The Planter's Prospect

Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings

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INTRODUCTION

When nineteenth-century artists painted plantation scenes, they usually began with preparatory sketches made while standing in front of a planter's house or somewhere slightly below it. From either position, their gaze—and that of anyone who looked at their paintings—was necessarily directed upwards. Viewing a plantation house from that perspective, one experienced a sense of the presumed authority of its owner. Since members of the planter class were certainly among the wealthiest Americans, they naturally assumed that they would be accorded a certain amount of deference. Or, to put it another way, they expected to be looked up to as superior individuals. When creating plantation vistas, painters tended not to observe the most common compositional rule for landscape painting: instead of painting the usual view, of a setting as seen from above, artists painting plantations rendered images as seen by an upturned face, one that implicitly signaled submission and respect.

In his book *The Magisterial Gaze*, Albert Boime explains that during the middle decades of the nineteenth century the central feature of American landscape painting was its consistent use of the view from a high place.[1] When painters rendered a scene from a lofty perch, they effectively took charge of all that their eyes might see. According to Boime, around 1830 the sight lines of most American landscapes fostered a feeling of mastery, a sensory goal that was fully consistent with the national policy of conquest and acquisition known as "Manifest Destiny." While preparing the essays that constitute this volume, I too became keenly aware of the statements of power encoded in plantation landscapes, of the superior position of the planter. But Boime's suggestions about the impact of a painter's stance are not enough to explain fully how artists conveyed the sense of authority when rendering the planter's prospect.

As important as position and gaze were the features of content that artists decided to highlight. Especially revealing of planters' concerns was the way in which slavery was depicted. Any successful plantation needed a reliable source of manpower, and southern planters secured the workers they needed by purchasing Africans, and later African Americans, who as the victims of chattel slavery would become laborers for life. Over the course of two and a half centuries, the enslaved population of the United States grew at a steady rate. The approximately 500,000

persons brought from Africa would increase eightfold; by 1860, almost 4 million captive blacks were counted in the federal census.[2] This sizable slave presence was not only an indicative feature of the American South but the definitive characteristic of a plantation.

Yet, prior to the Civil War, surprisingly few black figures appeared in plantation paintings. Art historian Hugh Honour reports that during the first half of the nineteenth century "the whole black presence was understated in paintings of the American scene."[3] Further, plantation vistas tended to omit most indications of agricultural labor. The exclusion of slaves from paintings of plantations was, like the choice of the view from below, a powerful tactic that artists used to suggest a planter's undisputed command over his estate. If there were no blacks to be seen in a plantation landscape, then white people, by default, would have to be recognized as the primary occupants. Images of rural estates that presented no black figures, or only a few, were intended to flatter planters and their families by offering them visual confirmation of their claims to power and authority. Given that the fortunes of slaveholders were in fact dependent on the efforts of a black majority—a population that on several noteworthy occasions opposed their captivity with acts of full-scale rebellion—members of the planter class were perpetually plagued with feelings of anxiety. It is thus understandable that they would commission images that focused solely on themselves, their families, and their buildings and spaces. The pervasive whiteness of an idealized planter's prospect offered, at least in symbolic terms, a reduction of the ominous black threat. By rendering slaveholding estates in a manner that either hid or diminished the presence of African Americans, those paintings functioned as documents of denial. Such paintings offered a soothing propaganda that both confirmed and justified the social dominance of the planter class.

The abolition of slavery in 1865 signaled the end of many plantations. On those estates that were able to remain in operation, owners found themselves forced to negotiate contracts with the very people over whom they had once exercised absolute dominion. Confronted with the new boldness of the black workforce, what these planters wished for most was a return to the old days, when their orders were followed without question or complaint. To a degree, these desires were realized, in images of plantation estates that inverted the older formula for plantation landscapes. When a plantation was viewed from its fields rather than from its front yard (as had been typical in antebellum depictions), the work performed by black field hands was necessarily highlighted. Viewed from the fields, the planter's house, if it appeared at all, was reduced to a diminutive presence in the distance. These images of toil, which focused on the labor of black tenants or sharecroppers, recalled an earlier time, when enslaved blacks had performed

these tasks. Postbellum paintings that presented large gangs completing their assigned tasks with only minimal supervision were functionally expressions of planters' longing. They supported a nostalgic vision in which black subservience, a key element of the old social order, was ostensibly restored. Intended more as symbolic evocations than as records of individual estates, these post-Emancipation paintings assumed all white southerners as their primary audience.

