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December 2008 Newsletter

Documentary Images and Devotional Acts: Plantation Painting as Propaganda

By John Michael Vlach

This article by John Michael Vlach, Professor of American Studies and Anthropology and Director of the Folklife Program at George Washington University, is a chapter excerpt from *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*, edited by Dale Rosengarten, Theodore Rosengarten, and Enid Schildkrout, published by the Museum for African Art, New York (2008), pp. 204-215, and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author, editors, and publisher (a scanned copy of this article follows this cover page).

Please see the “New Books” section of this Newsletter issue for additional information about this excellent new volume, which was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title organized by the Museum for African Art, New York.

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Documentary Images and Devotional Acts: Plantation Painting as Propaganda

John Michael Vlach

Art is a way of possessing destiny.

—singer Marvin Gaye, quoting a 1936 speech by André Malraux,
French novelist and statesman

DURING THE LATER YEARS of the Reconstruction era, *Scribner's Monthly* sent Edward King out to report on the economic and social conditions of the southern states. King traveled for almost two years, logging more than twenty-five thousand miles, and his monthly dispatches were a regular feature of the magazine in 1873 and 1874. He was accompanied on his zigzag path across sixteen states by James Wells Champney, a Massachusetts-based artist best known for his images of domestic life. Over five hundred of Champney's diligently rendered pastel sketches were converted into engraved images and used as illustrations for King's articles. Written with a decidedly pro-southern slant, King's essays were well received by southern and northern readers alike. Pleased with the popularity of the series, *Scribner's* publishers decided to reprint King's articles in a book format. That volume, entitled *The Great South*, was read widely by audiences in the United States and England, garnering further acclaim for both King and Champney.¹

The use of the word "Great" in the title of the book immediately signaled King's positive view of a formerly rebellious region, a view that was celebrated as well in Champney's careful illustrations which delineated facets of southern life ranging from the monumental to the mundane. While this capacious anthology contained only one article focused on South Carolina rice plantations, that piece was accompanied by nine images that offered a thorough overview of rice production through a combination of landscapes, character studies, and sketches of intriguing agricultural devices. Champney set the scene with a horizontal vista,

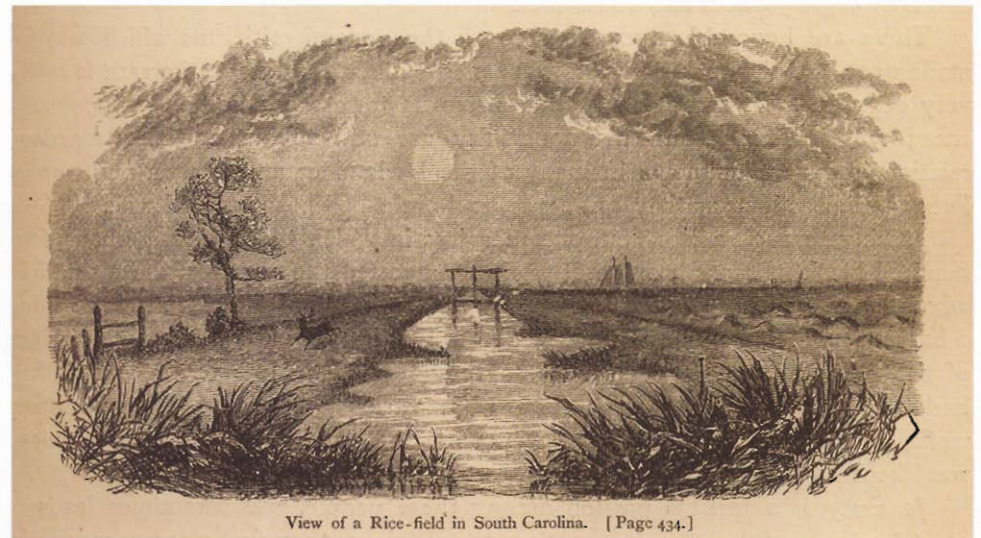


Fig. 8.1

James Wells Champney, "View of a Rice-field in South Carolina" (1873), from *The Great South*, 1875.

