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Images of African-American Slavery, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The visual record of slavery in the Americas is dominated by images rendered by members of the slave-owning societies; few images by slaves themselves exist. Nevertheless, much can be learned about the circumstances of slavery from the illustrations that do exist. Figure 16.3 shows a sale of slaves in Africa that was not atypical. Who are the slaves? Who is selling them? Who is buying them?

The work and living conditions of slaves varied among countries and slaveholders. Many slaves were put to work on large plantations to help with large-scale production, while others worked in smaller operations or as house servants and were sometimes hired out to work in other locations by their masters. A fortunate few were eventually granted their freedom after years of dedicated labor. Figure 16.4 depicts plantation work in Martinique in the early nineteenth century. Published in a traveler's account of the Americas, the text accompanying this image reads: "The slaves are called to work by the plantation bell at 6 in the morning; each person takes his hoe to the field under the supervision of overseers, either European or Creole; in a single line, they work in unison while chanting some African work song; the overseers occasionally use the whip to increase the work pace; at 11 the bell sounds, they take a meal, then resume their work until 6 in the evening." What does this image tell you that you might not have known about slavery?

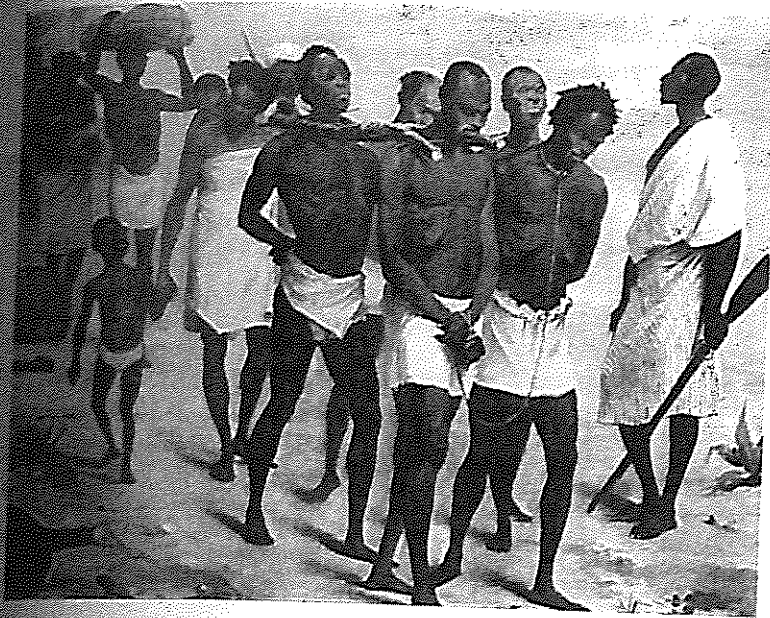


Figure 16.3 Buying slaves in Africa, late 1700s or early 1800s.
Source: The Granger Collection, New York.



Figure 16.4 Plantation work, Martinique, 1826.
Source: *Voyage pittoresque dans les deux Amériques*, Albert and Shirley Small
Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

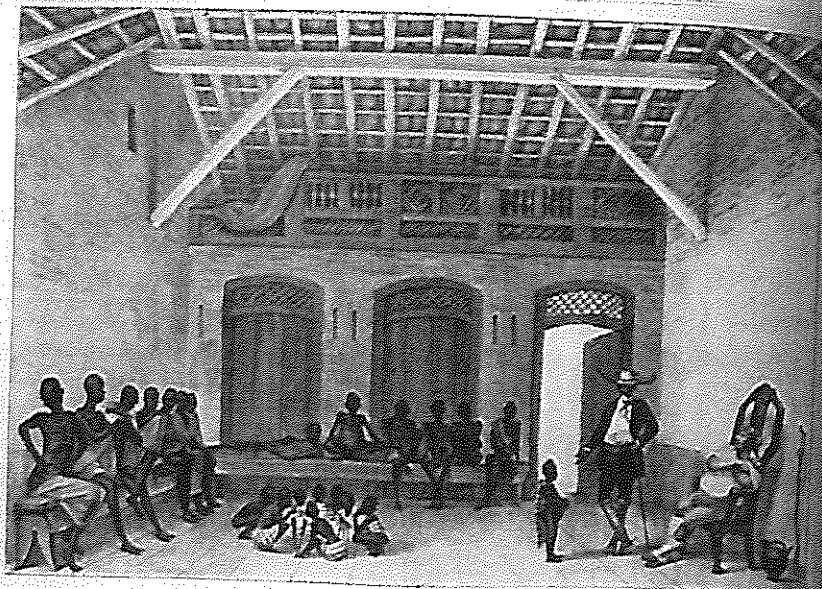


Figure 16.5 Slave market, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1830s.

Source: Snark/Art Resource, NY.

Slaves were sold at auction both upon arrival from Africa and sometimes when being sold by their owners. Figure 16.5 illustrates a slave auction in Brazil in the 1830s. Do slaves appear to be in high demand here? What does this image suggest to you about the cost and care of slaves in Brazil? Figure 16.6 offers a contrasting scene from a British newspaper of slaves awaiting sale in the United States. The article from the *Illustrated London News* reads: “The accompanying engraving represents a gang of Negroes exhibited in the city of New Orleans, previous to an auction, from a sketch made on the spot by our artist. The men and women are well clothed, in their Sunday best—the men in blue cloth . . . with beaver hats; and the women in calico dresses, of more or less brilliancy, with silk bandana handkerchiefs bound round their heads. . . . they stand through a good part of the day, subject to the inspection of the purchasing or non-purchasing passing crowd. . . . An orderly silence is preserved as a general rule at these sales, although conversation does not seem to be altogether prohibited.” What does this image suggest to you about slavery in New Orleans in 1861?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

These four images of African slavery in the Americas are selected out of thousands of paintings, engravings, and drawings, almost all done by Europeans who held varying attitudes toward slavery. Even if they accurately depict what the European artist saw at a particular moment in a



Figure 16.6 Slaves awaiting sale, New Orleans, 1861.

Source: A Slave-Pen at New Orleans—Before the Auction, from *Harper's Weekly*, 24th January 1863 (engraving) (b&w photo), American School (19th century)/Private Collection/The Bridgman Art Library.

particular place, we should be careful to avoid making generalizations based on a single image. Nevertheless, often a primary source, written or visual, prompts new questions rather than answers to old ones. What questions occur to you when you view these images?