

**Ethiopian Women Are the Most Beautiful Women in the World**

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**Introduction**

Christian culture inherited and elaborated an art in which the human face and figure were central. In Christian art the human form bore the burden of generating religious empathy and emotion, as well as interest and information. Today we may feel the chill alienation and icy exposure of life in a post-*Christian* world, but there is some comfort in the fact that our culture has not yet evolved to be post-*human*. The human face is still our chief icon.

Biologically, we are hard-wired to find the human face and figure of utmost interest. There is nothing we want so much to see, nothing we find so involving. In fact, we consider a lack of interest in looking at faces to be a symptom of pathology.

Today I would like to explore two activities of visualization involved in depicting faces. I refer to them as ‘ethnocentric’ and ‘ethnofocused’ seeing. These processes function in appraising and portraying members of the groups we define as “us,” and members of groups we consider “other.” I will discuss ethnocentric and ethnofocused seeing in reference to depicting ethnic groups and races.

I do not attempt to refute the errors in the arguments for the non-existence of race...Except to say that the most common socio-anthropological argument against race, that there are no sharp demarcations among human groups, is not valid in defining the genetics of intraspecific variation... In the same way that the lack of sharp demarcations between bands of the spectrum does not prevent us from affirming that a rainbow contains red, green, and blue.

**I. Ethnocentric and Ethnofocused Seeing**

Ethnocentric seeing, that is, seeing, evaluating, and portraying based on the forms one is familiar with in one’s own group, evolves naturally from the inescapable influence of the human features we see most often around us. This includes family, and what we see in the mirror. It can have positive and negative aspects for the artist.

In four photographs, the designer Eva Zeisel commented in her book, *On Design*, on the influence that one’s own face has on the images one produces, even in the design of inanimate objects. She was delighted to see that these students had unwittingly created ceramics that resembled themselves. Her comment was that a designer’s own body shapes are often reflected in his or her work.

Seeing one’s own self or group as the norm is one manifestation of ethnocentric seeing.

Another of its aspects is to view one's own race as special.

When an Ethiopian colleague assured me that Ethiopian women are the most beautiful women in the world, I agreed with him whole-heartedly. Because he was absolutely right; they truly are. Since then his comment has been a touchstone for me in thinking of how the ethnocentric eye, like the ethnocentric heart, looks from a specific viewpoint and sees a specific view...

Because of course it is also absolutely true that Japanese women are the most beautiful women in the world...and so are Irish women, and Pashtun women, and Kwakiutl women, and Maori women, and Qechwa women, and Icelandic women, and San Bushmen women...And let us remember that Tutsi women are the most beautiful women in the world, and so are Hutu women...

For the artist to portray such realities of beauty he or she needs to focus on the traits of the group being depicted. I would term this *ethnofocused* seeing.

I heard about a failure of ethnofocused seeing in a work of art when I visited Zimbabwe in 1988. After that country became independent, the North Korean government donated a massive monument adorned with bas reliefs depicting the local struggle for freedom. However, after the monument was unveiled, the Zimbabwean people asked that the sculptures be taken down and re-done. They felt that the Asian artists had made them look too Korean.

The North Korean artists were unpracticed in seeing or portraying Bantu faces. Their failure to focus on their subjects literally kept them from doing justice to the people of Zimbabwe.

## **II. Ethnofocused Seeing – Wilson**

One artist who has deliberately undertaken ethnofocused seeing is the lithographer Charles Banks Wilson. Growing up in Oklahoma, Wilson realized that he was seeing the last of the Native Americans who could identify themselves as being fully from a single tribe, what has been termed "pureblood." He knew that many of the more than 200 Indian tribes that existed when Europeans arrived in North America no longer had any pureblood members at all (Wilson, p.25). Wilson set out to document, mostly in pencil and lithograph, Native Americans whose ancestors were from one specific tribe.

Wilson made this drawing of the last Quapaw pureblood man in 1985.

In the Afterword to the third edition of his book, *Search for the Native American Purebloods*, Wilson summarized his motivations for making portraits of over 100 people from 65 tribes, including this drawing of one of three remaining pureblood Quapaw women,

Today, in some of the tribes, not a single pureblood Indian can be found. Many

descendants with Indian blood remain, but more than their arts, music and dance, or even ceremonies, the few purebloods remaining truly represent the heritage as does nothing else...