“View of a Rice-field in South Carolina,” (fig. 8.1) traversed by an irrigation canal or “trunk” that carried water from an unnamed river across a grid of rice paddies. This same canal also brought the harvested product to a central threshing yard or “floor,” as shown in an image entitled “Unloading the Rice-Barges.” Even some of the smallest details of equipment used during the rice harvest were noted. For example, Champney rendered the ingenious boots used to cover a mule’s hooves and prevent the animal from sinking too deeply into the mud. Attention to such specialized pieces of farming gear inspired reader confidence in the veracity of the essay’s assembled images. Champney’s drawings of a raised winnowing platform and the line of cabins in a slave quarters (fig. 8.2) would also be accepted as true to life.²

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AND ANTEBELLUM VIEWS

Detailed depictions of Carolina rice production had appeared as far back as the late eighteenth century. Italian botanist Luigi Castiglioni, who visited South Carolina in 1785, included in an account of his travels a drawing of a distinctive type of winnowing platform that consisted of an enclosed room standing on posts about twenty feet above the ground (fig. 8.3).³ Subsequent recorders of the rice landscape rarely failed to mention such structures in their reports as they were both markers of production and tangible signs of the extraordinary monetary wealth being amassed by the planters. Regarded as a signature emblem of rice planter identity, the rice platform and other structures peculiar to processing the staple were regularly incorporated in paintings of planters’ residences.

Inspired by a popular book of English estate views compiled by British landscape artist William Watts, Charleston printer and engraver Thomas Coram developed a similar folio of vistas of Carolina rice plantations. Although his proposed volume was never published, he did leave a number of “oil sketches” that he had hoped would be transformed into bound sets of finely etched prints. In his preparatory painting for *The Seat of Thomas Radcliffe* (ca. 1792), a winnowing platform and a rice barn partially block our view of Radcliffe’s mansion. Coram used a similar configuration in his *View in St. James’ Goose Creek – Chas. Glover Esqr.* (ca. 1792).⁴ Clearly, he thought it appropriate to obscure the view of a prominent client’s house with a humble functional structure. In a later painting of Mulberry Plantation on the Cooper River titled *View of Mulberry, House and Street* (ca. 1800), one of South Carolina’s most distinctive dwellings is consigned to the background while the two rows of slave houses dominate the foreground (fig. 8.4). Similarly, in the celebratory image of Rose Hill Plantation on the Combahee River by an unknown painter (fig. 8.5), the planter’s house sits well back in the scene and the viewer’s attention moves to a large barn, winnowing house, and stacks of recently harvested rice sheaves clustered in the foreground.⁵ Consequently, the functional aspects of agricultural production in this painting contend for visual prominence with the planter’s residence.

Two tendencies are apparent in all of these paintings: the importance of the precious grain and a perceived need to include the distinctive structures used in its production. In a territory where rice was “king,” it made sense for artists seeking to capture the region on canvas or paper to include in their images the buildings that were connected expressly to rice.

T. Addison Richards, well-known as a member of the Hudson River School of landscape painters, also proved to be a passionate advocate for the aesthetic value of southern scenery. He argued that the South constituted a superb subject for art with its varied scenes that he claimed could match any of the celebrated vistas of New York and New England. Using the pages of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* as his forum, he encouraged his New York colleagues to consider southern locations as worthy places to capture on canvas. *The South*, he wrote in 1853, “has the loveliest of valleys, composed and framed like the dream of a painter. . . . Above her are skies soft and glowing in the genial warmth of summer suns, and beneath her lie mysterious caverns, whose secrets are still unread.”⁶ Six years later, in a second *Harper’s* article

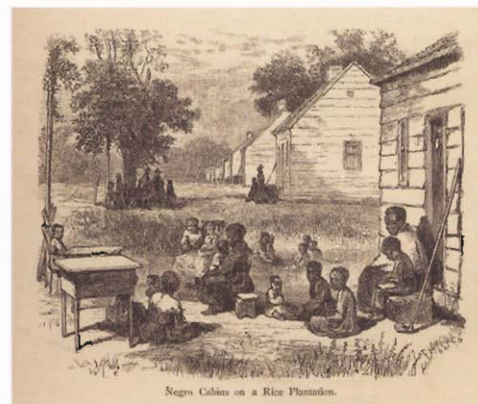


Fig. 8.2
James Wells Champney, “Negro Cabins on a Rice Plantation” (1873), from *The Great South*, 1875.



