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Slavery, Power, and Visual Culture in the Pre-Civil War South

Maurie D. McInnis, a professor of art history, begins her important study of the inextricably linked ideologies of slavery and cultural hegemony with post-Civil War Charleston as a “defeated city.” Invoking the words of a union soldier, she argues that “the city’s destruction was in large part rooted in both the material and the rhetorical arrogance of its past” (p. 5). While McInnis’s goal is not to analyze the coming of the Civil War, she asserts that Charlestonians pushed for secession because of a brazen self-confidence arising from their antebellum background.

As a book incorporating methodologies of several academic disciplines, McInnis’s research is well-grounded in the secondary literature of artifactual history and consumer culture as well as in an impressive array of traditional primary sources, including architectural manuals, floor plans, buildings, furniture, paintings, and decorative arts. *The Politics of Taste* makes a unique contribution to the literature on material culture by positioning this nineteenth-century city firmly in the context of slavery, power, and the built environment. According to McInnis, antebellum Charleston suffered from declining national prestige and economic prosperity. The elite felt this sense of loss deeply, and they looked backward to a mythological eighteenth-century golden age for their salvation. Slavery (not industrialization) provided the means to recover that past and to secure their future. Refinement, or rather the rise of middle-class respectability, was occurring throughout the United States, but “in Charleston it was accompanied by what was, ultimately, a politicized self-awareness” driven by the upper class (p. 16). Elite men understood the importance of public buildings and domestic compounds in shaping their power and their identity. Therefore, “understanding the city’s commitment to the institution of slavery is fundamental to understanding its material form” (p. 15).

McInnis introduces her readers to 1860 Charleston from a bird’s-eye view and at ground level, noting how much it had literally and metaphorically changed since 1810. She explains how much the elite had built up, tightly structured, and segmented the city to maintain a racial hierarchy that supposedly created solidarity among all whites as well as extreme divisions. As she walks us around Charleston, she points out the
plantation-style villas that most visibly affirmed the importance of slavery to the city. Because these structures helped organize and beautify the city, the private assumed a public responsibility. Despite—or perhaps because of—Charlestonians’ understanding of the powerful communicative role of architecture, the city was also, as McInnis reveals, one of contradictions and tensions. Charleston’s houses presented an awe-inspiring elegance (what she calls its public face) that “through piazza screens and elaborate gardens concealed a [brutal and oppressive] private reality” (p. 32).

The elite succeeded perhaps beyond their wildest dreams. Even visitors to the city noted the essential connections between its refined environment, social structure, and commitment to slavery. As white southerners saw it, this hierarchy controlled and stabilized a nascent democracy that could spell chaos and disorder for a city that had a larger slave population than any other city in America. The result was a social order very different from the national model. As McInnis rightly points out, Charleston hardly represented the iconic stagnant South that writers then (and now) used to highlight an urbanizing, industrializing, and ever-expanding vibrant North. But sometimes she too falls into that trap of using the “republican,” hard-working, “upwardly mobile” northerners in contrast with aristocratic Charlestonians who eschewed hard work because “to do so would blur the distinctions that separated the various castes and that ultimately separated blacks from whites” (p. 29).

In a section McInnis defines as “the visual culture of the public realm,” she argues that because whites and blacks intermingled on the streets, the elite imposed black deference to white power. This is neither surprising in a city numerically dominated by blacks nor new to historians of southern racial relationships. But what makes her contention unique is how she places it in the context of the Missouri Compromise, the Nullification Crisis, and especially Denmark Vesey’s so-called slave insurrection which potentially threatened their well-ordered slave-based society. The solution centered on the built environment. To physically control slaves, the elite formed the City Guard and, more significantly, built the Arsenal, the style of which signaled “the city’s commitment to hierarchy, slavery, and the maintenance of social control” (p. 73). They also established educational institutions to control, according to McInnis, the information available to the young, to maintain racial distinctions, and to elevate all whites over blacks. In analyzing commercial structures such the Charleston Hotel, Hibernian Hall, the Charleston Theatre, and St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, McInnis argues that they symbolized the progress of the marketplace, cultural pretensions, racial exclusivity, and contributed to a communal self-definition. To conclude this section, McInnis reflects on the “visual culture of painting and sculpture” to explore Charlestonians’ commitment to racial politics. While I found parts of this chapter interesting, I also found myself wondering why the author included some of the information and how she meant to tie much of the minute detail into her main argument.

