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ART ILLUMINATES THE PAST

By KENNETH R. JANKEN

**CREATING BLACK AMERICANS:
African American History and its
Meanings, 1619 to the present**

By Nell Irvin Painter

Oxford University Press, 458 pages, \$35

PRINCETON history professor Nell Irvin Painter brings her considerable skills and insight to "Creating Black Americans." Her excellent introduction to the black American experience will serve any interested reader well, though it will find its largest audience in college classrooms.

History, the author notes, exists in both the past and present. What we wish to know and how we understand it changes over time. And Painter's compelling use of black art, mostly created since the mid-20th century, to illustrate earlier times, emphasizes this point to great effect.

Drawing on the research of a generation of African-American historians, Painter also sets the record straight on a number of questions of the country's past.

She re-emphasizes that slavery was not just a Southern problem. Racial slavery in North America developed over several decades in the 18th century, laying the foundations for the entire American economy. Slaves grew the commodities that Americans exported across the globe, of course. But slavery and the Atlantic slave trade were the bedrock of vast fortunes in the North, too, including the precursors to the Bank of America and other financial houses.

Painter's examination of the Civil War shelves, once and for all, two enduring myths of the war: Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and a view popular in the South that the conflict had nothing to do with slavery.

When the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, it was common currency among white Northerners that this was a "white man's war." They fought to preserve the Union and had no intention of allowing blacks into the army. But Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists knew that separating emancipation from Union victory was a recipe for failure.

The Union's military difficulties and demands for fresh manpower prodded Lincoln to admit the centrality of the slavery issue, and he initiated a process of enlisting black troops and proclaiming emancipation. It is doubtful the Union would have prevailed without the participation of 200,000 black soldiers.

Yet black troops still had to contend with widespread hostility and discrimination in pay and promotion. Military service commands respect and confers rights and privileges, and Painter details the sometimes-heartbreaking struggles of African-Americans in our country's major wars since the Civil War.

Among blacks' reactions to the white supremacist violence that ushered in the Jim Crow era were the creation of schools, businesses and other institutions to sustain them during extraordinarily oppressive times. But the protest impulse never disappeared. Black Nationalism — as disparaged as it is misunderstood — has deep roots in African American history.

Artists — like historians, like ordinary people — sift the past to make sense of it for our times. Through word and image, Nell Irvin Painter has produced a narrative of African-American history that will profit its readers.

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