



Hermene Hartman

**GREAT BEAUTIFUL
BLACK WOMEN**

PORTRAITS BY: PAUL COLLINS

Great Beautiful Black Women Project that made history

By Hermene Hartman

In 1978, Mr. George Johnson, President of Johnson Products Company, the first Black-owned company to be listed on a major stock exchange, celebrated the company's 25th year in business by commissioning American realist painter/artist Paul Collins to paint portraits of Great Beautiful Black Women. Johnson Products produced hair care products for African American women. Johnson Products was located in Chicago at 8522 South Lafayette. The most popular brands were "Ultra Sheen" and "Afro Sheen." The company was sold in 1993.

In celebrating his Silver Anniversary Mr. Johnson was paying tribute to his customer - Black women. His was a company with a conscience. This project took on a cultural and education focus. The women selected to be painted were selected by a blue ribbon panel of 12, many of them now deceased.

They were: Mrs. Etta Moten Barnett, Mr. Lerone Bennett, Dr. Arnita Boswell, Dr. Maragaret Burroughs, Dr. Effie Ellis, Ms. Myra Everett, Mr. Richard Hunt, Judge Mark Jones, Mr. Harish Pandya, Dr. Kitty Robinson, Dr. Robert C. Stepto and Mrs. Doris Zollar. Their job was challenging as they had to choose Great Beautiful Black Women from the ranks of history to be included in this unique collection.

It was important to Mr. Johnson that each painting not only captured the physical appearance but the inner spirit of each woman as well. Beauty was defined as more than prettiness for Mr. Johnson beauty that transcended cosmetics, his definition of beauty was expressed by effort and deed.

We met on Saturday mornings and had much discussion on these historical powerhouses. After they were selected, I wrote biographies and poems for each woman. I was the coordinator of this project. As Paul painted, I wrote. There were two booklets , one with biographies and one of poems. The exhibit traveled the country and the books were distributed to schools. The exhibit opened in Chicago at the Cultural Center in 19787 and traveled, to



Queen of Sheba

Queen of Sheba

(c.10th century B.C.)

“I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem...”-- Song of Solomon

The Queen of Sheba is one of history’s greatest heroines, and the story of her visit to King Solomon is “infinitely better known,” historian William Leo Hansberry wrote, “than the thrilling romances woven around the love affairs of Aspasia and Pericles, or Theodora and Justinian or even Cleopatra and Marc Anthony...”

There are, as one would expect, different theories about the lineage and life of this great queen. But the most plausible and detailed account is to be found in the *KebraNagast*, the magnum opus of Ethiopian historical traditions. According to this source, and the works of modern African and African-American historians, Queen Sheba was Queen Makeda, who ruled Ethiopia from a district named Azab or Asabe or Saba, which meant in the Ethiopian languages of the time “the lands of the South.” The name *Sheba*, according to some scholars, is either a variation of the same name, or a specific designation of a part of the district or a neighboring region.

Queen Makeda ascended the throne in about 1005 B.C. on the death of her father, King Kawnasya. The young queen is said to have been “very beautiful in face; her stature was superb and her understanding and intelligence were very great.”

Queen Makeda (Sheba) was also very rich. Her caravans trafficked by sea and land to far places. It is reported that her enterprises were expanded from India to Syene, Egypt’s great southern market town. The place was known in later times as Aswan.

On the occasion of her celebrated visit to Jerusalem, Queen Makeda was welcomed cordially by Solomon, who housed her in his palace. Solomon, we are told, visited the Queen often and took great delight in her company and conversation. He showered the Queen with jewels and other rare gifts, and in turn imparted his wisdom and knowledge to her. Queen Madkea spent several months of intense study in Jerusalem before returning to her kingdom. Solomon was her constant companion. She learned much from this ancient scholar and he in turn gave his love to her.

Solomon held the child queen in high esteem of extraordinary order. So much so, although he did not wish her to depart his palace, when she insisted that she must return to govern her people, Solomon, despondently, ordered all things made ready for her safe and comfortable journey.

Later, Solomon learned that from his teaching Queen Makeda had totally accepted the religion of Israel and wished to extend its growth and development in her own country. To assist in the endeavor, Solomon commanded each of his counselors to select and dedicate their eldest son to go to Ethiopia and work among the people, under the Queen's direction, for this noble purpose. And thus the Queen delivered the concept of God to the area of her domain.

She died circa 955 B.C.

Paul Collin's interpretation of Queen Sheba follows the ancient Ethiopian traditions and gives us a queen who is black and comely.