Wilson goes on to describe his motivations,

I thought, I am presented an opportunity to draw what will never again be visible and will never reoccur...Faces record human destiny and character, so I drew faces. I was to record lives—and now with a sense of urgency.

Sometimes the request for portrayal was from the tribes themselves, as when the Wichita tribe asked him to draw, quote, a “true Wichita” (Wilson, p.18) for the Oklahoma State Capitol mural. Wilson says that they knew theirs was a very small tribe, and they selected representative models for him to paint. A decade later, when Wilson returned to the group, this man was the last pureblood Wichita he found.

In his focus on racial groups, Wilson made very close observations of distinctive features. He describes and illustrates them with sketches and notes (Wilson, pp.42-46):

An Indian skull might be generalized as being longer and broader than most races—certainly than the Caucasian. The nose can be short and broad contrary to the long classic one artists so often paint...I have observed that the outer side of the nostrils (the wings of the nose) of the Indian are lower than the tip of the nose....

...The upper lip extends outward from the face, whereas the Caucasian lip generally reverses this angle going back from the base of the nose to the teeth...

And Wilson describes how he passed along this information to other artists. He says:

By 1972, modelers for the Josiah Wedgwood [sic] Company in England had become so confounded by the Indian face, they had me fly over for the purpose of explaining it to them. I believe I accomplished this by first making a pencil portrait of the Company’s senior modeler, an Irishman, and then proceeding to turn the picture of him into one of an Indian.

But Wilson’s techniques of ethnofocused seeing in the end disappear into the art and the face. The beauty in this portrait of a Creek woman serves to emphasize Wilson’s statement:

People often speak of “the intensity of seeing for the first time.” I am certain the intensity of seeing for the last time is greater.

## **II. Ethnofocused Seeing – Hoffman**

The sculptor Malvina Hoffman carried out a famous exercise in ethnofocused seeing during the 1930's as she traveled the world to prepare over a hundred sculptures depicting "The Living Races of Mankind" for the Hall of Man in the Field Museum of Chicago. One of the motivations for this project was to record races that were disappearing in the course of modernization.

Hoffman's interest in portraying the psychology of character was a foundation of all her art. It was this interest in character that made her argue against the original plan for the Hall of Man. The museum's idea had been to have a number of artists portray the races of the world as anthropological specimen busts, made out of painted plaster with glass eyes and real human hair. Instead, Hoffman suggested that she herself undertake all of the figures, as bronze portraits from life.

Hoffman was attuned to the importance of spending time among the races she portrayed in order to observe representative physiognomy and character and to learn to see the group. In her book, *Heads and Tales* (1936) she describes how she watched people in their daily life,

...fishing, hunting, praying or preparing their food, or resting after a day's work. Then I chose a moment at which I felt each one represented something *characteristic of his race, and of no other...*

A Mongolian dancer provided such a moment to Hoffman's attentive eye.

Hoffman described some of the mental techniques of ethnofocused seeing that allowed her to accomplish her task and record a unique individual in a way that would represent the varied characteristics of a group.

No human beings are ever alike, and in constructing their facial forms it was an ever-changing problem to determine just how their features were set, and how the line of their profiles could be drawn with such accuracy and definition that later on one of their own people might recognize at a glance from just what area I had drawn my material...

Hoffman's work at its most successful persuades you that you see a person who existed in that mood and in that moment. That is the case with this portrait of an Ainu man from the northernmost island of Japan.

Hoffman's appreciation of the spiritual character of her models could imbue her work with unusual power. This is a portrait of an untouchable woman of the Hiedley caste in Jaipur, India. Of her Hoffman said,

Hunger and heat have wasted her body, but not her pride and courage.

## Summary

I have spoken from the premise that racial groups are unique assemblages that deserve to be portrayed by someone with an ethnofocused eye. The parallel irony, of course, is that each human on earth is also a unique physiological and psychological assemblage, one that at some point will disappear forever, never to re-occur. Each one of us deserves to be portrayed with an artist's revealing intensity of vision.

Charles Banks Wilson tells of a Sioux from South Dakota who asked to be sketched so that, "It will be known that I have lived" (Wilson, p.14). He speaks for us all.

## References

Hoffman, Malvina, *Heads and tales*, (New York, C. Scribners Sons, 1936), 416 pp.

Wilson, Charles Banks, *Search for the Native American purebloods*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 60 pp.

Zeisel, Eva, *On design: the magic language of things* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2004), 221 pp.