In analyzing “the domestic complex,” McInnis turns once again to residential Charleston. Even though she has a brief but revealing discussion of slave housing for those who lived not in the city with their owners but on rural plantations, where improved housing conditions “could serve as a concrete example of the progressive nature of slavery,” (p. 185) or on Charleston Neck, where “white property owners were only too happy to build tenement buildings to accommodate the slaves,” (although I was not certain why) (p. 190), her focus remains on the city proper. Here too the lessons learned from Denmark Vesey’s attempted insurrection—“the fertile ground in which talk of the insurrection quickly grew to hysteria” (p. 181)—influenced Charleston’s slaveowners. As they learned that the slaves who lived in their yards could not be trusted, they became obsessed with regulating their movements and interactions by vigilant surveillance and restructured residential compounds. For example, “for most slaves, the only point of ingress and egress was at the carriage way or through the piazza door, both of which were literally under the eyes of the master” (p. 177). More effectively, slaveowners built eight-feet-high brick walls (sometimes topped with iron spikes) all around the house. However, as McInnis reiterates, private homes were at the same time a public display of racial hierarchy and cultural aspirations, reflecting the tensions inherent between the two realms in a society dominated by slavery. Her exploration of the architecture of the Gothic Revival—employed only in the backlot and in selected public buildings (particularly the new work house), never for residences (which remained “robustly classical”)—is at once confusing and intriguing. The author repeatedly argues that the juxtaposition of these architectural styles “made forceful statements about slaveowners’ own conception of their hierarchical society and related closely to the ideological underpinnings of the proslavery arguments” (p. 219). But it was not until the final paragraphs of the chapter that I finally understood her point—which was that Gothic Revival buildings reflect a military past of castles.
and fortresses, and thus symbolized Charleston's military preparedness against slave insurrection. In concluding this section, McInnis analyzes the elite's use of goods, social rituals, and behavior. She convincingly claims that her work builds upon Richard Bushman's *Refinement of America* (1993) by explaining how "the mechanics of refinement" in Charleston deviated from national trends (p. 364). While Bushman employed the concept of nineteenth-century gentility to suggest that the world of eighteenth-century refinement became open to the middle class and thus blurred class distinctions between the elite and middle classes, Charlestonians used their displays to codify their defense of slavery and their continued reliance on a hierarchical social order.

Even the generosity of H-Net book review guidelines does not allow me to adequately convey all the research, the creative analysis, and the complex arguments of McInnis's truly fine work. I liked this book a great deal–indeed, I anticipate using it in my "Age of Consumption in Early America" seminar, so the following comments should not discourage anyone from reading it. McInnis clearly has an argument to make and she makes it throughout the book–but perhaps too insistently. I suspect art and architectural historians might disagree with this critique, but she sometimes overwhelms her readers with details that might lose the less committed and which, more significantly, take her off topic. I appreciate that this book covered many "inextricably linked" issues, but its organizational structure sometimes became confusing and unnecessarily repetitive. For example, she discusses the Arsenal in depth in chapter 3 and then returns to it again in chapter 7–and I am not sure of the distinction she was making in these two separate analyses. She discusses the residential backlot in chapter 6 and then returns to it in chapter 8; I believe she did so because she wants to focus on the slaveowners and then on the slaves themselves, but I question the effectiveness of separating them this way. She discusses gender issues in the final chapter, but her subject cried out for a more consistent analysis of gender. Finally, given how complex this study is, I wished for a more traditional conclusion rather than the description of Charleston occupied by white and black Union soldiers in 1865 that her epilogue provided. While it was an interesting and dramatic story, one that did bring the book full circle, McInnis would have better served her audience by weaving back together the multiple strands of black and white, public and domestic, slavery and culture. Despite these criticisms, McInnis explores a rich topic and she does so convincingly and intelligently.

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