Fig. 8.3
Winnowing house from Luigi Castiglioni, *Viaggio Negli Stati Uniti dell’America Settentrionale: fatto Negli Anni, 1785, 1786, e 1787, 1790.*

Fig. 8.4
View of Mulberry, House and Street, Thomas Coram, ca. 1800. Oil on paper, H. 10.2 x W. 17 cm. Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, 1968.18.01.



Fig. 8.5
Rose Hill, anonymous, ca. 1820. Oil on canvas, H. 90 x W. 130.8 cm. The Charleston Museum, W126884A.

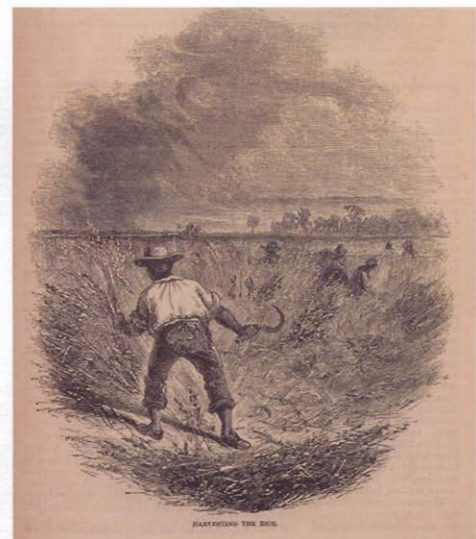
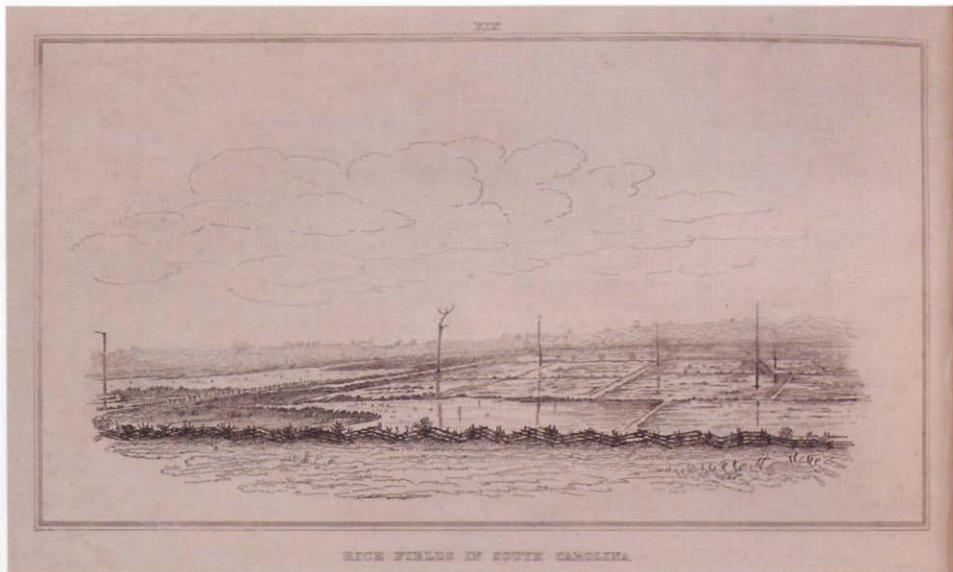


Fig. 8.6
T. Addison Richards, "Harvesting the Rice" (1853), from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. 19, 1859.

Fig. 8.7
Basil Hall, "Rice Fields in South Carolina," from *Travels in North America, in the Years 1827 and 1828, 1829*.



focusing expressly on the "Rice Lands" of South Carolina, he included among his illustrations five vignettes of rice production and slave life (fig. 8.6).⁷ Richards makes it crystal clear that enslaved workers were responsible for the annual harvest and thus were the ultimate source of a planter's wealth and reputation.

In most of the earlier images of rice plantations, human figures were generally absent. But even if plantation scenes lacked the presence of the obligatory human scale figure, those images could still be rigorously drawn with a convincing sense of perspective if one used a sketching apparatus like a camera lucida. Professional traveler Captain Basil Hall availed himself of such a device to provide images for his book, *Travels in North America, in the Years 1827 and 1828*.⁸ His "drawing machine" employed a prism that was attached by a fixed rod to his drawing board. When a prospect was viewed with this apparatus, the whole vista was seemingly projected onto a sheet of paper so that its key features could be readily outlined in their true scale and exact position.

