

Blackness, Sin, and Evil: European Religious Perceptions in Albert Eckhout's Depictions of Africans, Dutch Brazil Series

Izunna Sanctus Ugwu, University of Delaware

Abstract

Albert Eckhout's *Series of Eight Figures* (c. 1641–1643), painted for Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen in Dutch Brazil, visualizes colonized subjects as distinct racial “types” and contributed to emerging hierarchies of difference. Focusing on *African Man* and *African Woman and Child*, this article argues that Eckhout adapts Christian discourses on the Curse of Ham and the opposition of light and darkness to construct African Blackness as marked by sin, hypersexuality, and spiritual lack. Exaggerated skin tones, eroticized bodies, and the display of cowrie shells, ivory tusks, and tropical fruits detach these materials from African ritual contexts and recode them as emblems of commercial value and extractive potential. Reading Eckhout's paintings alongside early modern visual culture, biblical exegesis, and the Atlantic slave trade, the study shows how they operate not as neutral ethnographic images but as colonial instruments that naturalize racial hierarchy and help legitimize the enslavement and commodification of African peoples and resources.

Keywords:

Albert Eckhout, visual representation, Blackness, sin, biblical interpretation

Introduction

Albert Eckhout's *Series of Eight Figures* is a group of lifesize portraits painted around 1641–1643 in Dutch Brazil for Governor Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen, who commissioned Eckhout and the landscape painter Frans Post to “describe” the colony's peoples, flora, and fauna through images rather than text. The series consists of four male-female pairs representing the principal “nations” of Dutch Brazil—Tupi, Tapuya, African, and mixed-race (*mameluca* and *mulatto*) subjects—each posed in three-quarter view against a carefully composed landscape and still-life backdrop. Plants, animals, tools, and luxury objects surround the figures, signaling supposed degrees of “civilization,” religious conversion, and economic usefulness to the colony, and translating the classificatory logic of the cabinet of curiosities into the visual language of large-scale portraiture. Produced during Maurits's governorship and later gifted as diplomatic trophies to the Danish court, the paintings operate simultaneously as courtly decoration, colonial inventory, and visual propaganda: they naturalize racial hierarchy, eroticize and exoticize non-European subjects, and present Dutch dominion over Brazil and the Atlantic slave trade as orderly and divinely sanctioned.

Within this broader program of visual classification and colonial propaganda, each figure in the series is designed to embody a particular racialized “type” and its imagined spiritual and moral status. Against this framework, the depiction of African subjects becomes especially revealing. Accordingly, this essay examines Albert Eckhout's *African Man* and *African Woman and Child* from the *Series of Eight Figures*, arguing that these paintings translate longstanding

Christian constructions of Blackness as cursed, hypersexual, and spiritually deficient into a visual language of the Dutch colonial project. Drawing on art historical analysis and scholarship on the Curse of Ham, light-dark symbolism, Edenic allegory, and Atlantic slavery, the essay shows how exaggerated corporeality and the strategic inclusion of symbolic objects—such as cowrie shells, ivory tusks, and tropical fruits—mobilize visual narratives that cast African Blackness as synonymous with sin and idolatry. Detached from their original African spiritual, ritual, and political contexts, these objects are reframed as signs of commercial value and colonial extraction, underscoring the exploitation of African resources and lives. Situating Eckhout's paintings within broader early modern European visual and theological discourses, this study demonstrates how these images function not as neutral ethnographic records but as pictorial instruments that naturalize racial hierarchy and help legitimize slavery, resource exploitation, and the commodification of African cultural and spiritual materials.

Early Biblical (Mis)Interpretations Towards the Age of Exploration

European constructions of African “Otherness” emerged through the convergence of biblical exegesis, cultural prejudice, and pseudo-historical scholarship that associated dark skin with moral corruption and divine punishment. Central to this framework was the post-biblical interpretation of the Curse of Ham (Genesis 9:18–25), which—despite the absence of any reference to race or skin color in the biblical text—was reconfigured by later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic commentators to link Ham's lineage to Blackness, servitude, and sin. As Akaki Mesabishvili argues, this racialization was a historical fabrication, since Noah and his family were not described in racial terms in the original scripture, revealing how theological narratives were retroactively manipulated to serve emerging racial ideologies.¹ These interpretations gained renewed force in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries through figures such as the papal theologian Johannes Annii, whose writings between 1498 and 1515 invented genealogical histories that framed African Blackness as the visible mark of Ham's curse, transforming allegedly “white” descendants into Black bodies marked by sin and hypersexuality.² Embedded within Renaissance scholarship, these claims aligned with prevailing European assumptions that whiteness was humanity's original and normative state, casting Blackness as a deviation or divine punishment. Collectively, such distorted readings of scripture provided a pseudo-theological and intellectual foundation for racial hierarchy, reinforcing perceptions of Africans as inherently inferior and legitimizing the dehumanization and enslavement that underpinned European colonial expansion.

