

# Colonizing the Past: Constructing Race in Ancient Greece and Rome

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**What does the ancient world have to do with modern constructions of race? Many of the structural factors that shape the role of race today—particularly the histories of the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism, and globalization—are unique to the modern period, and scholars still debate whether and how the social and intellectual currents of the premodern past contributed to current racial systems.** While the influence of the ancient world on contemporary racial categorizations is difficult to identify precisely, it is undeniable that the *image* of antiquity, especially the construct of Classical Antiquity that comprises ancient Greece and Rome from the eighth century BCE to the second century CE, has played an indelible role in the racial formations that have developed since the beginning of modernity. *Colonizing the Past: Constructing Race in Ancient Greece and Rome* explores that role and the implications of our tendency to ascribe modern racial identities to people who lived in the ancient past. The exhibition traces the development of a selective, racialized interpretation of antiquity. Under this construction, the ancient Greeks and Romans were White; all other ancient peoples around the Mediterranean and beyond were not.

Rebecca Futo Kennedy, a leading scholar of ancient race, defines race as “the institutionalization of prejudice based on moving signifiers for human difference which can manifest differently in different times and places.” She also describes it as “a technology that structures human interactions and embeds prejudices against racialized peoples into systems of oppression.” It is still an open question whether something comparable to modern race existed in ancient Greece and Rome. Much of the lived experience of the people in Greco-Roman antiquity has been lost through the passage of time, and study of these cultures relies on a tiny fraction of the writing and material objects that originally existed. Our understanding of race (or of any other complex social concept) in these cultures, therefore, will never be more than partial. Nevertheless, the evidence that remains regarding their ideas about identity, difference, and cultural contact offers a picture of a world where race, if it existed, was structured very differently than it is today. Skin color was not an important marker of identity, and, unlike in contemporary racial discourse in the United States, the concepts of Whiteness and Blackness did not exist. Ancient Greeks divided the world into Greeks and non-Greeks, and ancient Romans followed a similar model. Neither culture would have seen itself as part of a larger racial category with others of the same skin color, nor did all people who identified as Greek or Roman have the same skin tone. But that reality has never stopped modern racialization of the ancient world, and as the current racial system emerged since the early modern period, in tandem with the oppression and violence that it wrought, an image of Classical Antiquity emerged that was inextricably tied to Whiteness. This exhibition examines how that narrative was created and how it still pervades our thinking about the ancient world today.

## Skin Color and Race in Antiquity

In the center of the exhibition stands a collection of ancient works that depict people. It is difficult—perhaps impossible—for contemporary viewers to look at ancient objects without refracting them through the lens of modern race. These objects use a variety of different colors to depict skin, but the meaning of these colors is often quite different

than what modern viewers might assume. The squat lekythos, for example, depicts the Greek goddess Aphrodite bathing; the opaque white used for her skin marks her gender, not her race. The same color used on the male winged figure on the same object likely indicates a garment.

The only unquestionably racialized depiction in the display of ancient objects is the kantharos depicting a woman the artist would have described as “Ethiopian.” Greek and Roman descriptions of the Ethiopians depict them as an exotic, semi-mythological people. While many such kantharoi survive from Greco-Roman antiquity, our understanding of their meaning is incomplete, but the context provides a clue. This was a drinking cup, to be used by an elite Greek or Roman man, and it is likely that power dynamics play a role in the choice of imagery. These drinking cups bear the faces of subaltern figures—women, foreigners, sometimes even nonhuman mythological creatures such as satyrs—and it is possible that the prevalence of Ethiopian faces, especially of women, is about exerting control over those considered “other.” Understandably, today’s viewers of the imagery on this vessel may be unsettled by a similarity to blackface, the racist practice of White Americans caricaturing Black people for entertainment purposes. The kantharos thus serves as an important reminder that we can never observe the ancient world from a place of objectivity and that we are always—even when we do not notice it—seeing antiquity from a modern perspective. The viewer is invited to return to this display to look for connections and disjunctions between these objects and later depictions of people in Greco-Roman antiquity.

