



WITNESSING

Art and Travel in the Age of Abolition

SLAVERY

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.. Augustus Earle, *Punishing Negroes at Cathabouco* [Calabouço], *Rio de Janeiro*, c.1822 (detail of fig. 1.18).

1 Testamentary Space

'Witness': to see, to know; to bear testimony to the truth, according to the best of our knowledge.

George William Lemon, English Etymology, or a Derivative of the English Language in Two Alphabets, 1783

Bought and sold, overworked yet capable of redemption through the elevation of Christianity, variously suppliant, tortured and broken, the enslaved body presented the abolitionist artist with an artillery of tools in the war of propaganda at the end of the eighteenth century. Abolitionism, which Eric Williams called one of the 'greatest propaganda movements of all time', harnessed imagery in a range of media to assist in the dissemination of its urgent message, cutting across divisions of class, politics and religion.¹ Yet visual culture was also deployed by pro-slavery forces, which argued vociferously that slavery was not only economically necessary but could also be sustained humanely. This book examines the imagery of slavery produced by European (mostly British) artists between 1770 and 1840, a tumultuous seventy-year period that witnessed the rise of powerful abolitionist movements, most dramatically in Britain, France and America, and the gradual erosion (although not the cessation) of colonial slavery.

Rather than focusing on those artists who portrayed the enslaved yet had never witnessed colonial slave societies with their own eyes – William Blake, J. M. W. Turner and George Morland among them – I shall shift the spotlight to those European travellers who worked 'on the spot' in various regions of the New World, in particular Agostino Brunias, John Gabriel Stedman, James Hakewill, Jean-Baptiste Debret, Augustus Earle and Johann Mauritz Rugendas. Their corpus of work is part of a wider category that I shall refer to as an 'art of travel', which extends broadly from the sketches of amateur military officers to the book illustrations,



caricatured style of some of his plates. Phrenology, which measured the skull to determine psychological attributes, was enormously popular in Britain when Bridgens's book was published.

By the early years of the nineteenth century, when it was becoming easier for artists to work and travel independently, the fledgling discipline of anthropology continued to impact directly on the representation of different peoples across the globe. While the diasporic identity of the enslaved distinguishes them fundamentally from their indigenous counterparts, such crucial distinctions were often masked by ethnographic imagery. For example, there are pictorial similarities between Albert Eckhout's *Tapuia Woman* (fig. 1.9) and his *African Woman*, both 1641 (fig. 1.10; discussed further later), and more pertinently here the compatibilities

(facing page) 1.8 A. Ducôte (lithographer) after Richard Bridgens, No. 1, 2, 5 & 6, *Negro*, 3 & 4, *Indian Characters*, 1836. From *West India Scenery, with Illustrations of Negro Character* (London: Robert Jennings & Co., 1836), pl. 25. Lithograph on paper, 36.5 x 27.7 cm (sheet). Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

1.9 Albert Eckhout, *Tapuia Woman*, 1641. Oil on canvas, 264 x 159 cm. National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.



(this page) 1.10 Albert Eckhout, *African Woman*, 1641. Oil on canvas, 267 x 178 cm. National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

5.17 William A. V. Clark, *Holeing a Cane-Piece*, c.1823. From *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, in which are represented the *Process of Sugar Making, and the Employment of the Negroes* (London: Thomas Clay, 1823), pl. 2. Hand-coloured aquatint on paper, 35 x 47 cm (sheet). Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn.



5.18 William A. V. Clark, *Planting the Sugar-Cane*, c.1823. From *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, in which are represented the *Process of Sugar Making, and the Employment of the Negroes* (London: Thomas Clay, 1823), pl. 3. Hand-coloured aquatint on paper, 35 x 47 cm (sheet). Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn.



