

A PECULIAR

AESTHETIC



LOOKING AT SLAVERY

Representations and the Visual in Slave Society

IN 2014, the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice was notified that the University's Art Slide Library was closing, and that hundreds of slides with historic images of slavery, once used in visual and art history classes, were being deaccessioned or discarded. This alert prompted us to collect these images, categorize them and produce this exhibition.

Two troubling questions arose as we worked for months; selecting images and creating a curatorial narrative for the exhibition: Could beauty be found in this social system of coercive labor and violence? How could we represent the unspeakable human experience of historical trauma and catastrophe? Many of the images we viewed gutted the human pain of slavery in idyllic renderings – and then we came upon the slave collar. We paused. Here was an instrument of torture, crafted to harm with precision.

In the end, the dominant aesthetic presented here, we called a *morbid aesthetic*.

CURATORIAL TEAM

Anthony Bogues

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Renee Neely [archivist]

Shana Weinberg



FIGURE 1. *The Old Plantation*

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 be 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 water color 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



FIGURE 2. *Free Natives of Dominica*
 COURTESY OF YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART,
 PAUL MELLON COLLECTION

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

SLAVERY in America 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 began in earnest in 1636 when a ship called *Desire* built in Massachusetts launched its first voyage from that state. By the early 1800s it was said that this



FIGURE 3. *Two Moors*

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 1651, 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 1682, 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 1600s servitude

FIGURE 4. *The Maroons in Ambush on the Dromilly Estate in the parish of Trelawney, Jamaica*

FIGURE 5. *Jamaica Negroes Cutting Canes in their Working Dresses*



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.¹ 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



FIGURE 6. *A Ride for Liberty – The Fugitive Slaves*

FIGURE 7. *Patchbox*

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



FIGURE 8. *Iron Yolk Slave Collar*

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

¹Perhaps 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.

COLLECTING THE IMAGES

 OUR exploration into the visual representation of slavery began with a collection of various depictions of enslaved people through portraiture, landscapes, broadsides, and the homes which they kept. Through what at first seemed like a random array of images, we began to see patterns, connections, and juxtapositions in the way various art forms depicted the enslaved. As is conventional in curatorial projects, we began by thinking about categories of the images, landscapes, houses, decorative arts, and the like, but quickly came to the conclusion that it would be more productive to juxtapose images through comparison of composition and aesthetic qualities.

So in this exhibition the images are in conversation with each other. They help us to understand that even in the face of slave auctions, there were also Maroon communities of escaped enslaved individuals actively fighting for freedom. That even as white abolitionists proclaimed their distaste for the institution of slavery as shown through their fashionable accessories, they still utilized images of the African as inferior. We realized that both slaveholders and abolitionists used similar means of sharing and disseminating messages through art, broadsides, advertisements and typeset. And that paradoxically an instrument of torture used to control and demean was also crafted with care and skill, having its own kind of *morbid aesthetic*.

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

IMAGE GALLERY



A Ride for Liberty – The Fugitive Slaves, CA. 1862

Eastman Johnson

oil on paperboard
21 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



RIGHT

*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



LEFT

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

ABOVE RIGHT

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 Dromilly Estate in the Parish of Trelawney, Jamaica, 1801
François-Jules Bourgoïn

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



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

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





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



LEFT
Corte de Cana also known
as *The Mill of Cana*, 1874
Víctor Patricio de Landaluze

oil on canvas
51 x 61 cm

Many contradictions surround this painting. Although opposed to Cuban independence, Víctor 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



Jamaica Negroes 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 "Negroes" 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

