

# This Month in Moravian History

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## Haidt's Painting of the *First Fruits*, 1747

In March of 1747 Johann Valentin Haidt began work on a painting that would become one his best known pieces of art: the *First Fruits* or *Erstlingsbild*. This enormous painting depicts 21 people standing around the throne of Christ in heaven. These were the first Moravian converts to have died and who were considered to be sent up into heaven as the "the first fruits" of Moravian missionary work. 260 years ago this month Haidt began working on this painting.

On March 15, 1747, news reached the Moravian congregation in Herrnhag, Germany, that the American Indian, Johannes, had died in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Johannes (formerly "Tschoop" or Job) was the first of the Mahican Indians in Shekomeko, New York, to be baptized.

Upon hearing this news Zinzendorf counted "18 first fruits from all our heathen nations" that had died and were in heaven with Christ. During a lovefeast on March 18th he incorporated the names of the first fruits into a hymn he wrote for that day. The image of a group of converts from many different nations standing around the Savior on his heavenly throne was so powerful that Haidt was asked to paint it. By the beginning of May 1747 the life-size painting was finished and put on display in the conference room adjacent to the meeting hall in Herrnhag. This room was called "Greenland" - perhaps a reference to its chilly temperature?

Haidt painted a total of 21 men, women and children (three more than in Zinzendorf's original list), standing on the clouds. In the center of the painting we see Jesus showing the wounds in his hands and feet and pointing at the side wound. Johannes, whose death was the occasion for the painting, sits at Jesus' feet. Was the placement of Johannes a parallel to the position of John, the disciple "whom Jesus loved", at Jesus' side during the last Passover meal (John 13:23)? Hovering about Jesus are two angels. The angel to his right is holding above his head a crown (Rev. 14:14), made of 21 stars: one star for each "first fruit". The angel to his left is holding a bundle of palm branches: many more palm branches for those who are to come later. Each person depicted is holding a

palm branch. This is a reference to Revelation 7 where the great multitude around the throne is described, "from every nation, tribe, people and language". Unlike Rev. 7:9 the first fruits are not wearing white robes, but most of them are wearing their national dress; some wear European (Moravian) dress. The angel to the right is holding a sign, inscribed with the theme of the painting: "They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb" (Rev. 14:4).



The *First Fruits* motif became quite popular among Moravians. The following years Haidt completed similar paintings for the Moravian congregations in Neusalz and Herrnhut (both lost). After Haidt came to America he also painted one for Bethlehem; this copy is now at the Moravian Archives. There was even a *First Fruits* painting for the Moravian

mission on St. Thomas. The Unity Archives in Herrnhut, Germany, has two additional 18<sup>th</sup>-century versions of the *First Fruits*; the artists of these paintings have yet to be identified. After the Herrnhag congregation was dissolved in 1753, the original *First Fruits* painting was moved to Zeist, Netherlands, where it can still be admired.

The painting of the *First Fruits* has become a symbol for the worldwide outreach of the Moravian Church. It is an unusual display of people from different races, nations and origins that is still appealing to many viewers, even 260 years after its first creation.

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