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To Be Sold: Virginia and the American Slave Trade and Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808–1865

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"To Be Sold: Virginia and the American Slave Trade"

Curated by: Maurie McInnis

Exhibition schedule: October 27, 2014–May 30, 2015, Library of Virginia, Richmond

"Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808-1865"

Curated by: Erin Greenwald

Exhibition schedule: March 17–July 18, 2015, Historic New Orleans Collection

According to former slave William Wells Brown, "Slavery has never been represented, slavery never can be represented."¹ While this is certainly the case, the curators of *To Be Sold* and *Purchased Lives* brought together a diverse and compelling group of documents, objects, and visual materials related to the American slave trade. In so doing, they charged visitors with the difficult task of approaching, unpacking, and acknowledging this difficult but critically important material. Perhaps there are no two better sites to host complementary and groundbreaking exhibitions about the visual culture of the slave trade than Richmond and New Orleans. With its active slave market and central Virginia location, Richmond marked the departure point for hundreds of thousands of slaves that were "sold South" in the antebellum years. The ultimate destination for most of these enslaved people was New Orleans.

This multi-faceted and innovative project was initiated in Virginia by the illustrious scholar of southern culture, Maurie McInnis, who was inspired to create an exhibition by the research for her 2012 book *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (University of Chicago Press). In conjunction with the exhibition, the National Endowment for the Humanities funded a multi-site symposium. Located in the city with the largest active slave trade in the antebellum era, The Historic New Orleans Collection was selected as the second site for the symposium. The two-city symposium, entitled "To Be Sold: The American Slave Trade from Virginia to New Orleans" was held March 21, 2015 and brought together top scholars who engaged in critical dialog on this important history. The morning session was held in Richmond, the afternoon in New Orleans, and it was broadcast in both sites and also [publicly through live stream](#) (now archived). Through her

organization of the New Orleans symposium, curator Erin Greenwald was inspired to create a partner exhibition at her institution. Importantly, both exhibitions were free and open to the public, and both encouraged a dialog about slavery in these locations and throughout the South and beyond.

To Be Sold: Virginia and the American Slave Trade

McInnis' exhibition used tangible visual and archival materials to flesh out the story of the internal slave trade that she told in her award-winning book. The book takes the 1853 visit of British artist Eyre Crowe to several slave sales in Richmond and his resulting 1861 painting, *Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia* as the center from which a whole story of slavery and its imagery emerges. Crowe's painting was on display in the show, but this time, it offered a climax to the exhibition, which built toward it and two others (one, a reproduction) on display in the exhibition's central room.

Exhibiting sometimes-tiny antebellum materials in the sleek, sprawling modernism of the Library of Virginia's facilities created a dynamic contrast, and the show was displayed throughout the building's large first floor. The initial panel in the rich and beautifully designed show introduced the exhibition's "frank exploration of Virginia's role in the business of the second middle passage." The exhibition unfolded from there in a chronological format, beginning with an eighteenth-century history of the slave trade and abolition in Britain, and displaying related abolitionist books and objects. From there, the exhibition moved through a powerful array of documents, objects, and visual sources related to Virginia and the slave trade.

The interdisciplinary exhibition featured a range of objects including slave receipts, deeds, insurance claims for slaves, account books, as well as a variety of visual materials, from paintings and prints, to instruments of torture and violence such as a whip, leather paddle, and iron collar. The exhibition was accessible if challenging and thought-provoking, and it was meant to appeal to a wide audience. The text was rich, in-depth, and fascinating. It also told the story from a variety of perspectives attempting to give voice to the enslaved. The scope of the show was, perhaps necessarily, expansive. In attempting to reveal the history of the internal slave trade from so many perspectives, McInnis' information was extensive and her research, exhaustive. The exhibition addressed the history, literature, visual culture, and biography of much about the slave trade. In so doing, McInnis clearly intended to educate, while encouraging a wider, if complicated, dialog about this troubling information.

Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808–1865

The Historic New Orleans Collection's partnering exhibition, *Purchased Lives*, examined the slave trade within the context of the Crescent City. In a loosely categorized manner, the exhibition traced the slave trade from the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin, to the forced migration of about one million slaves between 1808 and 1858, to the Emancipation Proclamation and finally the post-War search for family members separated by the trade. Unlike the Richmond show, which featured a great deal of explanatory text, many of the materials were left to speak for themselves. Viewers were asked to draw their

own conclusions for individual objects, but ideas were introduced and stories told in the wall text for each sub-category. Throughout the exhibition, wall space was punctuated with enlarged quotes taken from slaves and former slaves. This exhibition did not have the same level of graphic design applied to it as the Richmond exhibition, but reproductions and enlargements were effectively applied throughout to enhance certain elements.

Like *To Be Sold*, the New Orleans exhibition included an impressive array of documents related to slavery, such as deeds of sale, and ship manifests. One of the most powerful of these was a full six feet in length and showed the manifest of slaves on just one ship from Alexandria, Virginia to New Orleans. Greenwald took strides to make the horror of slavery palpable in a number of ways, especially in drawing attention to the families and children separated by the sale. As the text states, the trade “wreaked havoc” on families. McInnis noted that the sale of children in New Orleans became so common that a law was put in place banning the sale of a child under the age of ten without the mother. In the first room, the exhibition produced four life-sized black silhouetted figures of slave children and included beside them information about the sale of four children of the same size including names, ages, and heights. Another poignant display contained two jackets, made by Brooks Brothers, who specialized in slave clothing, which would have been worn by house slaves, one of them a small boy.

The array of items related to Louisiana slavery in *Purchased Lives* was impressive and diverse, from maps and boat prints (and even a reproduced boat) to paintings and deeds and manifests and advertisements. Another attention-grabbing aspect of the show was a full-scale reproduction of an auction block used at the slave exchange on Esplanade Avenue, made especially realistic with enlargement of an 1831 watercolor of a slave auction positioned behind it.

Solomon Northup, who lived in Louisiana for most of his twelve enslaved years, received special notice. As curator Erin Greenwald stated in a lecture on May 19, 2015, “Like any good museum would, we capitalized upon Solomon Northup’s story.” The exhibition included, remarkably, the 1855 journal of the Louisiana Lawyer, John Pamplin Waddill hired to free Northup, as well as the original manifest listing his arrival as “Platt” into New Orleans.

The impact of this show was clearly felt both in the silent visitors who slowly made their way around and in their written remarks. Near the exit of the show, the Collection left a notebook to encourage comments that almost without fail describe the exhibition’s emotional power. Some of the oft-repeated words include: moving, eye-opening, important, speechless, emotional, horrific, and heartbreaking.

Conclusion

To be sure, these two compelling exhibitions were not solely art exhibitions. They were, in fact, much more. The history of slavery perhaps “never can be represented,” but it certainly cannot be in the fine art record alone. Rather, the array of visual sources, literature, newsprint, and archival material offered by these exhibitions made for much more compelling displays that told a fuller story of slavery. In addition, the particular siting of each exhibition was both powerful and appropriate. Neither was an art museum, but both

are important archival repositories situated close to the heart of the slave trade of each city. Ultimately what these exhibitions have done is to take a giant leap in the right direction. They have presented a massive amount of information to inspire the public and scholars alike and thus have opened up the door for more discussion and conversation, more discovery, acknowledgement, and acceptance.

Notes

¹ "Narrative of William Wells Brown," in *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969) 82, quoted in McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale*, 9.