The dichotomy of light and darkness in Genesis established a powerful metaphor in which light symbolized divine creation, purity, and spiritual enlightenment, while darkness represented sin, ignorance, and death—a framework that later informed Christian portrayals of Jesus as the “light of the world” (John 8:12) and darkness as separation from God. Early Church fathers such as St. Augustine extended these allegories by identifying Ethiopians—synonymous with Blackness in medieval Europe—with sin and moral degradation.³ This theological frame-

1 Akaki Mesabishvili, “Misinformation: Black Race Originated from Noah's Son Ham,” *MythDetector*, May 18, 2018, <https://mythdetector.com/en/misinformation-black-race-originated-from-noah-s-son-ham/>.

2 Joaneath Spicer, “European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts,” in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012).

3 Augustine of Hippo, “Expositions on the Psalms,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1888), 508–9.

work influenced the way light-skinned Europeans viewed dark-skinned Africans, interweaving abstract metaphors of darkness with real-world biases and racial hierarchies. By the fifteenth century, as the Atlantic slave trade began, the association between Blackness and slavery was firmly ingrained in the European Christian mind. Black enslavement was frequently justified by invoking the Curse of Ham, turning biblical allegory into a tool for legitimizing the exploitation and subjugation of African peoples. As suggested by Joaneath Spicer, these interpretations, although fabricated and unsupported by the original biblical text, reveal the power of religious narratives in shaping cultural perceptions and justifying systemic injustices.⁴

The Age of Exploration did not generate new understandings of African societies so much as it intensified long-standing European religious and symbolic hierarchies of Blackness. As Winthrop Jordan argues, European thought had already structured Black/white difference as a moral and cosmological opposition, in which whiteness signified purity, virtue, and divinity, while Blackness connoted sin, baseness, and evil.⁵ Encounters with Africans were thus filtered through this entrenched dichotomy, leading Europeans to project symbolic meanings onto African bodies and cultures rather than engage with them on their own terms. For instance, in Albert Eckhout's *African Woman* and *Child*, the woman's skin is rendered several shades darker than that of the child beside her, while her exposed breasts, overflowing basket of tropical fruit, and the pipe tucked into her sash foreground fertility, sensuality, and indulgence as defining features of African womanhood. Likewise, the *African Man* is isolated against an African landscape, his dark skin accentuated and paired with an oversized ivory tusk and weaponry, casting him as both primitive and threatening, a visual condensation of European fantasies about African savagery and exploitable resources. African physical difference—especially dark skin—was exaggerated and homogenized, collapsing diverse societies into a singular racialized identity defined by perceived excess, hypersexuality, and moral deficiency. Religious practices were dismissed as idolatrous, social systems deemed uncivilized, and difference itself framed as evidence of inferiority.⁶ In this way, the Age of Exploration functioned less as an empirical encounter than as a reinforcing mechanism that translated symbolic associations of Blackness into racialized knowledge, ultimately legitimizing European domination, slavery, and colonial exploitation. These intertwined theological and symbolic traditions also shaped how African ritual objects were seen, collected, and represented, a dynamic that becomes crucial in Eckhout's treatment of cowrie shells and ivory tusks.

Appropriation of African Religious Objects: Shells and Ivory Tusks

The European commercialization of African ritual materials was inseparable from long-standing biblical and racial constructions of Blackness that shaped how such objects were perceived, represented, and exploited. Drawing on Albert Eckhout's painting *African Man* (1641, fig. 1), this section examines how cowrie shells and ivory tusks were visually mobilized to translate African cosmological objects into legible commodities within a Dutch colonial framework. In the painting, Eckhout presents a monumental Black male figure positioned in front of a coastal

4 Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts," 37.

5 Winthrop D. Jordan, with Christopher Leslie Brown and Peter H. Wood, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 7.

