A PECULIAR AESTHETIC
We look at a painting of a plantation house. Its style draws our attention. It is a “big house.” But from what perspective did the artist paint this house? The “big house” was part of landscape paintings during the period of plantation slavery, but in a different way. In many of these paintings, artists did not seem to follow the usual rules of composition instead they created images which one writer notes had to been seen by an “upturned face.” The plantation and its landscapes were the pinnacle of a way of life and were to be painted as such. Absent were images of toil or labor as the representation of the “big house” was about idyllic achievement in which wealth was the marker of who the planter was. These paintings had a meaning in which human life was fixed within hierarchies of race that subordinated the black enslaved.

In what is perhaps one of the most iconic images of slavery and the plantation in the United States, the watercolor painting, *The Old Plantation* (figure 1) we see the black enslaved singing and playing music at what could be understood as a celebration. There has been much debate...
about this painting focusing especially on trying to find the name of the artist who drew the image. While that is important, for this exhibition, the painting invokes a tradition of painting black bodies in slavery. There were two artistic strategies followed which elided the body of the enslaved. If the first was to paint the image without the black body then the second was to paint that body as a happy dancing one or one that was at leisure. Again absent was the toiling slave. The artist Agostino Brunias was a key figure within this tradition. Producing most of his work in the Caribbean island of Dominica, he depicted both slaves and free blacks and one his most famous paintings, was the 1780s *Free Natives of Dominica* (figure 2). His work was commissioned by planters or individuals who supported slavery. His paintings focused on local market scenes and washerwomen. Many of them do not deal with the plantation but these were slave societies and so he practiced an art form in which there was deliberate erasure.

It is one of the paradoxes of racial plantation slavery in the United States and Caribbean, a social system and way of life in which the enslaved was the center of wealth creation, in which laws and customs were contrived and created to keep the black slave in his or her place; in which forms of death were everyday occurrences, a violent society in which men and women were hunted and branded – that in such societies the dominant art found a way to make the slave body an *absent presence*.

Slavery in the Americas was part of a world system of enslaved African bodies and labor. The Atlantic slave trade which began a few years after Columbus’ voyages to the New World, carried over 12 million slaves to the Americas scattering Africans all over the New World. In colonial North America the trade begin in earnest in 1656 when a ship called *Desire* built in Massachusetts launched its first voyage from that state. By the early 1800s it was said that this trade in human flesh was the world’s largest business. So ask ourselves why was there an *absent presence* of the black slave body in art? The *absent presence* of the enslaved black was so pervasive in the general Western history of painting, the decorative arts and of visual culture, that one pauses at Rembrandt’s *Two Moors* (figure 3) painted in 1661.

In this painting, done a few years after racial slavery became legalized in the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut in 1641 and 1650 respectively, and Virginia in 1661, we have a work by an individual considered to be one of the major figures in the history of Western art, one who developed the tradition of “historical painting,” drawing *Two Moors*, dressed in the tunics typically worn by Roman generals. The painting was done at a time when the Dutch were deeply involved in the slave trade and when Dutch colonialism was a major European power, with the Dutch West India Company trading in slaves in the colony of New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1626. By 1672, the Dutch had established the colony of Surinam an island in the Caribbean, to be developed as a series of plantations. The painter Dirk Valkenburg signed a contract with a Dutch merchant involved with the colony and began to paint landscapes of the island. The main purpose of these paintings was to present to the European world a knowledge of a “new” world that was being explored and conquered by various European powers. It was to make this world both knowable and legible for Europe; to explain difference.

