

The Genesis of the Black Madonna

This study will focus on representations of the Virgin Mary and her son, the Christ Child, portrayed with black skin and Aryan features. It does not refer to artworks which portray them as Africans and which are created to convey the message that the Christ is trans-cultural. The latter are mostly a recent occurrence. The ones that we will study are mainly medieval in origin from the 12th to 15th century and even earlier.

Ean Begg, author of *The Cult of the Black Virgin* reports the existence at one time or another of 450 artworks depicting Black Virgins, mostly in Europe, with 272 in France alone. Many more are cited in literature but some were destroyed during the French Revolution and various religious wars. Usually they are found in churches and chapels. Most are sculpted out of wood, some are paintings, and several are attributed to St. Luke. Legend has it that he painted the Virgin's picture while she told him stories about Jesus' life. These images have persisted because they are usually associated with miraculous occurrences and powers.

The 12th century Gothic Renaissance was a time of religious novelty as well as faith. Many of the black statuettes were brought to Europe in the saddlebags of the returning crusaders, some of them Templars. Legend relates Black Virgin statues to the Order of the Priore Notre-Dame de Sion whose passionate aim was the restoration of the Merovingian bloodline to the throne. Their meetings were held near the town of Blois where there was a Black Virgin statue, which they venerated. They referred to her as "the eternal Isis" (mother of the gods). A statue of La Madone des Fenestres, near St-Martin-de-Vesubie was said by folk tradition to have been brought to Southern France by Mary Magdelene, whom the order of Sion believed to be the wife of Jesus.

In a chronicle from 1255 it is written, "St. Louis on his return from the Crusade left in the country of Forez several images of Our Lady made and carved in wood of black colors which he brought from the Levant". He is known to have visited many of the Black Virgin shrines. Virgins listed as black are cited in documents from 1248, 1340, 1591, etc.

But why black? There are several accepted explanations, all possibly true in part but equally refutable. The most common is that the statues were not originally black but were turned that way by the smoke from candles. If that were true, why did only their faces and hands turn black, not their clothing as well? Or why didn't this affect the other statues? Some say they were carved from black material, such as ebony, basalt or metal. But in fact, most are from indigenous wood – apple, pear, olive or cedar. Or because Mary lived in a hot climate, did the artist think she would be sunburned? Could it be that sculptors supposed Palestinians to be dark-skinned? There was too much inter-action with the Levant for this naiveté.

Solomon's Song of Songs has been used as an explanation. It is a love song between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. She is a Shulamite, the Lady *Anima*, and the epitome of femininity. In chapter one, verse five she says, "Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun." During the Gothic period when many of the Black Madonnas originated, the bride in the Canticles was explicitly interpreted to be the Virgin Mary.

The other prominent theory is that the Black Madonna is the ancient earth-goddess converted to Christianity. Many pagan goddesses were pictured as black, notably Artemis of Ephesus, Isis, and Ceres. Ceres is the Roman goddess of agricultural fertility and her Greek equivalent is Demeter, or Earth Mother. Black is the color of the fertile soil needed in agriculture. Were these images taken as is, renamed, and used in Christian worship? We know that pagan traditions were

incorporated into Christian expression: temples changed to churches, festivals to Holy Days. As Christianity asserted itself, great pagan statues were destroyed, smaller household images hidden. Some survived.

There was a festival in Rome to honor Isis in 341 AD. Her fame had spread from Egypt to all the corners of the Roman Empire, with a temple honoring her in London. Isis and Osiris had a son Horus. Isis was an important goddess because each pharaoh considered himself to be the living Horus. To the Egyptians, she was the purest example of the loving wife and mother. There are many statues showing Isis holding Horus on her knee, sometimes suckling him. It is believed that some of the earliest statues of Mary and her son had actually been representations of Isis and Horus.

The Christian Church in the East exalted Mary. She is said to have gone to Ephesus with St. John. He is buried there and that is the site of her Assumption. In 431, at Ephesus, she was declared "The Mother of God". In 438 Empress Eudoxia sent her sister-in-law, Empress Pulcheria an icon of the Virgin that was said to be painted by St. Luke. Ephesus is also the home of three goddesses: Isis, Cybelle, and Diane of Ephesus. It was the site of the great temple to Artemis, shown with black face, hands, and feet. Veneration of Mary perpetuated the preceding cult of Wisdom and the Great Mother.

The Mint Museum has two paintings of Black Madonna statues. They are from the 18th century Cuzco School in Alto Plano, Peru and would obviously have appealed to the dark skinned indigenous people for whom they were painted. The history of the original statues adds to our understanding of the Cult of the Black Madonna.

The statue of Santa Maria de Guadalupe, Spain, was said to have been carved by St. Luke. It was a gift of Pope St. Gregory the Great (b.540-d.604) to St. Leander, Bishop of Seville. When the Muslims swept through Spain in the 8th century, the statue was buried high in the Estremadura Mountains. After the overthrow of the Moors in 1326 a shepherd, named Gil, had a vision and the statue was unburied. It was enshrined in a Franciscan friary near the Wolf River. "Guadalupe" is Muslim for "wolf". Documents authorizing Columbus's first voyage were signed here in the presence of Queen Isabelle. In 1571 Santa Maria de Guadalupe was credited with the great victory of Catholic forces over the Muslim forces in the naval Battle of Lepanto.

In 1531, Our Lady appeared to a shepherd in Mexico calling herself Guadalupe. This word is similar to the Aztec Nahuatl "coatlxopeuh" (pronounced "quatlasupe") meaning "the one who crushes the serpent". It is more likely that that is the word she used and, in fact, the old religion was crushed and millions converted to Christianity. The Virgin of Guadalupe became the patroness of Latin America. The original statue is now in the Franciscan friary Santa Maria de Guadalupe in Guadalupe, Spain.

The ancient statue of our Lady of Loreto is in the Holy House of Loreto. This is purported to be the house where Mary was born, and where the Annunciation occurred. Tradition says that a band of angels scooped up the little house from the Holy Land and transported it first to Tersato, Dalmatia in 1291, Reananti in 1294, and finally to Loreto, Italy where it has been for centuries. Dalmatian woodcutters discovered the house on a hill where there had been no house the night before. The Governor of Dalmatia sent three men to Nazaraeth who found that the Holy House, with exactly the same dimensions and contents, and built of the same materials had disappeared to the amazement of the Muslims who had just taken the town. St. Louis heard mass in the house in Nazareth in 1253 and the murals depicting this were on the walls after its miraculous flight. The statue is the most copied of the Black Virgin.

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