6 Jordan, Brown, and Wood, *White Over Black*, 5.

landscape, with a palm tree, scattered shells, and a prominent elephant tusk arranged around his body. Earlier scholars, including Rebecca Parker Brien and Elizabeth A. L. Latham, have emphasized the painting's ethnographic ambitions and its role in constructing racialized difference through exaggerated corporeality and exoticized attributes, yet the specific clustering of cowries and ivory has received less sustained attention as a theological and economic



Figure 1. Albert Eckhout, *African Man*, 1641, oil on canvas, 267 x 178 cm. Photograph by John Lee. Photograph © The National Museum of Denmark.

sign system.⁷ By foregrounding these objects, *African Man* becomes a key site for tracing the epistemic rupture between African ritual meanings and European commodifying logics.

In many African societies, particularly in West Africa, cowrie shells functioned simultaneously as economic media and culturally embedded forms of spiritual and symbolic capital, a duality that Akinwumi Ogundiran identifies as central to their power and efficacy rather than a contradiction.⁸ This dual status is obscured in Eckhout's composition, where shells are displaced from ritual assemblages and reconfigured as tokens of natural abundance and commercial value, anticipating their later intensive circulation within Atlantic systems of exchange. Archaeological evidence reinforces this embeddedness: Frank Willett's excavations at Ita Yemoo in Ile-Ife (1957–63) uncovered cowrie shells associated with ritual objects dated between the seventh and tenth centuries CE.⁹ Additional findings of cowries from Djoutoubaya, Senegal and Yorubaland burial contexts attest to their roles in fertility symbolism, ritual offerings, and beliefs surrounding the afterlife.¹⁰ These continuities demonstrate that the value of cowries was cosmological before it was monetary, a distinction obscured during European encounters when

7 Rebecca Parker Brien, *Visions of Savage Paradise: Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Elizabeth A. L. Latham, "The Commodified Body in Albert Eckhout's Brazilian Paintings" (MA thesis, Southern Methodist University, 2010).

8 Karin Pallaver, "Cowries, the Currency That Powered West Africa," *ReThink Q*, no. 7. <https://rethinkq.adp.com/artifact-cowries-west-africa/>; Akinwumi Ogundiran, "Cowries and Rituals of Self-Realization in the Yoruba Region, ca. 1600–1860," in *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*, ed. Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 84.

9 Léa Roth, Gérard Chouin, and Adisa Ogundofe, "Lost in Space? Reconstructing Frank Willett's Excavations at Ita Yemoo, Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Rescue Excavations (1957–1958) and Trench XIV (1962–1963)," *Afrique: Archéologie & Arts* 17 (November 2021): 77–114; Thurstan Shaw and Raymond Mauny, "Ife," in *2000 ans d'histoire africaine. Le sol, la parole et l'écrit. Mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny*, Tome I (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1981), 109–135.

10 Anne Haour and Annalisa Christie, "Cowries in the Archaeology of West Africa: The Present Picture," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 54, no. 3 (2019): 287–321; Marta Truffa Giachet, Bernard Gratuze, Anne Mayor, and Eric Huysecom, "Compositional and Provenance Study of Glass Beads from Archaeological Sites in Mali and Senegal at the Time of the First Sahelian States," *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 12 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242027>.

shells were abstracted into instruments of exchange within the transatlantic slave economy. Ethnographic parallels further illuminate this loss of meaning: the Zulu diviner's bandolier (c. 1940s–50s, fig. 2), analyzed by Abigail Moffett and Simon Hall, assembles multiple shell species—including cowries—to materialize ancestry, healing, fertility, and political authority, reinforcing the healer's spiritual legitimacy.¹¹ Strikingly, the assemblage mirrors the scattered varieties of shells in Eckhout's painting *African Man*, underscoring the unified spiritual significance of the various species of shells across many indigenous African societies, yet in the painting these shells have been visually flattened into a generic sign of trade wealth.

Also reinterpreted in Eckhout's *African Man*, the ivory tusk is another object that held deep social, ritual, and religious significance within the African cosmology, but was inadvertently reframed within the European commercial pursuit and representation, alongside the cowrie shells. Significantly, the value of both objects is altered, as the cowrie shells underwent significant transformation following European contact in the sixteenth century, which led to a substantial increase in the importation of cowrie shells, driven by growing European demand. The same European encounters and commercial interest also reframed African ivory tusks as mere exotic commodities.