So what can we make of the general absence of the black presence in both painting and the decorative arts of this period of history before the Emancipation Proclamation and the legal abolition of slavery in America and the Caribbean: 1863 in the United States and 1834 in the Anglophone Caribbean? In the American case we tend to forget that America was a British colony, and was so for over 100 years. That at the heart of this colonization was the conquest of the Native American population as well as the institution of a system of indentured servitude for both black and white persons. However by the mid 1800s servitude...
turned into racial slavery and Africans became slaves. To justify slavery many ideas were used. However all justifications were based on a central premise of slave society in the New World – the African was an inferior person. Slavery in America was not a Southern side-show, a so-called “peculiar institution” it was at the core of American society. Enslaved labor laid bricks, sailed boats, built houses and sometimes “delivered babies, and dug the graves of their white masters,” so what is missing from the landscape images is not just agricultural labor but the ways in which the labor of the enslaved created a “built environment.”

The Built Environment

Buildings are not neutral objects which create our environment, they embody a set of ideas and often reflect both ourselves and how we think of our place in the world. So missing from the landscape of the plantation are the cabins and the slave quarters. Instead we see happy dancing slaves, or slaves working without toil. One example is Henry Thomas De La Beche’s Jamaica Negroes Cutting Canes in their Working Dresses (figure 5). It is the slaves’ imagination of the built environment which shaped many Southern homes and buildings. So for example one should pause to see how at Williamsburg, several out-buildings with pyramidal roofs created the effect of an African village. Yet these were not homes. Carl Anthony the architectural historian makes the point that, “the outbuildings I saw were built in the 18th century colonial tradition of brick or clapboard walls and shingle roofs … half the population of Williamsburg was black when the first census was taken in the 1780s and most blacks were either artisans or domestics.”

Try as they may, to represent the colony and slave plantations on idyllic terms, the planters and various colonial powers were not always successful, as the slave presence forced its way into the paintings of the day. From the Maroons in Ambush on the Dromilly Estate (figure 4) to the work of the radical English painter and poet, William Blake. The Dutch colony of Surinam become one of the most rebellious of the colonies and John Gabriel Stedman's 1794 account of the suppression of the rebellion was illustrated by Blake's engravings.

So here we have representations of idyllic beauty colliding with the bodies of the enslaved. Such a profound disjuncture could not be resolved unless the entire social order, based upon treating a human being as “property in person,” was abolished. And so abolition became the rallying cry of many in the anti-slavery movement. But again as in many social and political movements there were different currents. Was the slave a brother but one who should remain in a supplicant position (figure 7) as many white abolitionists thought; or was slavery to be ended through the violence of revolutionary war like in Haiti? How was the slave to assert his / her humanity? Could running away be a path to freedom (figure 6)?

Conclusion

To leave the plantation to join a Maroon community, or to become a free black in Canada, or to join a free community of blacks somewhere else, was to escape horrors we sometimes find it difficult to imagine today. To be a “property in the person” was to be subjected to torture and pain. To have your
marked skin already a sign of enslavement in the Americas to be further marked in pain by instruments of torture. If aesthetics is about beauty, about the creation of a sensibility then we say that the dominant art of plantation slavery in the Americas was about a morbid aesthetic (figure 8).

The late Stuart Hall once wrote that representation was about the "processes by which . . . a culture uses language to produce meaning." I would suggest that there is as well a visual language and as John Berger makes clear, ways of seeing are ways of knowing. So the visual language of the plantation, of landscapes, of absent slave bodies, of idyllic beauty in which we turn our head upwards speaks a language of domination in which there are fixed bodies within a racial social order. We need to trouble these images, to see the bodies of the enslaved; to grasp the ways within limited possibilities how the enslaved body deployed his / her imagination to create spaces in which they could claim some form of being human. What was available then was the built environment, gardens, textiles of patchwork quilts, iron works, and cultural practices which would be reconfigured and played out in these Americas. This exhibition is an attempt to tell that story using an archive which was here at Brown University. In no way is it exhaustive but we hope it points to directions which may be followed.

Anthony Bogues

COLLECTING THE IMAGES

The enslaved African in these images becomes both the focal point and the absent presence. In many of the images we can see the fruits of the enslaved labor; cane fields, sugar mills, plantation life, though without imagery of the toil and labor. For other images, the title erases a historical moment, by declaring a last slave auction, when in reality they would continue for several more years through to the end of the Civil War.