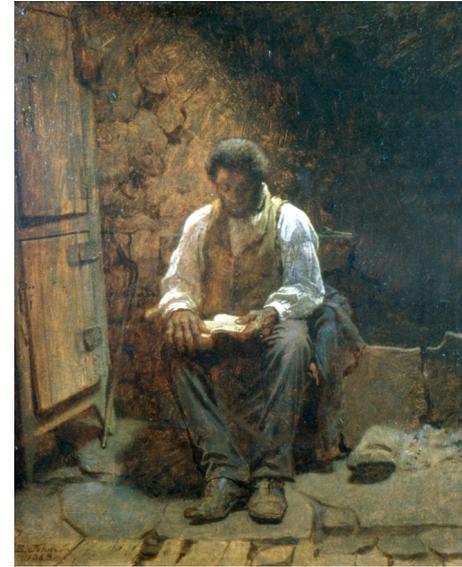
Negro Life at the South also known as
Old Kentucky Home, 1859

Eastman Johnson

oil on linen
36 x 45.25 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) peeks in to watch.

COURTESY OF THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The Chimney Corner, 1863
Eastman Johnson

oil on cardboard
39.37 x 33.66 cm

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.

COURTESY OF THE MUNSON-WILLIAMS-PROCTOR INSTITUTE – UTICA, NY



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



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 portraiture was about the status of the person being painted. Approximately 20,000 Africans would have been living in England at this time.

COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM, NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL

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

COURTESY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM, NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL



Armchair with Moors as Supports, CA. 1700
Andrea Brustolon

boxwood and ebony

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION



LEFT AND ABOVE
Vase-stand with Hercules and Moors (and detail), CA. 1700
Andrea Brustolon

boxwood and ebony
HEIGHT 200 CM

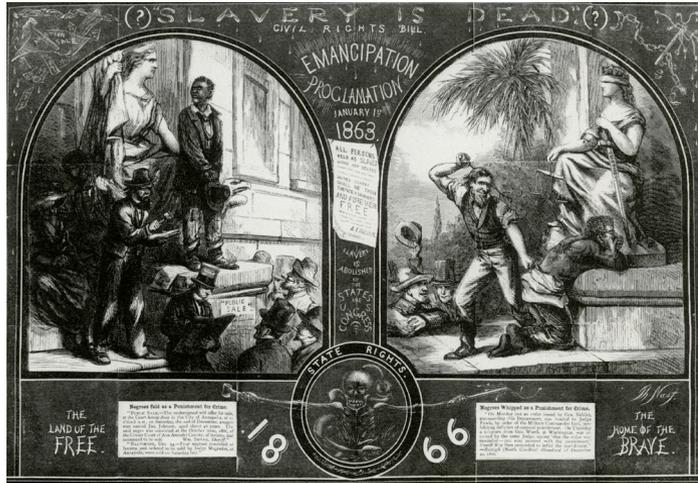
This 18th century vase stand by Andrea Brustolon utilizes classical mythology to create an ornate boxwood and ebony piece for a Venetian palace.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION

ABOVE RIGHT
Flower Stand in Shape of Moor, CA. 1700
Andrea Brustolon

ebony

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION



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.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION

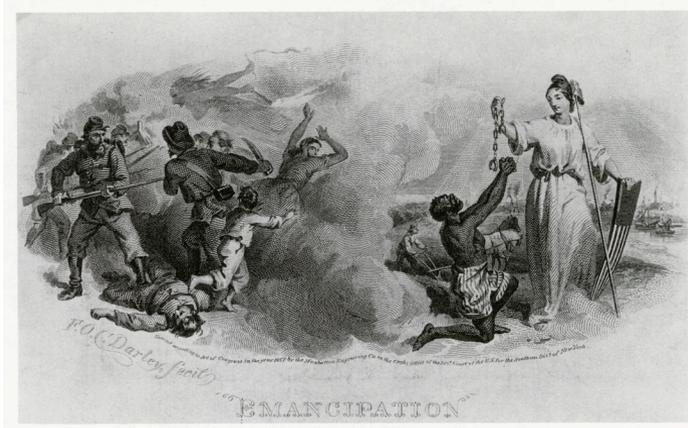
Emancipation, 1861

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.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY INSTRUCTIONAL IMAGE COLLECTION



Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society Collection Box, CA. 1836