In the chapters that follow I focus expressly on paintings of plantation vistas, works best described as topographical images. More than renderings of scenery, these paintings were, for the most part, attempts at the faithful depiction of a specific, identifiable locality.[4] As such, they were visual records of a particular planter's house, along with its surrounding grounds, buildings, fields, and pastures. Although they were appreciated for their decorative qualities, up until the Civil War these paintings functioned chiefly as documentary celebrations of what was owned. Even in the postbellum period, when plantation paintings had a stronger nostalgic or symbolic function, most images still presented specific locations. While there are a number of paintings and drawings that focus on aspects of the daily life of the enslaved—works that could reasonably be considered in tandem with depictions of plantation landscapes—these images of daily routines are more accurately categorized as genre paintings.[5] As such, they fall outside the focus of my study.

Paintings by six relatively obscure artists stand at the center of this book. Generally unknown outside of the South, they are granted, at best, only a brief comment or two in the standard histories of American art. These six are, nevertheless, the only painters who produced enough plantation landscapes to constitute what might be called "bodies of work." Consequently, it is to their careers that one must turn when attempting an in-depth study of the aesthetic motives and social uses of plantation imagery. Collectively, they worked over a rather long period, from 1800 to 1935. Their importance lies in the fact that they documented plantations across the whole of the South, from Maryland to Louisiana, and did so over a period of time that witnessed a crucial social transition.

The six case studies of plantation imagery that form the core of this book are bracketed by two chapters that examine, first, the formal features of plantation paintings and, second, the social attitudes that influenced the way that southern audiences viewed those paintings. Chapter 1, "Plantation Images: The Contours of Practice," surveys the wide range of plantation images, including paintings, sketches, moving panoramas, newspaper and magazine illustrations, map decorations, ink drawings, watercolors, oil paintings, lithographs, and block prints. This sample reveals the broad outlines of general practice within which painters of topographical landscapes were operating. Some forty-one artists are examined,

a group that includes well-known figures such as Charles Willson Peale and Winslow Homer, considerably more obscure painters like Jane Peticolas and Henrietta Drayton, and some who still can be identified only as "Anonymous." Their images not only served as potential sources of inspiration for landscape painters but also stimulated an interest in the topic among diverse audiences.

In the concluding chapter, "Controlled with a Paintbrush: Black Figures in Plantation Paintings," I examine the social reception of plantation landscapes, by tracing parallel trajectories in both artistic and literary images. The descriptions of plantations found in novels and other commentaries appear to rouse sentiments similar to the feelings that artists were attempting to express with their brushes. The close links between written and visual expressions suggest that artistic production was shaped by a shared climate of opinion. Southern history has long been marked by profound tensions associated with the matters of race, privilege, and authority. These subjects were deeply embedded in plantation landscapes both before and after the Civil War, and they were guaranteed to provoke strong reactions in art patrons and other viewers.

In an insightful address on the formation of southern identity, offered in 1928, historian U. B. Phillips focused expressly on the question of race relations. Southern whites, he alleged, were so worried by the large black population with whom they shared their beloved region that their need to control them became the central theme of southern culture. He suggested that feelings of anxiety had impelled southerners of the antebellum period to defend the practice of slavery with "vigor and vehemence as a guarantee of white supremacy and civilization." Moreover, he added, although advocates of the southern way of life "did not always take pains to say that this is what they chiefly meant . . . it may nearly always be read between the lines, and their hearers and readers understood it without overt expression."[6] Had Phillips thought for a moment about the various illustrations that he must have encountered during his reading of old newspapers and journals, he certainly would have amended his statement to include visual as well as verbal expression. By providing reassuring visual propaganda regarding southern refinement and achievement, plantation images were an *overt* visual expression of presumed white virtue. Before the Civil War, flattering plantation landscapes reinforced the chief tenets of the proslavery argument. The paintings created after the war sanctioned ingrained racial hierarchies with reassuring portrayals that depicted the former era as one of certifiable white superiority. The aesthetic qualities of these paintings should not mask the social functions that they performed.