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## BLACKS In ART; Straining Credulity

LEAD: To the Editor:

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Grace Glueck's "Images of Black Art Refracted in a White Mirror" [Jan. 7] raises some disquieting questions.

When art historians attempt to impute other than creative motives to painters, as some have apparently done in the case of the new Corcoran exhibit, "Facing History: The Black Image in American Art," they may be engaging in fustian intellectual arrogance. Unless they can support their allegations by producing solid evidence in the form of correspondence or contemporary accounts proving racial bias, they should be prepared to be challenged on their own motives.

It is preposterous for Professor Albert Boime, however prestigious his credentials, to allege that because John Singleton Copley painted a black holding a rope in "unsailorlike fashion," between the wrong fingers, he was perforce expressing racist sentiments. That Mr. Boime interprets this finger matter as evidence of the painter's belief that "this black is unable to function in the real world dominated by whites" strains credulity even more. If Copley had really wanted to communicate any such idea, surely he would have chosen a far less arcane and subtle way to do it.

Sidney Kaplan's ideas about the significance of the rope are every bit as questionable. To characterize a thrown line as an umbilicus, with all this word implies, is really stretching matters a bit thin. Can it be that Mr. Kaplan is attempting to construct a case to fit his own sociopolitical theories? And by the way, no fair viewer of "Watson and the Shark" could contend, as Mr. Kaplan does, that the black figure occupies "an honorific position, the dominant one in the painting." The harpoonist is far more prominently placed in the composition, and the two figures leaning precariously over the gunwhale are certainly doing far more than is the black, who is holding the lifeline passively, and with an astonishingly uninvolved expression on his face.

If such critiques are allowed to go unchallenged, I fear that it is only a question of time before artists will be forced to submit to notarized affidavits attesting to the true meaning of their work so that they cannot be accused of whatever intentions are ascribed to them by "experts."

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