



Race and Slavery in the Visual Arts

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“Act your age, not your color.” I turned only slightly; but just enough to make certain I had not imagined these words—that they had actually been spoken by someone and had not slipped away from a distant childhood memory.

These words, written by Karla Holloway in 1995, entangle us in the complex web of race, slavery, and visual arts.¹ It is a web that exists not only in neglected, dusty corners of a “post-racial” culture, but one that continues to spread over us Americans, “coloring” our perceptions of one another and the world. Holloway’s reaction to the words she heard tells us a number of important things. First, we learn that even in 1995 such words could be spoken by a mother to a child. Second, it is immediately clear that this kind of admonition is neither novel nor unusual. Holloway remembers it from her own childhood and family. In addition, it is clear that for Holloway as a child “color” was very negative, both for the admonisher and the child (presumably) who had been called to a higher standard of behavior. “Color” signaled a way of being that did not meet social standards. “Color” had to do with

¹This quote from Karla Holloway’s *Codes of Conduct* (1995), appears in an excellent book, Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 1.

The depiction of race and color in the visual arts provides striking insights into our cultural understandings of human identity and human worth (especially as determined by others). Since all of us continue to be influenced—more or less consciously—by this artistic history, it is important to step back and examine its grip on our imagination.

lesser behavior, embarrassing or immature. In fact, we will see that “color” stands for a code identifying race. The code, assiduously developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and North America (though its life span had begun earlier), included concepts of inherent characteristics, even species categorization.

It is noteworthy that this code, this “color” designation, is visual. “Color” is perceived visually: color and the race that is attached to it have clear—if not accurate—visibility. The development of an array of visual representations of Africans and, later, African Americans is vitally important to the construction of a “race” of people. Such visual representations were created by members of the dominant “white” culture, who were thus able to decide what color and race meant in the world. Because these artistic activities began in earnest in the eighteenth century, there was a great interest in justifying the inferiority of “colored” races for economic purposes, not least the perpetuation of slavery. We shall see, however, that even those who despised slavery and sought to abolish it were in the grip of seeing race in color and inferiority in the colored race. This article will begin with a sweeping look at some of the art called upon to do the work of creating a race for slavery. It will then take an equally sweeping look at art created by African Americans to subvert the white portrayals of blackness, particularly after the Civil War in the United States and into our own century.

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As we begin this survey, just a few words of apology and a suggestion are in order. This essay is too short to attend to the complex history of the creation of race and the particular attachment of color and race to slavery in the Western world. It is too short to offer an adequate history of slavery, so must remain full of reminders that slavery and race were not always connected to one another in such a way that racial character had to be perceived as deserving of or benefitting from slavery. It is certainly too short to look at all the visual artistry that was created by African Americans or about them. Rather, we will take a whirlwind tour, stopping now and then to get a good close-up of how the portrayal of visually perceptible aspects of a human being created a generic group so “other” that “colored” behavior could only meet civilized standards by imitating white (colorless?) behavior.

The suggestion: Because this is an essay about visual art and because this journal is not able to reproduce in its own pages all the significant pictures, readers would be well served by reading alongside a computer with a good search engine. I have included websites where I was able, a few months ago, to find the pictures mentioned. I hope these references will enable the reader actually to see what “color” often looked like.

AN OVERVIEW OF RACE AND SLAVERY IN EUROPE

We begin with an early and interesting shift, hinted at in an Italian painting. Before 1600 when artists painted Judith, the biblical heroine responsible for the death of Holofernes, Judith's maid is portrayed as an Italian, that is, white. Innumerable examples exist.² It is true that a kind of traditional iconography was established in painting biblical stories. Over time one sees certain dramatic scenes shown in repeated poses, often with characters similarly garbed or holding similar items. Honoring a traditional depiction allowed the illiterate to interpret the painting by recognizing the story. It also allowed those with more expertise in the arts to value subtle qualities in the work. There is no surprise in Judith's having a maid, as she does in the story itself, nor in that maid being one of "her own kind," as surely she would have been in the ancient story and as most Italian households would have experienced. The more surprising, then, is the choice of a young African maidservant in the work of Agostino Carracci.³

