Mary Sabina

Mary Sabina was born to black African slaves on a Jesuit plantation in the city of Cartegena, South America on October 12th, 1736. Not much is known about Mary’s life, but her image became iconic as an illustration of piebaldism. An engraving of Mary in a similar pose to the one shown, was used to illustrate George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon’s famous volume of books ‘Histoire Naturelle’ (Natural History) in 1777.

Mary’s parents would have been captured and brought across from Africa to South America by ship. As Mary was born to slaves she would probably have become a slave herself and worked on the same plantation.

Mary never came to Europe, but her painting did and it was copied in several versions. The painting in the museum’s collection travelled from Cartegena to North America and was captured by French privateers on its way to England. It disappeared for many years but was later donated to the museum in 1858 by Sir Erasmus Wilson.

A version of Mary Sabina’s painting can be found in the Colonial Williamsburg collection in America.