



Race and Aesthetics in the anthropology of Petrus Camper (1722-1789) (Studies in the History of Ideas in the Low Countries)

Miriam Claude Meijer

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After the discovery of the anthropoid ape in Asia and in Africa, eighteenth-century Holland became the crossroads of Enlightenment debates about the human species. Material evidence about human diversity reached Petrus Camper, comparative anatomist in the Netherlands, who engaged, among many other interests, in "menschkunde". Could only religious doctrine support the belief of human demarcation from animals? Camper resolved the challenges raised by overseas discoveries with his thesis of the "facial angle", a theory which succeeding generations distorted and misused in order to justify slavery, racism, antisemitism, and genocide. Thanks to his abundant papers in Dutch archives, Camper's ideas are restored to their original state. Eighteenth-century issues differed from those of other centuries: Did orang-utans talk like humans, walk like humans; even rape humans? What was the skin pigmentation of Adam and Eve? Did the spectrum of human physiognomies around the globe reflect the Fall of Man, the Creator's bounty, or merely bizarre beauty practices? Why did the ideal beauty of the Greeks appear to be the reverse of the Hottentots? The book contains some 50 illustrations, including apes with hiking sticks or tea cups, metamorphoses of living forms, and Apollo or Venus icons which titillated the "science of man."

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