It is known that the woman representing Judith in this painting was the wealthy wife in a wealthy family in Bologna, where Carracci (b. 1557) worked between about 1577 and 1602. Some slaves from Africa had been brought to Europe by this time. This is the first painting of Judith where the maid becomes a young slave girl from Africa, and it may well speak to the real circumstances of this wealthy lady's life. Her portrait as Judith was painted by Carracci at her husband's request after her death, as a memorial to his love for her. Whether or not the young black woman in the painting was truly a slave in that household or not, painter and patron were able to "picture" her in that role without difficulty. Almost invisible against the dark background, the choice of an African person of "color" in this role is not based on the biblical story, but on lived experience that connected blackness and slavery.

By the eighteenth century, the divide between Europeans and all other persons, especially Africans, had grown sharper. The discussion of human types became important in the European drive to classify the world. That world had been made bigger for almost everyone by sea voyages, explorations, and economic competition. Petrus Camper (1722–1789), trying to analyze beauty, paid great attention to the angle formed by two lines drawn from nostril to the ear and from the leading edge of the upper jawbone to the most prominent part of the forehead. Using Greek statuary as his standard, Camper claimed that Europeans were closest to that ideal, followed by "Orientals" and finally "Black people." The facial angle of blacks was closer to that of the orangutan than to the Greeks. Camper's work proved valuable and inspirational for artists, scientists, educators, theologians, and politicians.⁴ Notice how utterly visual this development was. Artists and illustra-

²See paintings by Botticelli (1469–1470); Mantegna (1495); Michelangelo (1508–1512); Caravaggio (1598).

³To see Carracci's painting, go to <http://www.jahsonic.com/ItalianArt.html> (accessed December 30, 2010).

⁴To see Camper's chart, go to the very useful website cited here. It also includes examples of Blumenbach's work: <http://figure-drawings.blogspot.com/2008/09/how-to-draw-head.html> (accessed December 30, 2010). Also helpful is a site that deals with history of phrenology, understood as a scientific discipline in its day and very popular on both sides of the Atlantic: http://www.historyofphrenology.org.uk/other_physiogs.htm (accessed December 30, 2010).

tors had a key role to play in creating the picture of race, a picture that was widely disseminated and became definitive of racial “types.”

Camper’s model was used and elaborated by artists and scientists in a variety of academies, universities, and museums across Europe. Accompanying pursuits such as craniology, physiognomy, and phrenology were supported by societies of the educated as well as by a variety of journals that displayed theoretical drawings like Camper’s. Increasingly, drawings were also made from life by artists sent along on various expeditions for the purpose of classifying native inhabitants. Such drawings and models became a way to understand the place of various “races” in relation to evolution. By 1775, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach of Göttingen received an MD with the thesis *De generis humani varietate native*, in which he classified the “five races of humans.” Because of his stellar professional career, Blumenbach’s influence was very important.⁵ Although Blumenbach himself was rather sophisticated in his understanding of the connection of race to inherent moral and intellectual capacity, his work was used by others to establish a scientific basis for racism. Between this kind of work and the legacy among artists of Camper’s depictions, the stage was set for the connection of the African (or Negro) race to inferiority. It did not take long for the size and shape of the cranium, Blumenbach’s particular interest, to signal the size of the human brain, and thus particular generic capacities for development.⁶

Obvious features were defined as racial: dark skin, kinky hair, broad noses, slanting foreheads, jaw shape, and full lips. More dangerous were the inadequacies attributed to those who bore them. Both the physical characteristics and attributed characteristics became part of the iconography of black representation. The attributed characteristics based on convictions of whites about the primitive nature of Africans included emphasis on a loose-limbed ability to dance as well as other musical skills, a preference for certain types of foods, and dependence on superior races for guidance, in part because of a greater degree of emotion and a lesser degree of self-control. In some cases, high degrees of sexuality were also attributed to African women and men or to those of the Negro race.⁷

