who accuse the "new" art historians of scanting esthetics for sociology - Mr. McElroy

emphasized that the show was an esthetic experience. "One of the high points in putting it together was looking at the objects, because I enjoy their beauty and spiritual quality," he said. Although last week Professor Kaplan had not yet seen the catalogue for the show, he endorsed the idea of it. "Such shows as these, if they gather good material, can be a revelation of what has hitherto been more or less invisible," he asid. "In the past, if one tried to visualize what black people were like up to the Civil War, there was a blur. Now all of a sudden we are finding that white artists have given us some splendid pictures, artists like Copley and Eakins and Homer and Eastman Johnson, and so many of them seem to be valid pictures without prejudice.

"The leading artists of the time do splendid and valid work, as if genius were able to get beyond stereotypicality and preserve for us the flesh and marrow and intellect of black people. It raises a very interesting question for art history, that some of our best artists were doing the greatest works on the victims of brutal slavery and oppression, even as they were portrayed in the popular press in a stereotypical way."

The initial impetus for the show, Ms. Livingson said, began with the District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities, whose chairman at the time, Peggy Cooper-Cafritz, was interested in developing projects that involved the "minority presence" in the arts. "With this in mind, I tried to find a young black art historian to do a good show," Ms. Livingston said. In 1985, she heard about Mr. McElroy. He proposed what turned out to be the present show - a show, Ms. Livingston says, that would not have been possible without the nurturing of the District of Columbia Commssion on the Arts and Humanities and Rockefeller Foundation.

Assessing the impact of the show, Ms. Livingston said: "I think the black community is ready and willing to face the depredations to its own self-image in American history, depredations that seem more painful in visual material than in much of the literature. Virtually every one of the stereotypes seen here has some vestige of vivid reality in 1990."

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