"Rice Fields in South Carolina" (fig. 8.7), a view of Nathaniel Heyward's rice field as seen from his Rose Hill plantation house, is one example of Hall's "assisted" sketches. While Hall would comment in his accompanying text that the carefully constructed fields surrounded by dikes and crisscrossed with canals had "no beauty whatsoever," he was suitably impressed by the vast engineered landscape. Learning that the rice was irrigated when the tidal flows raised the height of the river to the point where water could be directed onto the fields, he commented with some fascination that the river, at certain times, seemed to run "backwards." Hall was one of many visitors captivated by rice cultivation, a mode of farming that in its techniques, routines, and human relationships often seemed more industrial than agricultural in character. While some men like T. Addison Richards were in awe of the beauty of the Carolina Lowcountry, others were clearly more taken by the displays of technological ingenuity that they encountered. Both motives ensured that rice plantations would be depicted with accuracy and precision.

POSTWAR PANORAMAS

National interest in the South was particularly intense in the years immediately after the Civil War. Major journals and newspapers offered their readers panoramic illustrations of southern scenery, horizontal images so wide that they were run vertically in order to fit on the page; readers had to rotate their newspapers ninety degrees to see them. James E. Taylor's

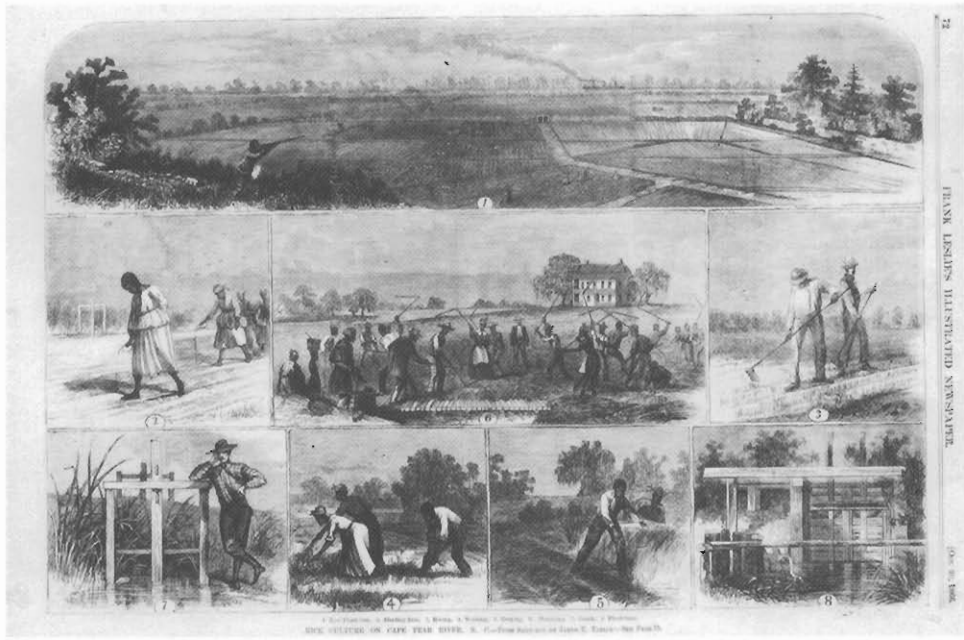


Fig. 8.8
 James E. Taylor, "Rice Culture on Cape Fear River, N.C.," from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 20, 1866.