SOME EXAMPLES OF AMERICAN DEPICTIONS OF THE “BLACK RACE”

These perceptions, while begun in Europe, were well rooted also on the American continent.⁸ Of the publication of the chart “Resemblances” in *Scribners* in 1872, two hundred years after the first Africans came to live in the Colonies, two

⁵See the following website for additional information and a depiction of Blumenbach’s basic racial divisions based on craniometry: http://understandingrace.org/history/science/early_class.html (accessed December 30, 2010).

⁶An excellent article that traces the development of racial science (in service to the colonization of African countries by European nations) is Angus McLaren’s “A Prehistory of the Social Sciences: Phrenology in France,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1981) 3–22.

⁷A particularly interesting example is Sara Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, concerning whom see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SarahBaartman (accessed December 30, 2010).

⁸See the chart “Resemblances,” in *Scribner’s Monthly* (July 1872) 335.

things must be said. First, it is typical of much material that came before, and provides a ready example of the way African American slaves had long been seen. Second, some of the most demeaning and even vitriolic material about (as well as actions taken against) slaves appeared after the Civil War, redefining as slavish those who had been slaves.⁹ For an earlier example of such material, see Winslow Homer's *Our Jolly Cook*, in which a Negro male in a menial role among men-at-arms reveals his unlikeness to the stern-faced white men around him.¹⁰ He is both jolly—inappropriately so, given a time of war—and clumsily active in a way that is entertaining to the others. This role as a musical entertainer was granted to the Negro through the widespread practice of minstrelsy.

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The depiction of Africans, especially males, in connection with their ability to make music for entertainment can be seen in a number of early American paintings. Take a look at *Rustic Dance after a Sleigh Ride*, painted by William Sidney Mount in 1830.¹¹ Mount lived on Long Island, and according to one naïve website “was the first American artist who painted African-Americans in a nice way.”¹² Mount did not paint the caricatures of African Americans in overtly hostile ways, but when even “nice” participates in the stereotypes you can see in this painting, convictions about the inferiority of the Negro “race” are clear. In this painting the only nonwhite persons are two musicians and someone in a freedman’s cap. Their physical characteristics are exaggerated. Even more importantly, their physical position in the painting is significant. All three black persons are on the margins of the painting. White folks are central. The artist highlights two tall couples dancing and one seated couple framed by the dancers. The dark musicians are not easy to see, and all are serving the entertainment of the whites in some way (the African American at the door is most probably a driver or a worker at the farmstead). Even in this “nice” portrayal, the distinctive features of the African Americans are in noteworthy contrast to those of white folks, and their social position is servile. Blacks simply were not seen as full participants in society nor were they imagined as, let alone permitted to be, agents of their own description.

Another painting, *Negro Life in the South*, painted by Eastman Johnson in 1859, looks for all the world like another depiction of Southern plantation life but

⁹For excellent material on slavery in New York, see the two websites put up by the History Museum of New York.

¹⁰See <http://www.vahistorical.org/ov/homer.htm> (accessed December 30, 2010).

¹¹This can be found at <http://www.1st-art-gallery.com/William-Sidney-Mount/Rustic-Dance-After-A-Sleigh-Ride.html> (accessed December 30, 2010).

