

Slaves for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade

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Review

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McInnis, Maurie D. *Slaves for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade*. University of Chicago Press, \$39.00 ISBN 978-0-226-55922-9

Visual Representations of Slavery

Maurie McInnis, an art professor at the University of Virginia has written a rare book. In the first instance she has thrown fresh light on slavery and abolition, two much-studied topics. Secondly, she has produced a book that deserves considerable attention from professional scholars of those topics and at the same time will prove attractive to those whose interests in the subjects is more casual. The topic of art, abolition and slavery is rotationally vast, a topic that could easily spin out of control. McInnis makes it manageable by focusing first on the domestic slave trade in the United States and secondly on the work of Eyre Crowe, a little-known but talented English painter whose masterpiece provides the title for this volume. Crowe visited the United States in the 1850s as an assistant to William Makepeace Thackeray. Thackeray's lecture tour took them from Boston to Savannah, providing Crowe with many opportunities to view slavery and the slave trade. For Crowe, the most important stop was Richmond, a major hub of the slave trade. What he saw there inspired his best work. While McGinnis's book is sharply focused, it also provides opportunities to comment on other visual representations of slavery and other types of artistic contributions to abolitionism, such as *Uncle Toms Cabin*. It also provides an opportunity for a detailed description of how the slave trade out of Richmond worked. My only disappointment is that she does not offer a systematic assessment of the role of visual culture in the effort to abolish slavery, although she does provide valuable material on which such an assessment might rest. Clearly, McInnis thinks visual culture made a vital contribution to the movement. At their best, these images "proved to be a vitally important way to get a much wider audience to *see* slavery in new ways, and, for many, for the first time" (10). This book is richly illustrated with examples of abolitionist painting. McInnis is an acute observer of

art and her comments on the paintings provide a valuable introduction to how to look at paintings.

Russell R. Menard recently retired from the History department at the University of Minnesota. He has written widely on slavery and plantation agriculture in early America. His most recent book is Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados (University of Virginia Press, 2008).