It is this very dichotomy that interested us, that continues to play out through our national and international narrative when it comes to the history of slavery and remembering. The impact of this enormous system and global movement of people still reverberates, and these images help us to understand how the institution has been understood at different moments in time, and how we might want to think about its legacies today.

Shana Weinberg

1 Perhaps one major exception to this was Thomas Coram, View of Mulberry House and Street painted ca 1800. But while there are houses depicted in an African architectural style the slaves are represented as agricultural laborers working without coercion.

Anthony Bogues

Figure 8. Iron Yolk Slave Collar
A Ride for Liberty – The Fugitive Slaves, ca. 1862
Eastman Johnson
oil on paperboard
22 15/16 x 26 1/8 in. (55.8 x 66.4 cm)
A family of fugitive slaves, as seen by the artist, fleeing to Union lines near Manassas, Virginia in 1862. The representation of black agency, in charge of their liberation without white intervention, is perhaps why this painting was never exhibited by the artist at the time.
COURTESY OF THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Two Moors, also known as Two Africans; Two Negros, 1661
Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt
oil paint on canvas
77.8 x 64.4 cm
There is much speculation, and little documentation regarding the motivation behind this painting. Rembrandt’s painting imagined a dignity for the African person at a time in Western history and thought when Africans were slaves and marginal in Dutch society.
COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION

Servant Girl Asleep, 1860
Charles Beale
pastel drawing
24.3 x 18.8 cm
Beale’s posed sketch of this young girl from his household – whether a slave or a servant, is sensitive. The reality of this moment though is questionable.
COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION

The Negro Avenged, 1806–07
Johann Heinrich Fuseli
oil on canvas
91 x 71 cm
Many opponents of slavery believed God would punish, with natural disasters those who were engaged in the slave trade. This painting, also an engraving for a book of poems by William Cowper, was intended to illustrate an abolitionist ballad with this theme. The defiance and passion of these figures, contrasts sharply with common white abolitionist imagery, of slaves as passive victims and supplicants.
COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION
The Maroons in Ambush on the Dramilly Estate in the Parish of Trelawny, Jamaica, 1801
François-Jules Bourgoin
aquatint coloured (engraving of original by J. Merigot)
55.3 x 81.5 cm
Maroons were formerly enslaved people who found freedom in the forests and hillsides of Jamaica and their counterparts in the lowcountry and Great Swamp of the Southern United States. This painting depicts the Second Maroon War (1795–96) in which the Trelawney Town Maroons fought to regain land rights awarded by a signed treaty which was then reneged upon by the British. After many successful battles, the Trelawney Town Maroons were deported and exiled to Nova Scotia. After 1800, they were then moved to Sierra Leone.
COURTESY OF THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD

American Slave Market, 1852
Signed “Taylor”
oil on canvas
84 x 112 cm
Based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, this image depicts a slave auction scene. In the far right hand corner there is a poster for the runaway slave, George, a nod to the Fugitive Slave Act which inspired her work.
COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Last Sale of Slaves in St. Louis, ca. 1880
Thomas Satterwhite Noble
oil on canvas
152.4 X 233.4 CM
This image depicts a slave auction on New Year’s Day in 1861, when it was said that hundreds of abolitionists protested so strongly against the sale of seven enslaved people that all future auctions occurred across state lines in Kentucky. Documents from the time tell a different story – this was neither the last sale, nor was this particular sale protested.
COURTESY OF THE MISSOURI HISTORY MUSEUM, ST. LOUIS
Dancing Scene in the West Indies, ca. 1764–96
Agostino Brunias
oil paint on canvas
508 x 660 mm (not confirmed)
This painting interprets idyllic leisure activities of a mixed gender group as well as a group of mixed descent. In this image class is not only differentiated by skin tone but by dress as well in which the lighter-skinned women are shown in more European style of clothing and the slaves with scarves and bare feet.
COURTESY OF TATE BRITAIN