¹²See <http://www.3villagecsd.k12.ny.us/Elementary/minnesauke/3villagehist/WlliamSidneyMount.htm> (accessed December 30, 2010).

actually is set in urban Washington, DC.¹³ In this painting, there is only one white person, the woman at the far right, who is observing (along with the viewer of the painting) this broad slice of African American life.¹⁴ While the activities of the various persons in this painting are respectable, their clothing and surroundings are not. The white woman has come to observe through a door of an overwhelmingly tall, beautiful building that dominates the scene. Roses bloom in profusion on her side of the fence, falling over a bit into the flower-free African American area. The painting really contrasts two different buildings that reveal two ways of life: one disciplined and bearing the fruit of centuries of the pursuit of beauty and civilization; and the other dilapidated, needy, and in some degree of chaos. The scene can be interpreted in many ways. Is that glimpse of blue sky reflected in the window a sign of hope for emergence from the dim, depressed lifestyle or not?

One pair of figures that demands our attention is the older man playing the banjo while the young boy looks on. The banjo player might be teaching his skill, handing on a tradition, but there is no indication of that in the painting. The boy's hands are hidden and his face shadowed so deeply that we cannot see his expression. It may be that the banjo player is simply entertaining himself and his group while his habitation falls into cluttered ruin. Notice also the young couple courting on the left. They are shown as a healthy, appealing, able-bodied pair who again are not about the business of improving their space, but are entertaining themselves and each other. From even these "gentle" paintings, as well as from the harsh depictions that had appeared in *Scribners* and countless other less refined journals, books, and newspapers, the African "race" was consistently portrayed as childlike at best, brutish at worst, and unfit for intellectual, refined, or "civilized" pursuits. These convictions served as an apology for slavery and undergirded its broad acceptance.

Then there is the revealing history of blackface minstrelsy. It is enough to note here the extreme popularity of this art form in Britain and the United States from the very early nineteenth century. Whites played blacks complete with wigs, blackened faces, speech seen as "black style," lips made up to a huge size and very red, and accompanied by the ubiquitous presence of watermelon. Often in minstrel shows one of the actors served as Mr. Interlocutor, who was also portrayed as African American, but dressed up as a "black dandy" whose use of language differed from that of the others. Mr. Interlocutor used big words, often inappropriately, and portrayed for audiences the attempt of the "lesser" race to imitate white, that is, civilized, ways. Unable to rise to a level of civilization on their own and unable to master the refinements of white civilization, the blacks in minstrel shows are just like the blacks in other visual portrayals, able to be entertaining or valuable for labor under firm guidance. Even free African Americans could never be free of the inherent incapacities of their race.

¹³The following site is excellent for viewing the painting and for some helpful analysis of it: <http://www.metmuseum.org/special/americanstories/objectView.aspx?oid=0&sid=4> (accessed December 30, 2010).

¹⁴The woman behind her may also be a white woman—it is not clear.

This kind of portrayal of African Americans continued for a long time, and gained credibility partly because of its longevity. The credibility was also increased by the intensity of mockery and harshness that showed up in a wide variety of respectable publications after the Civil War. The period of Reconstruction in the southern United States and the great migration of former slaves to northern cities in that same period pressed blacks and whites to find ways to identify themselves and one another. These dynamics, of using one another to establish group identification for one's own "race," are similar to those in nineteenth-century Europe, especially France. There we saw the budding human social sciences working hard to create visual distinctions among races in order to create a geography of status in urban areas. Visual distinctions of race also served the processes of colonization and economic exploitation. In early nineteenth-century Europe and in the late nineteenth-century United States, whites were the agents who created the Negro. But slowly, very slowly, some things began to change.

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LOOKING BACK AT SLAVERY

To get at the beginnings of African American agency in terms of the portrayal of the "black race," we will contrast two sculptures from the period immediately after the Civil War. The first is the Emancipation Monument (or Emancipation Memorial)(modeled 1874), sculpted by Thomas Ball (a white man) at the behest of and fully paid for by emancipated slaves.¹⁵ This gives the statue a "black voice" of a sort. The statue group, appropriate for its origins as a monument to the assassinated Lincoln, focuses on the president. With the sensitivity of our own time it is hard to miss the paternalism inherent in his strong, upright posture, his looking down at the young male slave, or the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation is rolled up and not to be read by the young slave who is himself on bended knee. Lincoln is fully clothed in the manly style of the time; the slave wears only a loin-cloth. The statue may be a sign of hope and gratitude, but it surely portrays one race subjugated—perhaps wrongly—by another. Freedom must be granted by the stronger and received in humility by the lesser. Again, neither full mature humanity nor full mature masculinity is the property of the freed slave.

