

Black History Month

Profiles

Janet Collins

Janet Collins was the first black artist at the Metropolitan Opera House and one of the few black women to become prominent in American classical ballet. She rose to become prima ballerina at the Met in the early 1950s. She performed at the Met, four years before Marian Anderson sang there. She made her NY debut in 1949 in a shared program at the 92nd Street Y. Collins had studied under Carmelita Maracci, one of the few ballet teachers who accepted black students. She auditioned in LA for the Ballet Russe but was told she would either have to have special roles created for her or dance in white face. Collins toured with Talley Beatty in a nightclub act that was sometimes billed as "Rea and Rico DeGard" in a ruse to prevent speculation about the two light-skinned dancers' race. She died in 2003.

Tuskegee Experiments

In the history of our nation, there have been some dark and grim actions taken in the name of science and of national security; among these have been the distribution of typhus laced blankets to Native American nations in the late 1880's, radiation experiments during the 1940's on pregnant women and U.S. soldiers, and the Tuskegee Experiments. This last action has been rarely discussed by the general public but is cited by many health care policy analysts as the reason why members of the U.S.'s minority racial and ethnic groups refuse treatment for AIDS or decline immunizations.

The Tuskegee experiments were started by the U.S. Public Health Service in 1932; at that time, there was no treatment for syphilis. Our government started the experiment to demonstrate the numbers of people afflicted by and dying from the disease and to move legislatures to fund testing and research for a treatment. When it began, it was to have lasted six months but lasted much longer. The study was comprised of black sharecroppers, mostly unschooled,. They were told they were being treated for "bad blood." For a treatment, they were given aspirin and vitamin tonics.

The scientists conducting the experiments observed and recorded the symptoms of syphilis and the death rates of the men in the study. They sought to chart the "natural course of the disease" and did what they could to prevent the men from learning about their disease and, later, to prevent them from getting treatment. Their observations and record keeping continued for the next four decades even after a treatment was found. In the late thirties and early forties, a chemotherapy using derivatives of arsenic was used to kill the syphilis bacteria; this regiment of injections lasted a year and exacted a terrible toll on the body but the patient was ultimately cured of the disease. After the US entered WWII, penicillin was found to be the way to treat infections from bullet and schrapnel wounds; later, it was found to essentially cure syphilis.

Despite the treatment being known and used widely during the 1940's, the Tuskegee Experiments continued. Citing "a high moral obligation to those who served," the scientists continued the experiment, recording each patient's symptoms and death. When it began, there were 622 men-- 431 with syphilis and 191 who were used as a basis of comparison.

The experiment continued forty years. In 1972, our government shut it down after the outcry when a reporter finally wrote about the study. No one was ever prosecuted; the survivors (20 in 1992) were financially compensated. Few of the doctors and administrators who conducted the study over its forty years were ever identified. One participating doctor, Sid Olansky, was

interviewed in 1992 and was unpenitent, believing there was nothing over which to be penitent rather affirming that he did his duty to the wealth of science. (based on an article by Tom Junod)

For more information read "Deadly Medicine" in GQ (Gentlemen's Quarterly) May 1992 by Tom Junod, pp.164-180. Also see the book Bad Blood by James H. Jones.)

Mary Edmonia Lewis

The American arts was greatly enriched at the turn of the century by the work of one of America's great sculptors of that era. Despite her many successes in Europe and among some circles in the U.S., Edmonia Lewis is not well known figure in the American art history. She has been described as the United States' first successful African American sculptor.

She was born in Greenhigh, Ohio, to a Chippewa mother and an African-American father. During her early years, she was known as Wildfire and lived the traditional ways of her mother's people. Tragically, she was orphaned at 5. She left her nation at 12 to attend school at Oberlin College.

Her studies at Oberlin were successful until the tragic deaths of two of her Caucasian friends who were found poisoned. She was charged with their deaths. Her trial lasted several weeks but she was acquitted on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The tragedy was compounded by a savage beating by vigilantes following the verdict.

She left and moved to Boston where she continued studying sculpture and worked there under the auspices of a leading sculptor there. Her first major work to attract attention was a bust of Colonel Robert Shaw, the commander of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment (you may remember the name from the movie "Glory"). However, she did not gain widespread success until she left the United States and worked in Europe where her style of sculpture captivated Rome's community of artistic expatriates. Despite her longing to return to her homeland, Lewis remained in Europe for the remainder of her life knowing that if she returned to the United States she would not be recognized nor treated as an equal as she had been in Europe.

One of her most famous works is the "Freedwoman on First Hearing of Her Liberty." It depicts a woman, formerly held as a slave, on her knees praying to God to deliver her from sin. A broken chain with a huge ball lies in front of her. When asked about the sculpture, Ms Lewis said, "Yes, so was my race treated in the market and elsewhere. It tells with eloquence, a painful story." (based on article by Rodney Brown)

A Person of Conscience

Prudence Crandall was a teacher in Connecticut in the mid 1800s. The Connecticut General Assembly passed the black law expressly forbidding her to recruit black women for her school. When she refused to obey the law, Crandall was arrested and jailed. After two years of legal struggles and harassment of her students, her conviction was overturned by the Connecticut Supreme Court. Shortly thereafter in 1838, the black law was repealed. Despite the legal victory, Crandall was forced to close her school for fear of her students' safety. Towards the end of her life, the General Assembly awarded Crandall a pension to compensate her for the injustices done her. Today, her heroism is celebrated by a sculpture in her honor in Hartford, CT, tourist district.