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THE BLURRED RACIAL LINES OF FAMOUS FAMILIES

QUEEN CHARLOTTE



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With features as conspicuously Negroid as they were reputed to be by her contemporaries, it is no wonder that the black community, both in the U.S. and throughout the British Commonwealth, have rallied around pictures of Queen Charlotte for generations. They have pointed out the physiological traits that so obviously identify the ethnic strain of the young woman who, at first glance, looks almost anomalous, portrayed as she usually is, in the sumptuous splendour of her coronation

robes.

Queen Charlotte, wife of the English King George III (1738-1820), was directly descended from Margarita de Castro y Sousa, a black branch of the Portuguese Royal House. The riddle of Queen Charlotte's African ancestry was solved as a result of an earlier investigation into the black magi featured in 15th century Flemish paintings. Two art historians had suggested that the black magi must have been portraits of actual contemporary people (since the artist, without seeing them, would not have been aware of the subtleties in colouring and facial bone structure of quadroons or octoroons which these figures invariably represented) Enough evidence was accumulated to propose that the models for the black magi were, in all probability, members of the Portuguese de Sousa family. (Several de Sousas had in fact traveled to the Netherlands when their cousin, the Princess Isabella went there to marry the Grand Duke, Philip the Good of Burgundy in the year 1429.)

Six different lines can be traced from English Queen Charlotte back to Margarita de Castro y Sousa, in a gene pool which because of royal inbreeding was already minuscule, thus explaining the Queen's unmistakable African appearance.

Queen Charlotte's Portrait:

The Negroid characteristics of the Queen's portraits certainly had political significance since artists of that period were expected to play down, soften or even obliterate undesirable features in a subject's face. Sir Allan Ramsay was the artist responsible for the majority of the paintings of the Queen and his representations of her were the most decidedly African of all her portraits. Ramsey was an anti-slavery intellectual of his day. He also married the niece of Lord Mansfield, the English judge whose 1772 decision was the first in a series of rulings that finally ended slavery in the British Empire. It should be noted too that by the time Sir Ramsay was commissioned



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to do his first portrait of the Queen, he was already, by marriage, uncle to Dido Elizabeth Lindsay, the black grand niece of Lord Mansfield.

Thus, from just a cursory look at the social awareness and political activism at that level of English society, it would be surprising if the Queen's negroid physiogony was of no significance to the Abolitionist movement.



DIDO ELIZABETH LINDSEY AND HER COUSIN LADY MURRAY

Lord Mansfield's black grand niece, for example, Ms. Lindsay, was the subject of at least two formal full sized portraits. Obviously prompted by or meant to appeal to abolitionist sympathies, they depicted the celebrated

friendship between herself and her white cousin, Elizabeth Murray, another member of the Mansfield family. One of the artists was none other than Zoffany, the court painter to the royal family, for whom the Queen had sat on a number of occasions.

It is perhaps because of this fairly obvious case of propagandistic portraiture that makes one suspect that Queen Charlotte's coronation picture, copies of which were sent out to the colonies, signified a specific stance on slavery held, at least, by that circle of the English intelligencia to which Allan Ramsay, the painter belonged.

For the initial work into Queen Charlotte's genealogy, a debt of gratitude is owed the History Department of McGill University. It was the director of the Burney Project (Fanny Burney, the prolific 19th century British diarist, had been secretary to the Queen), Dr. Joyce Hemlow, who obtained from Olwen Hedley, the most recent biographer of the Queen Charlotte (1975), at least half a dozen quotes by her contemporaries regarding her negroid features.

Because of its "scientific" source, the most valuable of Dr. Hedley's references would, probably, be the one published in the autobiography of the Queen's personal physician, Baron Stockmar, where he described her as having "...a true mulatto face."

Perhaps the most literary of these allusions to her African appearance, however, can be found in the poem penned to her on the occasion of her wedding to George III and the Coronation celebration that immediately followed.

MORE ON QUEEN CHARLOTTE

Revealed: the Queen's black ancestors

The *Times of London* reports that a Portuguese descendent of Queen Charlotte confirmed Valdes' research into her heritage. (June 6, 1999)

Was this Britain's first black queen?

"The suggestion that Queen Charlotte was black implies that her granddaughter (Queen Victoria) and her great-great-great-great-granddaughter (Queen Elizabeth II) had African forebears. Perhaps, instead of just being a boring bunch of semi-inbred white stiffs, our royal family becomes much more interesting." (*The Guardian*, March 12, 2009)

*Descended from the warlike Vandal race,
She still preserves that title in her face.
Tho' shone their triumphs o'er Numidia's plain,
And and Alusian fields their name retain;
They but subdued the southern world with arms,
She conquers still with her triumphant charms,
O! born for rule, - to whose victorious brow
The greatest monarch of the north must bow.*

Finally, it should be noted that the Royal Household itself, at the time of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, referred to both her Asian and African bloodlines in an apologia it published defending her position as head of the Commonwealth.

More about Research into the Black Magi:

In the Flemish masterpieces depicting the Adoration of the Magi, the imagery of the black de Sousas had been utilized as both religious and political propaganda to support Portugal's expansion into Africa. In addition, the Flemish artists had drawn from a vocabulary of blackness which, probably due to the Reformation and the Enlightenment, has long since been forgotten. There was a [wealth of positive symbolism](#) that had been attributed to the black African figure during the Middle Ages. Incredible as it would seem to us today, such images had been used to represent not only Our Lady - evidence of which can be found in the cult of the Black Madonna that once proliferated in Europe - but in heraldic traditions, the Saviour and God the Father, Himself.

Researched and Written by Mario de Valdes y Cocom, an historian of the African diaspora.

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