A different statue, *The Freedman*, was sculpted by John Quincy Adams Ward (a white man) in 1863.¹⁶ This statue is of a single black man, a slave whose shackles

¹⁵See http://www.uugreenfieldgroup.org/history_lincoln%20statue%20park%20square.html (accessed December 30, 2010). See also the website of the Montclair New Jersey Art Museum for a copy, the photo of which gives good visibility of the qualities of the statue group, at <http://www.tfaoi.com/permc/perm5b.htm> (accessed December 30, 2010).

¹⁶See the statue at <http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/Ej2zBl0UJy36iQoOGhIatA> (accessed December 30, 2010).

are still visible on his wrists, albeit broken open. This is a man who has been set free by the Emancipation Proclamation and looks more ready than the youthful slave in Ball's group to take up the tasks of freedom. Although he too is clothed in "primitive" garb, the loincloth allows us to see his well-muscled and mature body, fully capable of manly work. In addition, his head turns upward, not to some human emancipator, but in an expression of gratitude to a higher power. He does not cower or bow, but sits relaxed, yet about to push himself to a standing position by pressing his hand against the post behind him. Neither entertainer, dandy, brute, nor fool, the figure in this statue allows viewers to see the end of slavery (the broken shackles) as the beginning of African American males walking upright and strong. No "jolly cook" here. No connection to the orangutan.

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A similar change was rung on the theme of music, minstrelsy, and banjo playing in particular. In 1893, Henry Ossawa Tanner painted *The Banjo Lesson*.¹⁷ Tanner, son of Bishop Benjamin Tanner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Sarah Tanner (a former slave), grew up in Philadelphia and spent much of his adulthood in Paris. This fine painting is his contribution to and determined subversion of the "banjo genre." While taking a realistic approach and locating an older African American man and young boy in shabby surroundings and in ordinary clothing, Tanner focused on these two as human beings, concentrating deeply on the learning at hand, on passing on a tradition of music. He showed the man as a teacher, thoughtful and protective of his young student. He showed the boy as able to learn, carefully positioning his fingers and confidently sitting on his mentor's knee. Neither person pays any attention at all to the observer. All these qualities proclaim a different way of being an African American male than the image of the empty-handed, grinning entertainer who came to the banjo instinctively since incremental focused learning was not a possibility.

The painting shows the gentleness of the teacher and his attachment both to his student and their task, a kind of connection that was also thought nearly impossible for childlike African Americans. Tanner's painting disconnected race and slavery in several ways. First, Tanner depicted agency, his own as a painter and that of both the older man and the boy as willing teacher and focused pupil setting

¹⁷For an excellent website showing a number of artistic representations of banjo players see <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai2/identity/text4/banjo.pdf> (accessed December 30, 2010). Tanner's is the last painting in the list. Another beautiful version of this painting can be seen at <http://negroartist.com/negroartist/Henry Ossawa Tanner> (accessed December 30, 2010).

about doing something. They were African Americans, perhaps even slaves, but they were acting of their own accord, on their own behalf. Secondly, the characters depicted in the painting were not simply caricatures of human beings. They were human beings *and* African American. Race did not necessitate slavery of any sort in order to “domesticate” primitive persons.

