
Title of Object

Saint Benedict of Palermo

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Attributed to José Montes de Oca

Culture: Spanish

Date of Object: c. 1734

Country: Spain

Accession Number: 2010.27.2

File Created: 1/1/2017

Material/Medium: Polychrome and gilt wood, glass sculpture

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Tour Topics

Group 3, Highlight 1600-1850, History-people, Christianity, African, Christian saint, sacred, leaders, race/ethnicity, faces of history, making peace, spirituality, realism, sculpture, identity

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Look at this face of History. We have talked about how identity is a combination of how someone sees himself, how others see him, and who he really is. What does our artist Jose Montes de Oca want others to know about this man?

Looking at this sculpture by Montes de Oca, what did he do to give this man his personality?

Artists altered St. Benedict's image a bit to promote an idea that they wanted him to represent. Can you think of examples today of people using someone's image to promote an idea?

What about this depiction would have lead people in Africa and South America to Christianity?

We talked about identity being how someone sees themselves, how others see them, and how they really are. How do you think St. Benedict saw himself, how did others see him, and how do you think he really was?

What faces today have a powerful influence on people?

Transition to George Washington: Although St. Benedict saw himself as a humble man, others saw his leadership and his peaceful image lead countless people to Christianity. Our next historical face was also known to have come from humble beginnings, but now we see his face as the face of freedom.

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Here is a short video of Spanish carving to give you an idea of what was involved in creating a beautiful statue like this. We won't look at all of it but if you google "making of a Spanish sculpture", I encourage you to watch the entire thing because it is fascinating.

Style and subject matter:

"Standing in a wholly frontal, yet slightly relaxed stance. The arms are open, the left hand holding an open book, the right hand posed to hold a quill, which is now lost. Concentrated within the round, compactly modelled head, the face radiates all of the work's powerfully emotive energy. In the wide, slightly furrowed brow, piercing gaze, the straight nose, the pronounced naso-labial folds and philtrum leading to the beautifully modelled, slightly parted lips the sculptor showed a virtuoso command of the wood, managing to shape a wide variety of contrasting surfaces and volumes within a very small space. For the eyes, the sculptor used inset glass paste to highlight the carved modelling, and to lend a startling sense of immediacy to the facial expression.¹ The closely cropped hair is carefully detailed to express both a tactile lifelike quality, and to appear accurate and typical of the saint's race.

Cassock: The figure is completely covered by a loose, un-girdled cassock with long open sleeves that fall heavily in straight channel folds and loops. The thick carapace effect of the drapery is relieved by subtle variations in the drapery folds, particularly above the left knee, which is slightly advanced to suggest a

Contrapposto pose, with the weight concentrated on the right leg. Equally, the cassock breaks in realistic folds to reveal the shod feet, placed on the small oval base with toes pointed slightly out, which also adds a subtle sense of levity and movement to an otherwise completely frontal pose. The cassock was completely polychromed in a white or ivory tone, then covered in gilded floral motifs, and incised in narrow stripes to add further texture to the surface and folds

As a Franciscan, Benito (or Benedict) would have worn a brown cassock, so the remains of the white polychromy on the draperies are initially somewhat puzzling. Considered in connection to the Benedictines, however, we may recall that while the habit for this Order was traditionally black, some reformed confraternities the Cistercians, the Camaldolese and the Olivetans dressed in white robes. One final possibility is that this sculpture in fact represents a fusion of two saints named Benito: the figure from Palermo and another, a Benedictine from Nursia, thus combining the African features of the former with the monochromatic habit of the latter." (Mattheisen Gallery)

Medium and Techniques

The head was carved in two pieces so that to increase the sense of realism the eyes were applied from the back and then the two pieces of the head joined.

Per the Getty Museum: Seventeenth-century Spanish polychrome sculpture was intended to appear as lifelike as possible. Compared to bronze or marble statues, sculpted and painted wooden figures--often with glass eyes and wigs--achieve a remarkable realistic effect. Artists specialized in particular Spanish polychromy techniques, such as *estofado*: painting and incising to create rich silk fabrics with raised patterns in gold and silver used for the garments, and *encarnaciones*: blending and applying of oil paint for lips, hair, and modulations of the skin. Learn more about these techniques in this video from the Getty Museum. (See you tube from the Getty's museum - the making of a Spanish polychrome sculpture.)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

José Montes de Oca, a sculptor who worked during the first half of the eighteenth century and whose work is typified by a somewhat antiquated and eclectic quality. The study of this artist is challenged largely by the scant documentary evidence for his life and works. This is the only known sculpture by de Oca outside of Spain. He was a masterful carver.