Historically, ivory held deep spiritual and social meanings in precolonial African societies, where carved tusks and ivory regalia served as key components of royal ancestral shrines and ritual practices rather than simple trade goods.¹² Archaeological and art historical studies of Benin altar tusks and West and southern African ivory assemblages show that tusks materialized kingship, fertility, and ancestral authority, even as they later became entangled in expanding commercial networks.¹³ Excavations from farming communities in the uThukela and uMngeni valleys located in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa, dating between 600 and 1000 CE, reveal ivory's symbolic association with elephants as creation symbols and intermediaries between humans and



Figure 2. Bandolier (“outfit for diviner/isangoma”), artist unrecorded, collected at Mtubatuba, Zululand, by Barbara Tyrrell. Photograph by Justine Wintjes. Anthropology Collection, Department of Human Sciences, KwaZuluNatal Museum.

11 Abigail Moffett and Simon Hall, “Divining Value: Cowries, the Ancestral Realm and the Global in Southern Africa,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 30, no. 2 (2020), 9.

12 Barbara Winston Blackmun, “Icons and Emblems in Ivory: An Altar Tusk from the Palace of Old Benin,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 149–98; Kathy Curnow, “Ivory as Cultural Document: The Crushing Burden of Conservation,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12227>.

13 Ashley N. Coutu and Paul Lane, “Ivory in West Africa, c. 100 to 1900 CE: Archaeological Evidence and Future Research Priorities,” in *African Ivories in the Atlantic World, 1400–1900 / Marfins Africanos no Mundo Atlântico, 1400–1900*, ed. José da Silva Horta, Carlos Almeida, and Peter Mark (Lisbon: Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, 2021).

the cosmos.¹⁴ Similarly, Thurstan Shaw's 1959–1964 excavation of the Igbo-Richard site, one of three Igbo-Ukwu sites in South-eastern Nigeria, unearthed elephant tusks among the grave goods of an important individual, believed to be the Eze Nri's (king of Nri) grave, dated to between 880 and 1160 CE.¹⁵ Also, in the ancient Benin Kingdom, carved tusks adorned royal ancestral altars (fig. 3) and burial sites, embodying sacred authority and playing critical roles in sociopolitical and spiritual practices.¹⁶ These findings reflect the intertwined cultural, religious, and wealth symbolism of ivory tusks in African societies, emphasizing their role as a medium for creative and spiritual expression before European interruption. The oversized tusk beside the figure in *African Man* compresses these royal and ancestral resonances into a single emblem of exportable raw material, exemplifying how encounters with Europeans altered ivory's meanings and enabled its misrepresentation and exploitation—processes inseparable from preexisting biblical and racialized perceptions of Blackness in Europe.



Figure 3. Ancestral shrines, House of the Oba, Benin City, Nigeria. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1970. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, EEPA EECL 7610. National Museum of African Art.

Eckhout's painting of the African man prominently displays the man's muscular physique, with a palm tree on his left serving as a phallic symbol and elements of sexualization emphasizing virility and power. His ceremonial sword, adorned with a large pink shell and a tuft of yellow hair, suggests a blend of African and European influences while underlining notions of "Otherness." Scattered at his feet are various shells, including cowrie currency types, and a curving elephant tusk, symbolizing both Africa's natural wealth and the means of its exploitation, as currency and trade commodities.¹⁷ The sea in the background represents the connection to trade, exploration, and the transatlantic routes used to transport goods, such as ivory tusks, along with enslaved people. Dressed minimally in a tightly wrapped blue-and-white striped cloth around his genitals, his attire perpetuates stereotypes of African primitivism and hypersexuality.

Eckhout's *African Man* visually appropriates Pieter de Marees's *Cape Lopez* illustration to anchor its Brazilian figure in a West African ethnographic framework. The painting, as argued by scholars such as Brien, appears to borrow visual elements directly from Pieter de Marees's 1602 illustration of the inhabitants of Capo Lopo Gonsalves or Cape Lopez (fig. 4) in his account, *Beschrijvinge ende historische verhael vant Gout Koninckrijk van Gunea* (*Description of the Gold Coast of Guinea*).¹⁸ The depiction of African figures in De Marees's illustrations, including their

14 Gavin Whitelaw, "The Early Ivory Trade and Southern Africa," *The Digging Stick* 41, no. 1 (2024): 3.

15 Thurstan Shaw, *Unearthing Igbo-Ukwu* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1977), 49, 53, 58; Coutu and Lane, "Ivory in West Africa," 356.