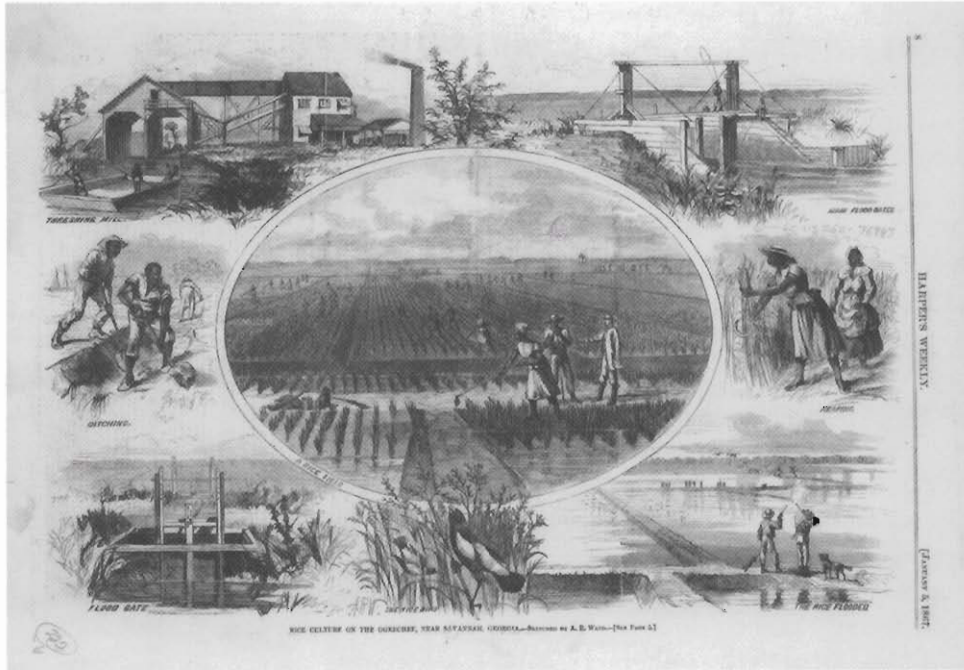


Fig. 8.9
 Alfred R. Waud, "Rice Culture on the Ogeechee, near Savannah, Georgia," from *Harper's Weekly*, January 5, 1867

"Rice Culture on Cape Fear River, N.C." (fig. 8.8) appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1866. His montage, consisting of eight scenes, begins with a vista of a North Carolina rice field that offers a deep view back to the far horizon where a passing steamship can just be glimpsed. Subsequent images detail the cycle of rice production with a set of close vignettes that depict planting, weeding, reaping, and threshing. Taylor notes in his accompanying essay that this plantation was so close to the ocean that the high tide carried salt water up the river beyond the estate's boundaries. Observing further that "salt is poison to rice," he concludes with a description of how large inland reservoirs were created to provide water for irrigation as needed.⁹ Two views of the large wooden gates designed to release that valuable rainwater bracket the page.

Three months later a similar set of scenes drawn by Alfred R. Waud appeared in *Harper's Weekly*. Titled "Rice Culture on the Ogeechee, near Savannah, Georgia," (fig. 8.9) his images closely parallel Taylor's sketches. But where Taylor arranged his pictures into three horizontal bands, Waud opted to place an oval-shaped vista of rice cultivation at the center of his composition. He then surrounded this view with close-up details that highlight various tasks emblematic of the work required to grow rice. Waud focused primarily on the black field hands as they tend the rice paddies from planting through harvest. Images of irrigation works and a steam-powered threshing mill are also included, but it is the army of black workers who hold center stage as the makers and maintainers of this carefully wrought environment. Views like those produced by Waud and Taylor signaled that even though much of the South had been devastated by four years of bloody warfare, the rice empire along its southeastern edge was still largely intact and capable of satisfying the demands of national and world markets. Indeed, commercial rice planting persisted until the second decade of the twentieth century when a series of hurricanes finally shattered the intricate system of levies, dams, reservoirs, and canals that once had enabled rice planters to produce their astonishingly bountiful crops.¹⁰