Per Blackpast.org: "Saint Benedict of Palermo, also known as St. Benedict the Moor and Benedict the African, was born in 1524 in Sicily (then part of Spain). His parents were slaves from Ethiopia who converted to Catholicism. Some references say he was freed at 18, other that he was freed at birth. He earned a meager wage as a shepherd but gave most of what he earned to the poor and was bullied for his skin color. Benedict did not attend school because his family was impoverished. At age twenty-one Benedict was befriended by a nobleman, Jerome Lanze, who encouraged the youth to join a society of hermits under the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi. Upon becoming a member of this enclave Benedict gave the few possessions he had accumulated to the poor. Eventually he became one of Lanze's principal advisors and, when he was about twenty-eight years old, Benedict succeeded Lanze as superior of the Franciscan-affiliated group of hermits.

In 1564 Pope Pius IV decided to disband the hermit societies, whereupon he encouraged their communities to join the Franciscan orders. When Benedict became a member of the Order of Friars Minor he was sent to Palermo, to the Franciscan Friary of St. Mary of Jesus. Benedict rose through the Order, first starting as a cook and advancing to Master of Novices, and eventually to Guardian of the Community. While he remained illiterate throughout his life and was never ordained a priest, Benedict as a lay brother continued drawing people to hear his teachings of the Scriptures and to experience his professed healing abilities. his virtue so impressed his fellow monks that barely three years after entering the monastery was made superior, which he headed until his death in 1589. After years of service elsewhere in the Friary, Benedict returned to the kitchens because he enjoyed cooking. Benedict was known for his resourcefulness in feeding more people despite a limited amount of available food. Having suffered persecution throughout his life due to being "il Moro," or dark skinned, Benedict is remembered for his racial tolerance. Benedict never referred to possessions as "mine" but always "ours." He possessed gifts for prayer and the guidance of souls. His humility and cheerfulness set an example that helped reform his order.

Benedict died at the age of sixty-five on April 4, 1589 near Palermo, Sicily, where he was buried in a large tomb in the Friary church. Soon after his death, Benedict became the patron of Palermo. In 1592

Benedict's body was exhumed, allegedly without signs of decay. In 1611 King Phillip III of Spain added a shrine for Benedict near the Santa Maria de Gesu in Palermo, Italy, at which time Benedict's body was again exhumed and to be placed in the shrine. In 1743 Benedict was beatified by Pope Benedict XIV, and in 1807 he was canonized by Pope Pius VII. While his exemplary life yielded enough cause for his sainthood, he also came to illustrate the inhumanity of the slave trade. Benedict's feast day is celebrated on April 4th.

Since Benedict has become the patron saint of Black Catholics in America, there are several churches bearing his name in Washington DC, Savannah and Columbus, Georgia, New York, New York, St. Augustine, Florida, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Omaha, Nebraska, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Two churches in Chicago, Illinois, St. Benedict the African East, and St. Benedict West, also carry his name.

Before the twentieth century, only five saints of recognized African origin were included in the Sanctorum of the Church.⁹ In addition to Benito of Palermo, these were Saint Martin of Porres, Saint Gregorio Moro, Saint Victor and Saint Maurice.¹⁰ With the exception of Maurice, none of these saints had widely promulgated cults and therefore their attendant iconography is not often as recognizable as that of other saints. Indeed, the original inclusion in the present work of an open book and a quill does not in itself make it possible for us to identify this sculpture as an image of Benito of Palermo, since both objects are fairly generic in representations of monastic saints. However, Benito's origins were apparently of special relevance to his hagiography, so much so he was also referred to as 'Benito the African'.

Though he was not beatified until 1743, he was popularly revered in his own lifetime, and immediately following his death in 1589, a widespread cult developed that was especially popular in Latin America, Italy and Spain.¹¹ In 1611, Phillip III commissioned a new shrine to Benito to be built in the friary church at Palermo, where he was buried, and it was reported that when the monk's remains were transferred to the shrine, they were found to be uncorrupted, thus fueling his veneration."

This polychromed and gilt-wood statute of St. Benedict, attributed to José Montes de Oca, is the only known work by the artist not held in a Spanish collection. Saint Benedict of Palermo, also known as Saint Benedict the African (1524–89), was the first African to be canonized a Christian saint in modern times. Africans in 18th-century European sculpture were frequently represented as subordinates; this rare example celebrates an African's accomplishments.

Regarding the polychromy, we know that Montes de Oca combined two traditional techniques in the estofado decoration of his figures. First, he incised the patterns with a burin, and then added the floral motifs with the point of the brush, affording particular care and attention to the latter process. The result is a multitude of variations in line and tonality in the motifs. (Mattheisen Gallery)

History

Africans in the 18th century were frequently depicted as subservient. This is a rare example of celebrating an African accomplishment

In the 1st half of the 1500's, Africa became a focus of European attention. Thirst for new markets drove a consolidation of the trade routes established by Portuguese explorers in the late 1490s along the coast of Africa and into the Indian Ocean.