### Early Modern Constructions of Race and Antiquity

The beginning of the early modern period (c. 1400-1800 CE) is marked by the Renaissance, which witnessed an explosion of interest in and study of the literature, history, art, and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. In the process the concept of Classical Antiquity was shaped and presented as the unique heritage of the Europeans studying it. Renaissance artists often depicted mythological stories and historical events from Greco-Roman antiquity, and these works created an enduring image of the people of antiquity—a construction of Classical Antiquity that was implicitly White, even though modern concepts of race were only in their infancy. This can be seen in the sixteenth-century maiolica bowl from the school of Orazio Fontana, which depicts the Greek mythological figure Cadmus and the Thebans he ruled with white skin and blonde hair. This construct was also explicitly imperialist, and many images draw from Roman monuments to conquest, such as Nicolas Beatrizet’s engraving from the same century, which was derived from relief carvings on the third century CE triumphal arch of Constantine. The relief depicts the Roman victory over the Dacians, a people of central Europe. Similarly, Peter Paul Rubens’s *Parade of the Captured Chiefs*, a counterproof from Giulio Romano’s *Triumph of Scipio*, carefully distinguishes between the Romans celebrating the triumph and their Carthaginian captives. Celebrating Roman conquest over other territories, these works were used by Europeans to justify imperialism and colonization, just as the conquest of the Americas and the abduction and enslavement of Africans was beginning.

Scenes from the Old and New Testament were another important site of racial formation tied to the ancient world. The relationship between race and religion has been difficult to untangle since antiquity, but particularly after a European identity tied to Christianity began to emerge in the late Middle Ages, around the thirteenth century. This Christian identity inspired wars against Muslim states in the East and violent persecution of Jews living in European cities. Amid these racial, geographical, and religious tensions, the picture of Jesus with the light-colored skin of a European, as seen in Albrecht Dürer’s early Renaissance print *Christ on the Cross*, came to predominate, conflating Christianity and European identity. As Western Europeans began to create a collective identity, these Renaissance images used racialized depictions of ancient figures to render both biblical history and Classical Antiquity the exclusive heritage of Europeans.

### Temporal Boundaries of Race

Contemporary racial formations often use geographic borders for categorization, but less obvious are the ways periods of time serve as boundaries as well. The European appropriation of both the Judeo-Christian past and Classical Antiquity as their exclusive heritage meant that, as the construct of Whiteness came to full realization by the

eighteenth century, the ancient past was racialized as well. The racial categorizations of ancient cultures often conflict with those of the modern inhabitants of those lands. Classical Antiquity became White because Europeans were White and saw it as their legacy, even aspects of Classical Antiquity that did not occur in Europe. This can be seen mostly starkly in the comparison of Anne-Louis Girodet de Roucy-Trioson's *The Meeting of Aeneas with Anchises in the Elysian Fields* and Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña's *The Smyrna Girls*. Although Troy (the mythological birthplace of Aeneas and Anchises) is only a few hundred miles from Smyrna, the ancient mythological characters are depicted as White, while the modern Turkish women are exoticized, with darker skin and hair.

## Constructing and Deconstructing Whiteness

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such scholars as Johann Winckelmann, Petrus Camper, and Johann Blumenbach began to create explicitly racist, pseudoscientific theories of race that argued for White supremacy. The construct of Classical Antiquity played an important role in the developing concept of Whiteness, as can be seen in several objects in the exhibition. Luminais's nineteenth-century painting *The Fleeing Gaul* depicts a Gallic prisoner of war fleeing from German attackers. Luminais's work constructs a selective national identity, linking France to the ancient Gallo-Romans and distancing it from ancient Germanic peoples. His work comes amid the rise of a French nationalistic consciousness in opposition to the new German nation that was founded in 1871 after defeating France in the Franco-Prussian War. This modern nationalistic identity is fashioned from the mythos of ancient racial categories, categories ironically based entirely on the Roman imagination of the peoples to its north.

Another use of the ancient past to construct Whiteness emerges in the intersection of race, slavery, and the reception of antiquity in Thomas Ball's *Freedom Memorial* from 1875. Although ostensibly celebrating the end of slavery in the United States, the statue centers Whiteness, giving prominence to Lincoln and relegating the formerly enslaved man to a crouched, subservient position. The piece draws on Classical Antiquity to provide authority, not only in the use of white marble but also in the "Phrygian cap" the crouching man wears. This is a reference to the hats that Roman freedmen wore, linking modern slavery to the ancient practice. In the ancient world, slavery was omnipresent and horrific, but it was never justified by racist ideologies.

In the twentieth century, depictions of ancient Greek and Roman myths remained as popular and often just as White. Some artists challenged the default depiction of these figures, however, and many Black artists and writers pushed back against the Eurocentric image of Greco-Roman antiquity. For example, Romare Bearden's collage *Black Venus* of 1968 deliberately invokes the Classical tradition but portrays the goddess Venus (the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite) as a Black woman, challenging the assumption of Whiteness as the default.