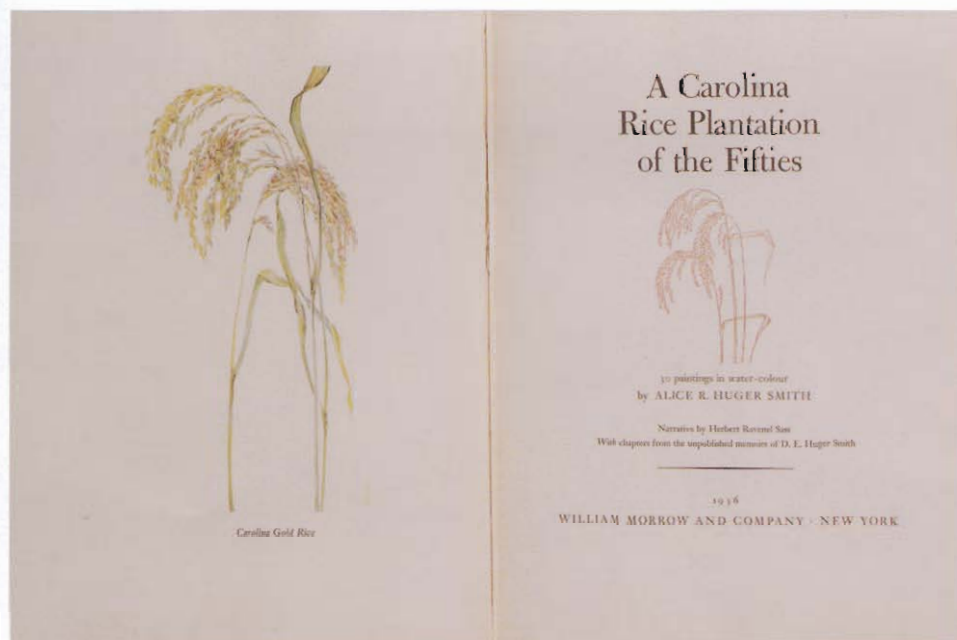
A LOST TIME AND PLACE

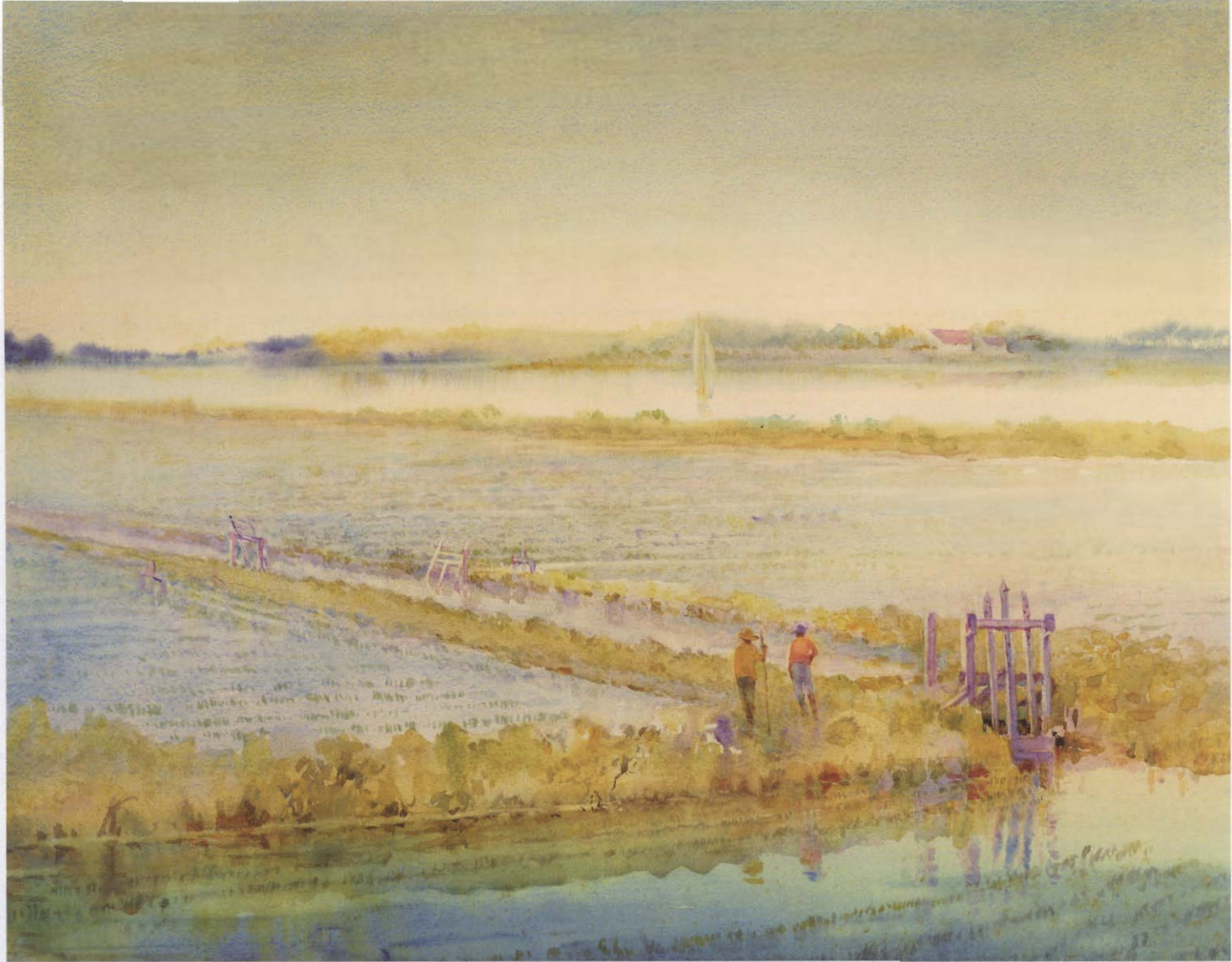
Born in 1876, Alice Ravenel Huger Smith did not have direct experience of either plantation life or slavery. But she was descended from three lines of plantation-owning families who could trace themselves back to the era of the American Revolution and beyond. Educated by local tutors in Charleston, she was passionately attracted to art. After experimenting with several media she would concentrate primarily on watercolor landscapes of Carolina scenery. Combining impressionist techniques with Orientalist sensibilities gained from the writings of ancient Asian philosophers, her paintings convey a feeling of hushed anticipation. According to one of her friends, she would begin a painting by sloshing colors over a thoroughly soaked sheet of paper and finish by adding a few brush strokes here and there to suggest such details as blades of grass or a bird in flight. It seemed that she worked in a trance-like state: "the paint flows, glides, dances or is suddenly checked as she desires."¹¹ Over her long career as a painter she would complete hundreds of works using this spontaneous technique and eventually be