Expansion of the Ottoman Turkish Empire into North Africa led to military and political conflicts of interest in the Mediterranean. These elements, along with importation of African slaves from primarily West Africa led to an increased African presence in Europe.

Africans participated in society as Ambassadors, clerics, writers and soldiers, peasant farmers, and house slaves.

Roman Empire included North Africa and stimulated the imagination of the Renaissance. Medieval appearances of the 3rd wise man in adoration scenes as African.

Legendary Egyptian St Maritius was also popular

The role of the Hermit saints in Egypt led to early monasticism.

Slave trade begins to move from Slovak slaves to Africa in the 1400's. Africans were purchased as house and shop servants except in Spain and Portugal where they were agricultural and utilized on sugar plantations in new conquests in America.

In the 1500s, blackness began to be associated with evil and sin in Christian teachings, due to the sinister effects of disease, the invading armies of Islam, and the "otherness."

From Holland Cotter, New York Times review of the Walters exhibition (of which the Mia sculpture was part):

The exhibition concludes with an "18th-century carved wood sculpture of a Roman Catholic saint, Benedict of Palermo (1526-89), who was born into a family of African slaves in Sicily, led an exemplary life as a Franciscan monk there, and was canonized in 1807. This saint is sometimes referred to as Benedict the Moor or Benedict the African, and in the sculpture his racial identity is emphatically conveyed: his grave face and extended hand are a rich ebony black, their darkness framed and amplified by the brilliant gilding of his robe.

By the time this sculpture was carved around 1734, Benedict had long since attracted an ardent following, in Europe, in the colonial Americas and in Africa. Today he's the official patron saint of African-America, with churches in his honor from Bahia to the Bronx. And images of him, no matter how stylistically varied, continue to combine traces of Renaissance Europe and of Africa. In him the two are inseparable, are one."

About St. Benedict: The first Christian saint of African origin to be canonized in modern times, Saint Benedict of Palermo (1524-89) was born in Sicily (then part of Spain) to parents who were probably from Ethiopia and formerly enslaved. Granted freedom at age 18, Benedict continued to work for his former master. He earned a meager wage, much of which he gave to people who were sick and in need. Nonetheless, he was often bullied for his black skin. He responded with peaceful actions and gentle words. He later joined a religious group called the Franciscans. He was admired as a model of religious devotion, wise counsel, and leadership. Benedict had a strong sense of community and referred to possessions as "ours" not "mine." (Teaching the Arts)

His death inspired a grassroots movement that resulted in his sainthood. By the early 1600s, Saint Benedict was widely venerated in Italy, Spain, and Latin America. Today he is considered the patron saint of African Americans. (Teaching the Arts)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Saint Benedict of Palermo (1524-1589) was the first Christian saint of African origin to be canonized in modern times. He was born in Sicily (then part of Spain) of parents who were freed slaves, and who were said to have come from Ethiopia. Saint Benedict was admired as a model of extraordinary religious devotion, wise counsel and spiritual leadership. After his death a grassroots movement to make him a saint ensued. By the early 1600s Saint Benedict was widely venerated in Italy, Spain, and Latin America. José Montes de Oca's statue, carved in Sevilla in the 1730s, masterfully captures Saint Benedict's charismatic personality. The glass eyes and bone teeth add to the saint's life like quality. Yet it is the concentrated facial expression, Benedict's welcoming gesture of his spread arms, the movement of his cowl and his contrapposto stance, by which Montes de Oca renders the saint's inspiration within the statue's every inch.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

This work was acquired from the Mattheisen Gallery by Mia; this link is a synopsis of the research the gallery had on the work: http://matthiesengallery.com/work_of_art/saint-benito-of-palermo

Getty Museum, You tube video: Making of a Spanish Sculpture (excellent information):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Wb-T1F033Q>

Teaching the Arts, Benedict of Palermo: <https://new.artsmia.org/teaching-the-arts/making-peace/>

The Walters Art Museum: thewalters.org, Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe exhibit information: <http://media.thewalters.org/african-renaissance/> and a complete PDF of the exhibition catalog: <https://thewalters.org/assets/pdf/revealing-the-african-presence-in-renaissance-europe.pdf>

St. Benedict the Moor (1526-1589) : <http://www.blackpast.org/gah/st-benedict-moor-1526-1589>

Holland Cotter, New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/arts/design/african-presence-in-renaissance-europe-at-walters-museum.html>

The African American Atlas

Black History & Culture an Illustrated Reference by Molefi K. Asanta and Mark T. Mattson, Macmillan USA, Simon & Schuster, New York