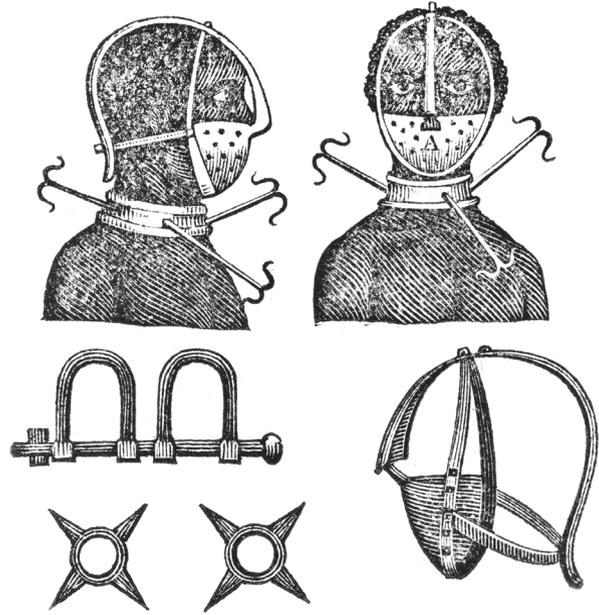
wood

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.

COURTESY OF THE BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, PHOTO BY REBECCA SOULES





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-USZ62-31864



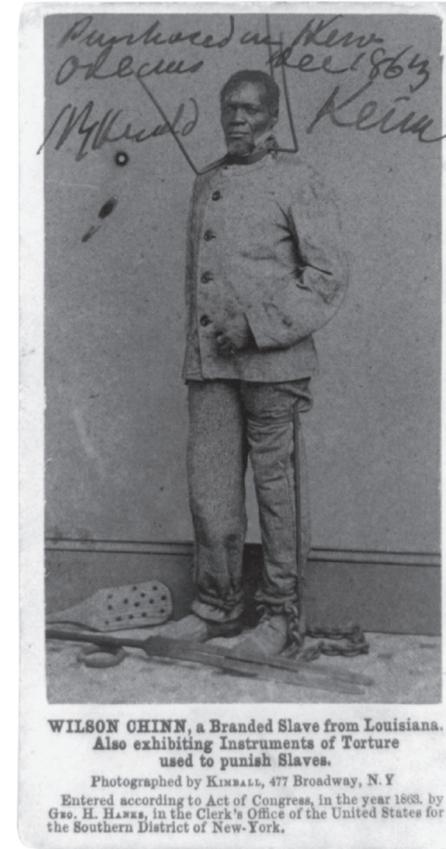
Iron yoke slave collar, 1800s

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



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

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



SELECTED RESOURCES

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Campbell, James, "The Slaveholders' Rule." *Crime and Punishment in African American History* (New York: St. Martin's, 2013)

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Tradition in Decorative Arts (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990)

Vlach, John Michael, *The Planter's Prospect, Privilege & Slavery in Plantation Paintings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002)

Willis, Deborah and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013)

Wood, Marcus, *Black Milk, Imagining Slavery in the Visual Culture of Brazil and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Wood, Marcus, *Blind Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

WEB BASED RESOURCES

Brooklyn Museum Collections:
American Art: A Ride for Liberty --
The Fugitive Slaves (recto)
http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/495/A_Ride_for_Liberty_--_The_Fugitive_Slaves_recto

International Slavery Museum
http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/collections/legacies/patch_box.aspx
John Horse and the Black Seminoles
<http://www.johnhorse.com/trail/01/a/09zz.htm>

Kauai Fine Arts
<http://www.brunias.com/wj156.html>

Missouri History Museum
<http://www.civilwarm.org/gallery/item/CW-MO-109?nojs=1>

Museo Nacional De Bellas Artes,
Havana, Cuba
http://www.netssa.com/museum_fine_arts_havana.html

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

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Thanks too to Ben Kaplan, Erin Wells and Mark Foster for their help with installation and design and for their continued support of the Center's exhibition program.



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