In Tanner’s work we see at last the simple description of another reality, a description that highlights life as African Americans saw it, portraying real human beings with reverence and respect. It is noteworthy that the quality of Tanner’s painting is also worthy of respect. His skill is in and of itself a witness to the effectiveness of patient teaching and focused learning in the life of an African American artist. While *The Banjo Lesson* was well received, even in the United States, which had been less welcoming of Tanner’s art than France had been, a controversy had begun to develop among African Americans themselves about how African American artists ought to work in order to assert their value as artists, human beings, and as representatives of a race. This debate developed with fruitful vigor during the early twentieth century, not least through the powerful artistic energy of the Harlem Renaissance. The debate was utterly conditioned by the previous wretched connection of slavery and race, and its arguments moved into a wide variety of areas.

TWO CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS LOOK AT SLAVERY

We will conclude this essay with a glimpse of two contemporary artists who reflect quite specifically on race and slavery in their work: Beverly McIver and Kara Walker. McIver, born in 1962, learned to clown, in the classic white-world’s sense of that term, when she was in high school. Her clowning allowed her to apply lots of white greasepaint to her face, making her, as she herself says, into a “white girl” and able to fit in without all the baggage that came with being a young black woman. McIver moves on in her life and art to find ways to mock the stereotypes of blacks by assuming them, painting herself in the “guise” (from her point of view) of a “black clown” (from a white culture’s point of view), but applying black face and, in one painting, eating watermelon.¹⁸ In all these paintings, we see an African American woman tackle the images of race and slavery in order to claim the pain of her past while rejecting them as controlling her. Again, her agency as painter, as one who can bedeck her own face with paint both black and white and take it off again, is her claim to be inherently more than a particular skin color, even though she is also deeply shaped by it.

We leave the last word and image on the connections of race, slavery, and art to Kara Walker, one of the most controversial of contemporary African American

¹⁸For McIver’s self-portrait eating watermelon, see the following website: http://www.arcadja.com/auctions/en/mciver_beverly/artist/410250/ (accessed December 30, 2010). For McIver in blackface, see <http://www.pacnilubel.com/artists/mcivera.html> (accessed December 30, 2010), especially “Radcliff Girl 2” and “Singing Off Key.” For McIver in whiteface see “Up Close #1,” a painting from 1995, at <http://thestory.org/photo-galleries/beverly-mciver-gallery-1> (accessed December 30, 2010).

artists.¹⁹ Her work is controversial because she does not back off portraying, mostly in black silhouettes on white, the power dynamics of slavery that include sexual exploitation as well as harsh treatment of other sorts. Walker's work takes an unblinking look at the legacies of slavery for black Americans and for white. Caught in an inextricable dance, a reversing gestalt of black and white, her silhouettes are reminiscent of a Victorian artistic tradition, as well as that of some Asian countries today, where finely cut figures become decorative and revelatory. To visit one of Walker's installations is to participate in the processes she depicts, in that one's own shadow is cast on the wall and joins the other silhouettes there. Kara Walker, whatever else one might want to say about her, places every one of us in the same inextricable tangle of black and white, of the legacies of slavery, of thinking about race apart from slavery. Her agency as an artist draws each observer into the role of a black person, both through shadows and through the emotional reactions to what she portrays.

How do we all wrestle with this legacy of stereotype and the need for power—economic, social, and political? From the days preceding Barack Obama's candidacy, to his election, to these days after the midterm elections and the noise that has arisen in America, it is clear that Walker was correct. The entanglement of race continues, and puts us all into the role of slaves to a system based on visual perception and deeply inculcated over centuries. Many fine African American artists have now spent over 150 years trying to disconnect slavery and race by their efforts to show us a "race" not enslaved, to show us the absurdities of racial stereotypes, and to "speak for themselves." This is no easy task. Many artistic works first remind us of slavery even as they show us its brokenness. Both are difficult for a busy, "progressive" culture to look at. There is no blank canvas for any American to use in painting her story. Where do we go from here? A good question for another essay and for each of us. ⊕

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¹⁹A good website for Walker's work is <http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker> (accessed December 30, 2010). It is designed to be educational as well as providing images. Another website, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/>, offers a slideshow of her artwork (accessed December 30, 2010).