16 Kathy Curnow, "Ivory as Cultural Document," 67–68.

17 Brien, *Visions of Savage Paradise*, 134.

18 Brien, *Visions of Savage Paradise*, 141; Pieter de Marees, *Beschrijvinghe ende historische verhael vant gout koninckrijk van Gunea* (Amsterdam: Michiel Colijn, 1617; originally published by Cornelis Claesz, Amsterdam,

attire, weapons, and contextual settings, bears significant resemblance to Eckhout's portrayal. The detailed inclusion of shells, a curving elephant tusk, and the palm tree in Eckhout's painting echoes the visual motifs seen in De Marees's illustrations. Such parallels suggest that Eckhout incorporated elements from these earlier ethnographic accounts into his Brazilian representations, likely using them as a visual framework to emphasize the African man's connection to the West African coast.

Eckhout's inclusion of cowrie shells and an ivory tusk situates the African man within the expanding sphere of Dutch commercial and political power along the West African coast. As Harvey M. Feinberg and Marion Johnson note, the Dutch challenge to Portugal's West African monopoly—from the 1590s through the capture of Elmina (1637) and Axim (1642)—secured Dutch dominance along the Gold Coast and fostered enduring trade alliances with African communities.¹⁹ Within this context, the cowrie shells and ivory tusk prominently featured in Eckhout's painting of the African man function as visual signifiers of Dutch commercial engagement with the region. While ivory held profound political and ritual significance in Akan society—where rulers often exercised exclusive rights to elephant tusks as symbols of power, wealth, and prestige—and cowrie shells operated as culturally embedded forms of currency and spiritual value within broader West African traditions, both materials were increasingly subsumed into European trade networks. As Margaret Makepeace and Stanley B. Alpern emphasize, the mass importation of cowries facilitated commerce on the Gold Coast, yet their circulation also points to pre-existing indigenous systems of meaning that were subsequently reinterpreted through European economic frameworks.²⁰ Influenced by Pieter de Marees's ethnographic accounts, Eckhout's depiction acknowledges these objects' local presence but ultimately reframes them within colonial logics, stripping them of their cosmological significance and reducing them to markers of extractive commerce. The inclusion of the sea in the background further situates these materials within transatlantic circuits of exploitation, transforming culturally and spiritually resonant objects into visual instruments that reinforce European dominance, racialized hierarchies, and imperial ideologies that justified the commodification of



Figure 4. People of the area of Cape Lopez in Pieter de Marees, *Beschrijvinghe ende historische verhael vant gout koninckrijck van Guinea*, 1602. Courtesy of the University of Toronto.

1602). De Marees's book offers one of the earliest European accounts of the Gold Coast, describing its peoples, cultures, and economy. Based on his own observations and supplemented by information from Dierick Ruijters and Bernardus Paludanus, it became an influential source for later Dutch knowledge of West Africa.

19 Harvey M. Feinberg and Marion Johnson, "The West African Ivory Trade during the Eighteenth Century: The '... and Ivory' Complex," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, no. 3 (1982): 435–53. The Dutch gradually displaced Portuguese trade dominance along the West African coast, establishing key forts such as Nassau and Elmina by the mid-seventeenth century. This transition strengthened Dutch alliances with local African groups and secured their control of regional commerce.

20 Margaret Makepeace, "English Traders on the Guinea Coast, 1657–1668: An Analysis of the East India Company Archive," *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 242; Stanley B. Alpern, "What Africans Got for Their Slaves: A Master List of European Trade Goods," *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 24.

African resources and lives.

By foregrounding cowries, ivory, and the sea, Eckhout's *African Man* shows how West African objects and landscapes were recast, signaling Dutch commercial power and the violent extraction of African labor and resources. Yet the logic of commodification and eroticization that shapes this figure is not limited to masculinity. It also becomes pronounced in Eckhout's companion image of the African woman, where fertility, sexuality, and abundance are central to how her body is constructed within the colonial imagination.



Figure 5. Albert Eckhout, *Woman and Child of African Origin*, 1641, oil on canvas, 282 x 189 cm. Photograph by John Lee. Photograph © The National Museum of Denmark.