Jamaica Negros Cutting Canes in their Working Dresses, 1825
Henry Thomas De La Beche
lithograph, hand coloring
11.8 cm x 19.7 cm
This painting was the frontispiece of Henry Thomas De La Beche’s so-called neutral monograph, on his study of slaves at Halse Hall plantation in Jamaica. The relaxed disposition of “Negros” shown here encouraged travel and expansion beyond Britain’s shores, appropriately masking the inhuman treatment deeply rooted in the production of sugar and plantation slavery.
COURTESY OF THE JOHN CARTER BROWN LIBRARY AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Corte de Cana also known as The Mill of Cana, 1874
Vicror Patricio de Landaluze
oil on canvas
51 x 61 cm
Many contradictions surround this painting. Although opposed to Cuban independence, Victor Patricio de Landaluze, a native of Spain, is considered an early Cuban nationalist painter for his nineteenth-century representations of Cuban society. Like many costumbrismo artists, his fascination with depicting the daily lives of Afro-Cubans, though idealized, mocked the then conventions of the proper subjects for art.
COURTESY OF THE MUSEO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES HAVANA, CUBA/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES
Negro Life at the South also known as Old Kentucky Home, 1859
Eastman Johnson
oil on linen
38 1/4 x 45 3/4 in.
Admired by abolitionists and slaveholders alike, this painting’s popularity helped to build Johnson’s career as artist. For some, despite the rundown house in the backdrop, this image provides an idyllic glimpse into African American plantation life in the South. For others, the condition of the dwelling symbolizes the corrupt nature of the institution of slavery. From around the corner, an upper class woman (the artist’s sister) peers in to watch.

The Chimney Corner, 1863
Eastman Johnson
oil on cardboard
39 3/4 x 33 5/8 in.
Created months after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, this painting considers the place of African-Americans in post-Civil War America. By focusing on a man perhaps reading the Exodus passage from the Bible, the artist provides an allegory for the black community’s journey out of bondage, while also producing an empathetic figure for white viewers.

Patchbox (with abolitionist motif “AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER”), ca. 1790
enamel on copper
48 x 39 x 26 mm
The patchbox (a container for removable beauty spots fashionable in the late 18th century) with its well-known abolitionist image of the enslaved person, might show the owner’s objections to human bondage, but the design makes us question some abolitionists’ views on the future equality of the enslaved.

Courtesy of the international slavery museum, national museums liverpool

Courtesy of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute – Utica, NY
Coffee Pot with The Tea Drinkers, ca. 1761-1780
coffee pot said to be made by Josiah Wedgwood and transfer-printed likely by the partnership Sadler and Green porcelain, image transfer-printed in black
The black page depicted in the popular 18th century British design, “The Tea Drinkers” shows the elite status of his owners. Black presence in portrait was about the status of the person being painted. Approximately 20,000 Africans would have been living in England at this time.

Coffee Cup with The Tea Drinkers, ca. 1760-1770
coffee cup said to be made by Philip Christian; transfer-printed likely by the partnership Sadler and Green porcelain, image transfer-printed in black

Vase-stand with Hercules and Moors (and detail), ca. 1700
Andrea Brustolon
boxwood and ebony
This 18th century vase stand by Andrea Brustolon utilizes classical mythology to create an ornate boxwood and ebony piece for a Venetian palace.

Armchair with Moors as Supports, ca. 1700
Andrea Brustolon
boxwood and ebony

Flower Stand in Shape of Moor, ca. 1700
Andrea Brustolon
ebony
Emancipation, 1861
Felix Octavius Carr Darley
engraving
In this engraving the “Angel of Death” grips a flaming torch above a battle scene. Columbia, the female personification of America, on the right of the illustration, removes the chains of a slave pleading and praying for freedom while a white man is left to plow the fields in the background.