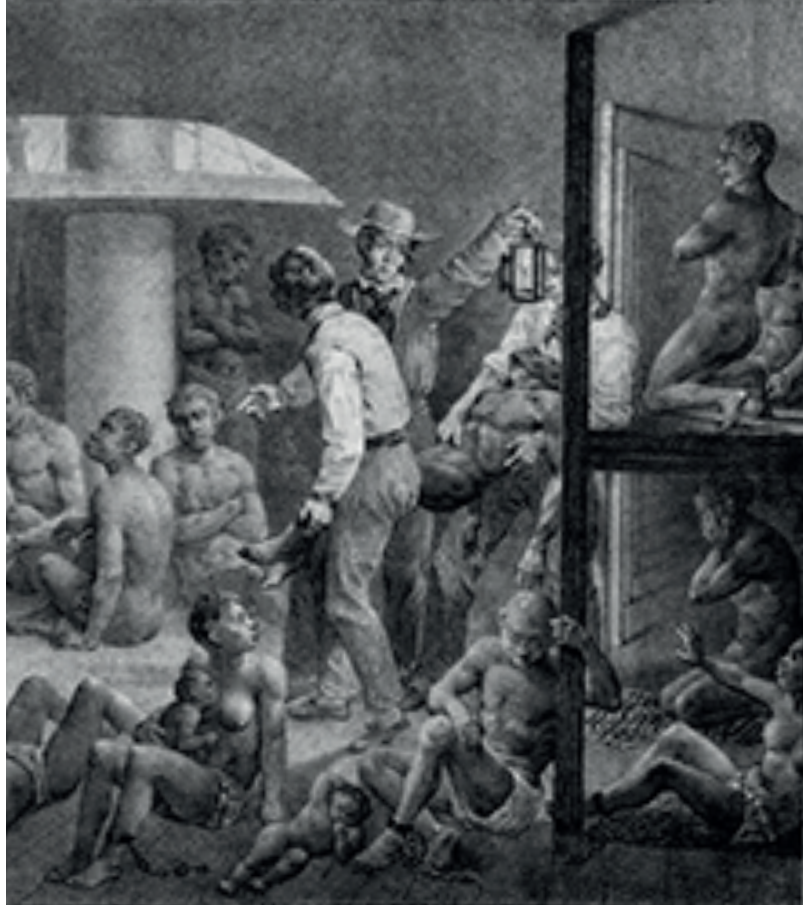
clear and detailed views designed to impart practical information. They illustrate a variety of occupations, ranging from the backbreaking job of preparing the field (*Holeing a Cane-Piece*, c.1823), and planting and harvesting the cane (*Planting the Sugar-Cane*, c.1823), to the boiling, manufacturing and loading (figs 5.17–21) of sugar for transportation.

It is significant that Clark was an overseer and business manager of several Antiguan sugar plantations and his plates strongly reflect a manager's perspective. In his view, slaves were mere cogs in the wheel of industry – hard-working, dignified and, above all else, pliant. The much-reproduced *Cutting the Sugar-Cane*, c.1823 (fig. 5.22), for example, utilises standard picturesque conventions to frame a scene of utility, the kind that Gilpin had specifically advised against a couple of decades earlier – diligent and disciplined agricultural labour, "proof" that a well-managed plantation could still be both harmonious and productive. As we know, this was a far cry from reality in the West Indies of the 1820s and in fact it was only several years after Clark's series was published that anger among Antiguan slaves boiled over into full-scale resistance.⁷² Like the imagery of Brunias from the previous century, such plates served, at least in part, to dispel well-founded anxieties that centred on the figure of the slave: unlike his predecessor, however, who avoided the subject of plantation labour altogether, Clark envisioned in his didactic plates a set of work practices that is tightly controlled and subject to close surveillance. The mounted manager is prominently placed in the foreground of *Cutting*

5.19 William A. V. Clark, *The Boiling-House*, c.1823. From *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua* (London: Thomas Clay, 1823), pl. 6. Hand-coloured aquatint on paper, 35 x 47 cm (sheet). Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Conn.



6.31 L. Deroy (lithographer)
after Johann Moritz Rugendas,
Nègres à fond de calle, c.1835.
From *Voyage pittoresque dans
le Brésil* (Paris and Mulhouse:
Engelmann & Cie, 1835), pt 4,
pl. 1. Lithograph on paper,
15.4 x 25.5 cm (image). Bodleian
Library, Oxford.





6.42 Jean-Baptiste Madou (lithographer) after Pierre J. Benoit, *Vente d'une esclave*, c.1839. From Pierre J. Benoit, *Voyage à Surinam: description des possessions néerlandaises dans la Guyane* (Brussels: Société des Beaux-Arts, 1839), pl. xliii, fig. 89. Hand-coloured lithograph on paper, 20 x 26.6 cm (plate). John Carter Brown Library, Providence, R.I.

Market, Constantinople, 1838 (fig. 6.43), was executed only a few years after the publication of the Brazilian travel books, yet a quick glance reminds us of what their images were not: grand, classical and imbued with historical symbolism, this painting was not an attempt to assure its metropolitan viewers of its first-hand authority (despite the fact that Allan was an itinerant Scottish artist of some repute). Rather, here was an artist engaging with the academic traditions of 'high art' and drawing on the language of Sensibility, to create a modern history painting based on a captive Greek family being torn apart by cruel Turkish slavers.

Slave auctions were taken up as a major subject for oil painting in the American South in the context of the American Civil War (1861–5). While that period lies outside the scope of this book, it is nevertheless interesting that it was two British artists, Eyre Crowe and Lefevre James Cranstone, who were responsible for key paintings showing enslaved people being auctioned in the American South: *Slaves waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia*, 1861 (fig. 6.44), and *Slave*

6.43 William Allan, *The Slave Market, Constantinople*, 1838. Oil on panel, 129 x 198 cm. National Galleries, Scotland, Edinburgh.



6.44 Eyre Crowe, *Slaves waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 53 x 80 cm. Private collection.