Blum, Edward J., and Paul Harvey


Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey acknowledge that many Americans have favored depictions of an ethnically white Christ yet today doubt the veracity of the results. How could a Jewish man in the Holy Land come to look Nordic? In order to explain this skepticism and a number of related issues, the authors analyze the history of color in visualizing Jesus. The efficient and engaging narrative that results encompasses a wide range of imagery in the United States, spanning from the initial arrival of Europeans to the presidency of Barack Obama. The book has much to offer to historians of art and visual culture, whose work on representations of Christ has traditionally given preference to European or Catholic developments instead. By studying the United States and its largely Protestant traditions, Blum and Harvey unveil how these images evolved in a multiethnic New World society. Because the country came to export the ensuing imagery through the channels of mass media, this story is of international consequence.

The authors characterize an early America that will likely seem at once familiar and strange to most readers. The arrival of sacred images with French and Spanish Catholics and of iconoclastic views with the Puritans ensured that the United States did not take shape with a uniform vision of Christian art. The divergent approaches of these first settlers set the tone for subsequent artists and viewers, who have never coalesced around a single set of norms. Although the seventeenth-century Puritans loom large in the heroic Anglo-Saxon narrative of America, their hostility to representations of Jesus seems alien today. This stance had implications beyond New England and persisted into the early decades of the Republic. The Russian ambassador to the United States observed in 1811 that portraits of George Washington were ubiquitous, as if they had been icons of saints, whereas contemporary historical records suggest that images of Christ were so rare as to be negligible.

Another unfamiliar concept is the apparent absence of ethnicity in early conceptualizations of the Son of God. For Americans accustomed to viewing their demographic history in terms of race, this notion of freedom from racial characteristics seems implausible. Yet Blum and Harvey show that early descriptions of visions, such as those by the Quakers or the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, emphasized light, brightness, or fire; divine glory was their principal feature. Other individuals, who focused on his wounds and blood, beheld the redness of Jesus. This latter approach, for example, surfaced in the Indian
Great Awakening, in part through the encouragement of the Moravians and their propagation of images. Tidy racial boundaries did not always distinguish the proponents of concepts like these.

Not until the nineteenth century, according to Harvey and Blum, does the idea of the unambiguously white Christ crystallize as a norm to accept or contest. In tracing the critical fortunes of ethnicity in these images, *The Color of Christ* avails itself of recent research on the history of whiteness by scholars like Nell Irvin Painter and of studies about its religious implications. Art historians who explore issues of whiteness have favored material since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, including the identity politics that surfaced in museum and gallery exhibitions from the 1980s onward. One of the contributions of Blum and Harvey, then, is to reach decades before the twentieth century in order to assemble images for analysis. Moreover, by focusing on Christ, this book highlights material that came to reach a sizable portion of the American population in places of worship, schools, homes, and other venues. Audiences often felt direct connections with the imagery, thereby becoming stakeholders in shaping its spiritual, ethnic, and political dimensions.

By acknowledging the importance of viewers’ responses to the imagery, *The Color of Christ* recognizes that artists often had limited control over its significance. Throughout the centuries, Christ assumed different meanings for audiences. For example, the Civil War and its aftermath offered some of the sharpest moments of divergence; northerners enlisted images in support of abolition, whereas the vanquished southerners saw themselves as imitating Jesus in his suffering. Black or Indian viewers, who in colonial times seemingly had not beheld an overtly white Christ, sometimes viewed him as an exemplary figure who challenged predatory whites into the modern era. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which served in part as a meeting place for black advocates of civil rights, featured a stained-glass image of Jesus with white features; its face disappeared in the lethal bombing by white supremacists of September 1963.

Despite the ascendance of the white Christ by the mid-nineteenth century, Americans sought alternatives or questioned whether to assign particular ethnic characteristics to Jesus. Blum and Harvey identify an intriguing proposal in 1862 by the black abolitionist T. Morris Chester to promote favorable depictions of black rather than white figures in biblical paintings. This idea would need to wait until the twentieth century to gain traction with the efforts of, for example, Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. After 1960, as the civil rights movement gathered speed, depictions of Christ assumed greater variety and encompassed a range of American ethnicities, partly to follow the implications of the notion that God had created man in his own image.