Slavery is Dead (?), 1867
Thomas Nast
Harper’s Weekly
This political cartoon considers the success of the Emancipation Proclamation. The bottom of the image is framed with two newspaper excerpts reporting African Americans accused of crimes. Nestled between these clippings is a skeleton gripping a whip and an auctioneer’s gavel. The illustrations echo punishments of being sold or whipped at the site of personified liberty and justice. The statues are ignorant to the pending troubles of the newly freed, the dawn of Jim Crow, and the death of Reconstruction.

Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society Collection Box, ca. 1836
wood
17.8 CM X 11.4 CM X 12.7 CM
This c. 1836 wooden collection box proclaims “Deliver me from the Oppression of Man.” A clipping attached to the front reminds donors that “it is the duty of every Abolitionist to lay up at least one cent per day in support of this cause, and that it is in the power of every man, woman, and child to adopt this plan without injury, by depriving themselves of the luxuries of life.” Its caption succinctly captures the core of the slaves’ oppression.
Specimens of Printing Types including runaway slave icons, 1840
Johnson & Co.
wood engraving

American type specimen books dedicated many of their pages to image icons as shown here on this page of newspaper cuts. These icons operated as arrows directing the reader’s attention to advertisements and other commercial interests in newspapers and broadsides. The left page features a diverse selection of runaway slave images both male and female, from barely covered to fully clothed with hats, scarves, shirts, slacks, and dresses. At the bottom of the right page, images of runaway slaves are situated amidst icons of soldiers, justice, royalty, and the American eagle. The peculiar quality of a runaway slave in static motion speaks to the harsh reality that he or she will be in a constant predicament of running until captured and re-enslaved.

Courtesy of the Brown University Library Instructional Image Collection

The Fugitive Slave, 1837
The Anti-Slave Record
wood engraving

Although this wood-engraving/letterpress features the iconic image of the runaway slave, commonly used in advertisements and print culture of the 19th century, abolition propagandists of North and South America recasted the image to fit within anti-slavery discourse. This woodcut image was featured on the front page of the Anti-Slave Record’s July 1837 issue.

Courtesy of the Brown University Library Instructional Image Collection
Wilson Chinn, a branded slave from Louisiana—Also exhibiting instruments of torture used to punish slaves, 1863
M.H. Kimball
black and white print

This 1863 photograph depicts a branded slave from Louisiana restricted by an instrument of torture (yolk collar) used to punish slaves. Images like this were said to have played an important part in Northern anti-slavery sentiment. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division

Iron mask, collar, leg shackles and spurs used to restrict slave, 1807
Samuel Wood
print, woodcut

These engravings accompany the essay titled, “The method of procuring slaves on the coast of Africa; with an account of their sufferings on the voyage, and cruel treatment in the West Indies.” The mask contains a flat iron designed to go into the mouth preventing the slave from swallowing. When worn over a period of the time, the iron would get so hot that it frequently removed the skin. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division LC-USZ62-53164

Iron yoke slave collar, 1800s
iron
24.8 cm x 17.5 cm x 10 cm

Weighing an estimated 3–4 pounds, this three prong iron yolk collar was cut from the neck of a slave who had run away from a New Orleans plantation. It is now in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Courtesy of the Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society

Slave Collar, ca. 1550
steel

This late gothic studded steel collar is housed in the Bargello Museum in Florence, Italy. As an instrument of punishment the studs on the collar would press up against the skin to limit movement and inflict further pain with each gesture. Courtesy of the Brown University Libraries Special Collections

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**Web Based Resources**


John Horse and the Black Seminoles http://www.johnhorse.com/trail/01c/09tax.htm

Kauai Fine Arts http://www.kauaiarts.com/wj156.html

Missouri History Museum http://www.civilwarms.org/gallery/stems/CW-MO-200page1


Web Gallery of Art, educational database http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/b/brantl/vasestan.html

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Slave House, ext., side

This house was built by a slave named Tahro. It has timber walls and was held together by twine netting. The design of the roof is distinctly African.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION