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The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: the Hottentot Venus. First Run/Icarus Films.

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"My name is Sara, very unhappy Sara." This is how the South African woman from the Khoi Khoi tribe, named Sara Baartman, described herself to a French man after being displayed at a French ball. <p> The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: The Hottentot Venus, is an enthralling film by Zola Maseko. Sara Baartman became commonly known in England and France as the Hottentot Venus. <p><blockquote> "She has been a woman and an ape." (Quote from the film) </blockquote><p> She was taken from her home in South Africa and displayed as a freak in England. Later in France she was displayed as a freak and a scientific specimen. <p><blockquote> "Even in death she was given no rest." (Quote from the film)</blockquote> <p> In the name of science, her sexual organs and brain were preserved and displayed in the Musee de l'Homme in Paris until as recently as 1985. Even as of today, her remains have not been returned to her people. <p> The film is well documented. It uses a variety of sources to tell the story of Sara Baartman. It supports its version of her story by using "historical drawings, cartoons, legal documents and interviews with noted cultural historians and anthropologists" (Jacket cover). <p> Ms. Baartman is considered a symbol. During the process of the film's telling us her story the reason becomes clear. She has become a symbol of how people of African descent have been denied not only their history and culture, but also their beauty. <p> Sara Baartman was born in South Africa. She belonged to the Khoi Khoi people. They were a very ancient nomadic people who once lived in caves in which they recorded their lives and history. They lived in peace until the brutal arrival of the Dutch, who shattered their tranquillity. The Dutch started a campaign of killing thousands of Khoi Khoi because "they were stealing our cattle". Sara was born during this turbulent war torn time. The men defended their land and became engaged in guerrilla warfare. As a result, they were frequently away and this left only women, children and the elderly in the villages. The film places us in a raid by giving us a first person account of a raid on a Khoi Khoi village. One of the strong points of the film is the wealth of primary documentation. The account describes how the women held up their hands for mercy, but no mercy was shown. This is probably how Sara was caught. <p> Sara Baartman was enslaved and served on a farm that belonged to a Dutchman, Peter Cezar. His brother, Henrik and a British surgeon, visited him from England, and decided to take her to England. They planned to exploit her and make a fortune. They knew that for two centuries the Khoi Khoi people had fascinated Europeans. The attraction that would lead audiences to see her would be her buttocks, which were large by Eurocentric standards. Also they wanted to answer for themselves the underlying question that the film so skillfully poses, "Were these people really human?" <p> Why Sara Baartman went is the subject of debate, but what we do know is that on March 20, 1810 she set forth with Cezar to England. What makes the film so valuable is that it is factual. It also adds scholarly opinion and pictures, which allow the audience to make its own conclusions. The film informs us that we will never know what went forth in her mind as she set sail for England. Scholar Steve Martin states that in London at the time of Sara Baartman's arrival, the majority of Blacks were slave/servants; but there were Black ladies seen in all their finery in the opera house. <p> The film gives us a fine example of what it meant to be a piece of property. It documents that the surgeon and Cezar offered to sell her and a giraffe to a merchant. The merchant bought the giraffe, but not Sara. The doctor panicked and bought his way out of the deal. Henrik Cezar still thought that he had a profitable venture. The next place that we see Ms. Baartman is in Piccadilly Circus. The film gives you an idea about how Piccadilly Circus was during that time, which places her show in a broad historical context. Piccadilly was a popular entertainment area. Freak shows were the most popular attraction. As one of the scholars said, Londoners paid to see women who were bears, bears who were women, anything freakish and bizarre. Ms. Baartman's arrival was publicized and the show began on October 20, 1810. The film has a depiction of a cartoon of the show. It illustrates a young Khoi Khoi woman looking straight-

forward with a woman looking under her apron; with Scottish soldiers wearing kilts looking at the European woman and dogs were looking under their kilts. The cartoonist's sympathies are definitely with Sara Baartman. The film expertly displays an assortment of illustrations of Sara Baartman by the cartoonists of the day. <p> The film puts us in the times and allows us to feel her pain by proficiently using a column written by a journalist for the London Times. He wrote that the Hottentot was put on parade and ordered to move backwards and forwards like a wild beast. When she refused to come out, the trainer went back stage and shook his hands at her and she came out and moved about. Then she acted like she was sick and pointed at her throat. He shook his hands at her and she continued. <p> On November 24, 1810 three members of the English Anti Slavery Society sought to free Ms. Baartman by bringing her case before the court. The film provides a variety of extracts of the legal documentation. The court proceedings lasted three hours. Hendric Cezar's argument was that she was a willing participant and was getting her fair share of the profits. She spoke and confirmed his statements. He won. <p> Did she fully understand her rights? The film explores several perspectives of the case. The end result was that the three members of the Anti Slavery society had no case. The court declared the case closed and she was kept in the same conditions. The film again knowledgeably uses court documentation, scholarly interpretation and actual pictures to help position us in court with Ms. Baartman. <p> Ms. Baartman and Cezar showed up in Manchester a year later and on December 07, 1811 she was baptized. The film shows the baptism certificate, which is the last evidence of her stay in England. Was it her decision to become a Christian or Cezar's to make his show more legitimate? Whatever the reason, there is no record of them until three years later when they showed up in France. Did she think that she was going home? Did she think that the worse was over? If she did she was sadly mistaken. The show went on. <p> This time not only was she paraded as a freak, but she also became a scientific experiment. Some of the scientists who wanted to examine her in 1815 had been with Napoleon in Egypt. On December 12,1814 Cezar sold her to an animal trainer. The Journal of Paris advertised her arrival as well as the show. The film shows the announcement. Vaudevilles, light comedy with sexual overtones, were written about her. A French journalist writes that someone announces that a marvel is to come. He writes that her "tears come from her eyes, complexion light green, she jumps, she sings and plays drums. Someone gives her sweets, around her neck she wore a tiny piece of turtle shell." <p> The highly influential scientific community paid to see her in a private space. The three scientists had great difficulty. Ms. Baartman would not drop her handkerchief that was in front of her vaginal area. One can imagine that covering her genitals was all the control over her life that Ms. Baartman had left. She held on to that. One scientist reported that she had tremendous buttocks, which he compares to those of a female ape. <p> Three months before her contract was to end on January 16, 1816 Sara Baartman died. She was 25 years old. Death, however, did not end the challenges for her body. Her corpse was given to scientists who began the process of dissecting her. Her brain was taken out and a cast was made of it. One scientist presented a paper about her sexual organs. Scientific racism as one of the scholars in the film states, was borne on her body. Her skeleton and body casts were on display in the Musee de l'Homme until 1974. However her brain and genitals have disappeared. <p> What is the issue today? Why has her body not been returned to her homeland? Khoi Khoi belief is that she must be buried. By Khoi Khoi cultural standards, her body has been desecrated. They believe that a dead body has to have certain rituals or it is bad for the person's spirit and bad for the spirit of everyone who had a hand in desecrating it. It should be returned to the land of her birth and buried with dignity and respect. The question, with which the film leaves us, is to whom should her remains be returned? The debate lingers on. <p> This is an excellent film that won the Best Documentary Film award at the 1999 FESPACO Pan African Film Festival. I would recommend that it be made a part of the video library of African, African-American and Women's Studies programs. It is valuable for scholarly purposes because the issues of colonialism, racism, enslavement, scientific racism, and beauty standards are covered here in the story of Sara Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. May her soul rest in peace.

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