



The Planter's Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings

John Michael Vlach

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Although nineteenth-century American landscapes typically were painted from a high vantage point, looking down from above, southern landscapes that featured plantations diverged from this convention in telling ways. Portraits of planters' landholdings were often depicted from a point below the plantation house, a perspective that directs the viewer's gaze upward and, as John Vlach observes, echoes the deference and respect the planter class assumed was its due. Moreover, Vlach notes, slaves were rarely represented in plantation paintings made before the Civil War, although it was slave labor that powered the plantation system. After the war and the abolition of slavery, he argues, a wistful revisionism seems to have restored these people--still toiling in the service of the masters--to the landscapes they had created and on which they were so cruelly mistreated.

This richly illustrated book explores the statements of power and ironic evasions encoded in plantation landscapes, focusing on six artists whose collective body of work spans the period between 1800 and 1935 and documents plantations across the South, from Maryland to Louisiana: Francis Guy, Charles Fraser, Adrien Persac, Currier & Ives chief artist Fanny Palmer, William Aiken Walker, and Alice Ravenel Huger Smith.

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