SABA, SHEBA

By Hermene Hartman©1978

Queen of Sheba

I write these words for thee
in homage to your beauty
as Solomon did his song.

Saba,

as you were originally known
from the land of Yemen
daughter of a king
destined queen.

Saba, Sheba

Eastern lady
descendant of Ham
with Semite mixture
touches of Egyptian
hints of East African
The world has questioned the
blackness of your beauty
but Solomon
described your discrete darkness.

Saba, Sheba

dark beauty
with sun scorched skin
antelope eyes
that made men sigh
ruling the peninsula
of the Red Sea.

Saba, Sheba

you who dared to raise
hard questions of Sir Solomon

comforting him as he answered
You,
who were the richest of the richest
the most beautiful beauty
with a body of smooth sculpted skin
like an artistic figurine
with motion akin to a palm tree
making Solomon climber
seeking solitude in your limbs
soothing his soul
discovering the nest in your breast
with a mouth compared to the finest vintage wine
cut from a single ruby
molded into an unforgotten smile.

Saba, Sheba
from the land of Yemen
3000 years ago
Solomon's splendid bride

Saba, Sheba
Eastern lady
we still marvel at your majestic beauty
never having seen your face.



Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley

(c. May 8, 1753- December 5, 1784)

The career of Phillis Wheatley is unique in American letters. There have been other poets who were celebrated as teenagers. There have been other poets who, as women, achieved recognition in male dominated societies. There have even been other poets who were slaves. Only Phillis Wheatley was all three.

One day in 1761, a little Black girl, perhaps seven or eight years old, was landed on the dock in Boston. It is known that she was part of a slave cargo, and her birthplace was in Ethiopia.

She was purchased by Susannah Wheatley, wife of John Wheatley, a successful tailor. The girl was given the name Phillis and taken into the Wheatley household which consisted of a twin son and daughter about 18 years old and several other slaves.

Mrs. Wheatley and her daughter, Mary were unusually cultivated and intelligent. Mary began to teach Phillis the rudiments of reading and writing and discovered an extraordinary aptitude in the young girl. The first book Phillis read was the Bible, and in it she found both a lifelong faith and love of English poetry.

The Wheatleys quickly recognized that they had a very precocious young woman living in their house. They treated her like a member of the family.

In her early teens, Phillis began to write poetry. Mrs. Wheatley showed Phillis' poems to her friends. As upper and middle class Boston became aware of her talents, they would request Phillis to write poems commemorating a death or a special event in the lives of their families. In the years immediately preceding the Revolutionary War, Phillis became

much in demand as a domestic “poet laureate” in Boston. Phillis had become a privileged person. The Wheatleys truly loved her and insisted that she have a fire in her room at night to protect her fragile health.

In 1770, Phillis wrote her first published poem – “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield.” The poem commemorated his death. It came to the attention of the Countess of Huntington in England to whom Whitefield had been chaplain. In 1773, when the Wheatleys sent Phillis to England for the improvement of her health, the Countess had Phillis meet the Lord Mayor of London and other members of the nobility.

Phillis made a great impression in England. Before she left, arrangements were made to publish a volume of thirty-nine of her poems. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in 1773. It is the first book to be published by a Black American woman. The book had a favorable reception both in England and America, sold well, and was reprinted on numerous occasions. The most recent edition appeared in 1966.

Phillis remained in England only a month, hastening home to attend the sickbed of Mrs. Wheatley. Susannah Wheatley died in 1774. John Wheatley died four years later, and Phillis became a free woman. A month after his death, she married a Black man named John Peters. What information has come down to us regarding Peters is sketch and untrustworthy. We know that he tried his hand at various trades and often lived apart from his wife.

The remainder of Phillis Wheatley Peters’ brief life was spent in sadness and poverty. The country was poor during and immediately after the Revolutionary War and few had the inclination to read or the money to spend on poetry. Phillis published a few poems but could not support herself by writing alone. The Annals of the Massachusetts Historical Society describe her last employment. “She, poor Phillis, was obliged to earn her own subsistence in a common Negro boarding house.”

Two of her children died in infancy. When a third child was born, Phillis fell ill with complications. Both she and the infant died within a few hours of one another on December 5, 1784.

The site of her grave is unknown, but Phillis Wheatley will be long remembered as a pioneer in literary history. She became a symbol to Abolitionists of the talents of Blacks, and she is a symbol to all of what genius can accomplish even in slavery.

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