Albert Eckhout's Depiction of the African Woman

Eckhout's depiction of the African woman places her against a coastal landscape featuring palms, a papaya tree, fishing Amerindians along the shoreline, and ships in the distance, blending natural abundance with colonial narratives of exploration. She wears an elaborate hat adorned with peacock feathers, and a small white clay pipe is tucked into the sash at her waist, adding an air of exoticism. By her side stands a nude boy, presumably her son, with noticeably lighter skin than hers, suggesting his mixed race, holding a small bird in his left hand while pointing a shucked ear of corn suggestively towards her. Around her neck, double ropes of white pearls and red coral beads mirror the form of her full, exposed breasts, emphasizing themes of sexuality and fecundity. These elements are further reinforced by the overflowing basket of tropical fruits she carries, resembling a cornucopia, symbolizing abundance and prosperity.²¹

Eckhout's African Woman and the Black Eve Allegory

This section reads Eckhout's African woman as a "Black Eve," an allegory of temptation and racialized danger within a colonial framework that reworks the biblical Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man. While scholars such as Rebecca Parker Brien and Elizabeth A. L. Latham have foregrounded the sexualized dimensions of this depiction and its alignment with European colonial ideologies, this reading emphasizes how the painting recasts Eve's story through a colonial, racial lens. Through this lens, Eckhout's African woman is constructed as a figure of temptation and moral danger within the colonial imaginary, positioned as a threat to the purity of white Dutch men in Brazil. Although the motif appears in other European visual contexts—such as the 1770 *Black Eve* painting in the Old Pharmacy, Calw, where it intersected with scientific debates on race and heredity²²—Eckhout embeds this allegory within a dis-

21 Brien, *Visions of Savage Paradise*, 134; Latham, "The Commodified Body in Albert Eckhout's Brazilian Paintings," 33.

22 Helga Satzinger, "White Adam and Black Eve: A 1770 Painting at the Old Pharmacy, Calw, Southern Ger-

tinctly colonial framework. The absence of a male figure does not weaken this narrative; rather, the inclusion of a mixed-race child, whose lighter skin implies sexual relations with white Europeans, evokes the consequences of Eve's transgression, framing Black femininity as a corrupting force. The overflowing basket of tropical fruits further reinforces this Edenic symbolism, linking abundance, temptation, and exoticized sexuality to colonial desire and exploitation.



Figure 6. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail, central panel, lower left), c. 1490–1510, oil on panel, 220 x 389 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado. © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

The coastal setting of Eckhout's painting—marked by ships and fishing Amerindians in the distance—foregrounds the maritime networks of European exploration, trade, and exploitation that frame the African woman within the economy of the transatlantic slave trade, where Black bodies, cultures, and resources were commodified. Her sexualized portrayal, emphasized by exposed breasts and her child's provocative gesture directing an ear of corn towards her genital area, constructs her as a figure of carnal temptation, a visual logic that closely parallels Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490–1510, fig. 6), particularly the young Black nude woman confidently standing among pale white men in the lower left of the central panel, who holds a red berry as an emblem of seduction and postlapsarian moral corruption.²³ Like Bosch's figure, Eckhout's African woman is cast as a symbolic Black Eve, her body mobilized to materialize European biblical and racialized stereotypes that equated Blackness with hypersexuality, sin, and spiritual inferiority. The ships in the background further anchor this allegory within the material realities of colonial extraction and enslavement, reinforcing how religious, racial, and

many, and the Scientific Discourse of the Time on Heredity, Skin Colour, Variation and Race," *Politika* (2019): <https://www.politika.io/en/notice/white-adam-and-black-eve>.

23 Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts," 47.

economic ideologies converged to naturalize the dehumanization and subjugation of African peoples within the colonial imaginary.

Conclusion: Biblical Narratives and Colonial Justifications

Biblical narratives of sin and evil profoundly shaped European conceptions of Blackness, forming an ideological foundation for colonialism that is vividly reflected in Albert Eckhout's representations of African figures. Drawing on misinterpreted scriptural frameworks such as the Curse of Ham and the symbolic opposition of light and darkness, these works align Blackness with moral corruption, ignorance, and divine disfavor, while whiteness is associated with purity and authority. Eckhout's portrayals of African men and women mobilize these beliefs through visual strategies that exaggerate skin tones, sexualize bodies, and incorporate objects such as cowrie shells and ivory tusks—materials stripped of their spiritual, ritual, and political meanings and recontextualized as signs of commerce, wealth, and exploitation. In doing so, the paintings reinforce European constructions of African primitivism and inferiority, reducing African subjects to embodiments of sin and subjugation. These representational strategies parallel Eckhout's depictions of Indigenous peoples, who are similarly framed as “exotic” and uncivilized in order to legitimize their exploitation within a shared Eurocentric worldview. By emphasizing material abundance through trade objects, tropical fruits, and coastal settings populated by ships, Eckhout's works underscore colonial fantasies of resource extraction while implying European necessity and control. Collectively, these paintings function as visual instruments of biblical and imperial ideology, naturalizing racial hierarchy and providing cultural justification for slavery, resource exploitation, and the domination of non-European societies.

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