

Medieval Germany: The Black Magus

Overview

In this activity students will survey a series of images of the Three Kings/Magi dating from the Middle Ages to the modern era. They will talk about the presence of a black Magus, what he is supposed to represent, and why he was introduced in the first place. This activity will introduce students to ways of thinking about human difference that pre-dated modern scientific racism.

Goal

As part of lessons on how Germans in the Middle Ages thought about blackness, this activity will challenge the presumption that depictions of black people must invariably be determined by racist prejudice. Students will come to understand that before the age of scientific racism, Europeans conceived of human difference first and foremost in terms of religion, with racial otherness a much more fluid category with negative as well as very positive associations. The Black Magus illustrates how blackness could be used to represent an inclusive, Christian egalitarianism that transcended all differences. Represented as an outsider, he is nevertheless also a figure of veneration who symbolized the universal reach of Christianity. This was a useful symbol in an era of increasing contact with the wider world, which Europeans saw as defined by a struggle battle between Christians and non-Christians, Muslims in particular.

Lesson Plan

Break students into small groups and give each group a packet of images, arranged randomly. Ask them to put them in chronological order and to explain any shifts they notice. The most noteworthy feature is the appearance of black figures and eventually the black Magus himself and his persistence into the present. Students in the US or UK may not be familiar with the idea of a black Magus, so it may be necessary at this point to explain that in Germany and the rest of the continent it is assumed that one of the Kings is black (referring to the Playmobil image can help make this point), and Germans are generally surprised to hear that there was a time when all the Kings were light-skinned.

Students will hopefully have discussed what the black Magus looks like, but if not then direct them to examine and interpret his features relative to his companions. They should notice his flashy, exotic clothing; his youth; and the fact that he is placed to one side rather than in the center. Upon asking them to explain these features, students often start from the presumption that he is being marginalized and exoticized, but push them as well to think of ways that this depiction is positive: he is not caricatured, his bearing is noble and attractive, his clothing rich and admirable if also fantastical. Ask them to think about why artists might have started to include a black figure. Depending on preparatory and background reading they may or may not know the answers to this, but eventually guide them into thinking about the value of including people who represent distant lands.

In the Middle Ages Europeans thought of the world as divided into three continents (Asia, Europe, Africa), and in the context of fights against Muslims in the Iberian peninsula, the Holy Land (Crusades), and Eastern Europe it was a useful propaganda tool to show the “entire” world bowing before the Christ child. Africa is the youngest not because it was the least important but because it was imagined (incorrectly) to have been the most recent convert to Christianity. Although there were longstanding

associations between blackness and devils and paganism, these images turn those on their head and provide a positive portrayal.

The magus's blackness here is not incidental—it does mark him as coming from a distant land—but in these images it is not assumed to be demeaning nor to make him different on the inside from white Europeans, presuming that he accepts the truth of the Gospels of course. In the end students should be encouraged to step away from a present-day mindset to inhabit a different way of seeing the world, which will give them a better appreciation for the significance of later developments (e.g. the slave trade, the Enlightenment) for changing how Europeans viewed black people.

Important contextual events to be aware of might include the following:

711-1492: Muslims crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and soon extended their reach as far as France. A few Christian nobles and rebels resisted their authority, and, supported by their co-religionists across Europe, were able to “reconquer” (Reconquista) some territories over the span of many centuries. What had been the most sophisticated court in Europe declined until the final conquest of Granada and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain in 1492.

1095-1291: In the seventh century Muslim armies took the Holy Land from the Byzantine Empire but it was only when threatened by Ottoman Turks in 1095 that the Byzantines called on their western brethren to come to their aid. Pope Urban II called for Christians to reconquer the Holy Land, sparking a wave of more or less successful military expeditions over the next two centuries. Although some initial successes led to the establishment of Christian kingdoms, they gradually fell to later opponents, with the fall of the fortress at Acre in 1291 marking the end of the Christian kingdoms. The Crusades brought Christian Europeans into direct contact with Muslims in the Holy Land through warfare but also, when many settled there, through trade, diplomacy, and intermarriage.

ca. 1299-1683: But even while advancing against Muslims in western Europe, in eastern Europe and the Holy Land Christian kingdoms were being overwhelmed by the expansion of the Ottoman Turks. After establishing a base in Anatolia and conquering lands in the Balkans, they eventually defeated the Byzantine Empire (Constantinople finally fell in 1453) and came to rule a vast empire reaching from Hungary through the Middle East all the way across North Africa and around the Red Sea. At its height in 1683 the Ottomans besieged Vienna (for the second time!), but their expansion in Europe was halted then. In the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire entered a period of decline that culminated in its collapse during the First World War.

The expansion of Islam provoked hopes of a Christian ruler in distant lands (India or Africa) known as Prester John who might become an ally.

The association of Muslims with darker skin tones and “African” facial features came from the presence of sub-Saharan Africans among Muslim forces, especially in Egypt.

Materials: Links to materials are provided online.