This exhibition scrutinizes how the cultures of the past have been interpreted and claimed by modern racial formations. It is not intended to celebrate the ideas that underlie these depictions of antiquity or to reify their place of authority in our culture. It is instead intended to invite viewers to consider their own assumptions about who the Greeks and Romans were and to begin a conversation about the place of the premodern past in contemporary constructions of race and its bearing on our lives today. As the medievalist Geraldine Heng writes, quoting T. S. Eliot, "*In my end is my beginning*." The conversation on premodern race needs to re-begin, again and again, and continue."

Kathryn Wilson  
SENIOR LECTURER  
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS  
ARTS & SCIENCES

This exhibition is curated by Kathryn Wilson, in conjunction with her course "Race and Identity in Greco-Roman Antiquity," offered in the Department of Classics in Arts & Sciences at Washington University.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Thomas Ball

American, 1819–1911

*Freedom's Memorial*, 1875

Marble, 44½ × 27¼ × 21⅞"

Gift of Reverend Dr. William Greenleaf Eliot

Romare Bearden

American, 1911–1988

*Black Venus*, 1968

Mixed-media collage, 29¾ × 40¾"

University purchase, Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 1994

Nicolas Beatrizet

French, c. 1515–1565

*Bas-reliefs from the Arch of Constantine*,  
from *Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*, 1553

Engraving, 13¼ × 18"

Gift of the Art and Archaeology Department,  
Washington University, 1980

C Painter

Greek, Attic, active c. 575–555 BCE

Siana cup, 560–550 BCE

Earthenware, 5⅝ × 12⅝"

Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904

After Giovanni Jacopo Caraglio

Italian, c. 1500/1505–1565

After Rosso Fiorentino

Italian, 1494–1540

*Mercury*, 16th century

Pen and ink wash on paper, 10⅞ × 8"

Gift of the Washington University  
Department of Art and Archaeology, 1969

Cornelius Cort

Netherlandish, c. 1533–1578

After Federico Zuccaro

Italian, 1540/1–1609

*Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh*, 1567

Engraving, 16 × 10¼"

Gift of Professor and Mrs. Thomas Hall, 1986

Narcisse Virgile Diaz de la Peña

French, 1807–1876

*The Smyrna Girls*, 1875

Oil on panel, 12½ × 15⅞"

Bequest of Charles Parsons, 1905

Raoul Dufy

French, 1887–1953

*Aphrodite aux papillons (Aphrodite with Butterflies)*,  
c. 1938

Watercolor on paper, 19 × 25⅝"

Gift of Charles H. Yalem, 1963

Albrecht Dürer

German, 1471–1528

*Christ on the Cross*, 1508

Engraving, 5¼ × 3⅞"

Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, 1966

Anne-Louis Girodet de Rouçy-Trioson

French, 1767–1824

*The Meeting of Aeneas with Anchises  
in the Elysian Fields*, 1820

Pierre noire and ink wash heightened  
with white on vellum, 11 × 14<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>"

University purchase, Plant Replacement Fund, 1962

Hasselmann Painter

Greek, Attic, active c. 450–420 BCE

Pelike, 450–430 BCE

Earthenware, 8 × 5¾"

Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904

Evariste Vital Luminais

French, 1821/1822–1896

*The Fleeing Gaul*, before 1880

Oil on canvas, 17 × 12¼"

Bequest of Charles Parsons, 1905

Peter Paul Rubens

Flemish, 1577–1640

Unknown

After Giulio Romano

Italian, probably 1499–1546

Retouched counterproof of *Parade  
of the Captured Chiefs*, 1600–8

Red chalk and wash, heightened with white  
on tinted paper, 19⅞ × 25¼"

University purchase, Plant Replacement Fund, 1950

School of Orazio Fontana

Italian, 1510–1571

*How Cadmus Killed the Serpent*, c. 1540

Maiolica, 1⅞ × 10⅝"

University purchase, Elizabeth Northrup McMillan  
Fund, 1967

Attributed to the Workshop

of Nicolas Visscher I

Dutch, 1618–1679

After Jan van der Straet (known as Stradanus)

Flemish, 1523–1605

*The Arrest of St. Paul*, from the series  
*Acta Apostolorum (Acts of the Apostles)*,  
published c. 1643–46

Published by Claes Jansz. Visscher

(Dutch, 1587–1652)

Engraving, 8⅞ × 11"

Gift of Professor and Mrs. Thomas Hall, 1986

Unknown (Greco-Roman)

Torso, 300 BCE–300 CE

Marble, 8½ × 5¼ × 2⅝"

Gift of Halsey C. Ives

Unknown (Greek, Attic)

Kantharos, 500–490 BCE

Earthenware, 6⅞ × 6 × 4⅞"

Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904

Unknown (Greek, Attic)

Squat lekythos, early 4th century BCE

Earthenware, 5⅝ × 2½"

Gift of Robert Brookings and Charles Parsons, 1904