Fig. 8.10
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, "One or two hands in the barn-yard," from *Patience Pennington* (Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle), *A Woman Rice Planter*, 1913

Cat 114
A CAROLINA RICE PLANTATION OF THE FIFTIES
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith and Herbert Ravenel Sass
1936
Avery Research Center, College of Charleston





Cat. 115
THE POINT FLOW OR STRETCH WATER
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith
Ca. 1935
Watercolor on paper
H. 43.2 x W. 55.9 cm.
Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art
Association, 1937 009 0014



Cat. 116
**TAKING SEED-RICE DOWN TO
THE FIELDS**
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith
Ca. 1935
Watercolor on paper
H. 34 x W. 49.5 cm.
Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art
Association, 1937 009 0011



Cat. 117
SHAKING THE RICE FROM THE STRAW
AFTER THRESHING
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith
Ca. 1935
Watercolor on paper
H. 43 x W. 56 cm.
Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art
Association, 1937.009.0023

celebrated by Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, with an honorary doctorate in art for her stunning achievements.¹²

From the early years of childhood, Smith was preoccupied by the history of Charleston and the plantations lost by her family and other landowners as a result of the Civil War. "I have always been grateful," she declared in her *Reminiscences*, "that it was given to me to grow up in the shadow of the shade of the great civilization that had produced the generations of the past."¹³ Her first images of the places associated with the era of these forebears were rendered in pen and ink. Perhaps the accuracy of detail that could be achieved with this medium—and its apparent finality—seemed to her especially suited for these ancestral subjects. In 1913, she prepared more than eighty illustrations for Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle's *A Woman Rice Planter*, a memoir that describes the year-long cycle of rice production at Pringle's Chicora Wood Plantation on the Pee Dee River in Georgetown County, South Carolina. Smith's images (fig. 8.10) included rural vistas, portraits of individuals and groups of people at work, and renderings of plantation buildings.¹⁴ In 1914, Smith partnered with her father, Daniel Elliott Huger Smith, to produce the first of two works of architectural history: *Twenty Drawings of the Pringle House on King Street, Charleston, S.C.*, to be followed by *The Dwelling Houses of Charleston, South Carolina* in 1917. A pronounced documentary feeling governs the illustrations which accompany *Twenty Drawings*, as Smith shows the famous residence from varying perspectives and captures its structure in an array of detailed views. In *The Dwelling Houses*, the same sorts of images are combined with photographs and scaled plans provided by architect Albert Simmons. Yet Smith's drawings, which range across much of the city, seem more nostalgic, as if formed by a deepening conviction that the way of life she was illustrating was not likely to return.

In *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties* (1936), Smith attempted what might be termed the recovery of a lost time and place (cat. 114). Working mainly from her father's recollections of the family's Smithfield Plantation in Colleton County, South Carolina, she developed a suite of thirty watercolor paintings.¹⁵ She said that she "threw the book back to the Golden Age before the Confederate War so as to give the right atmosphere."¹⁶ Twenty years after the publication of the meticulous drawings that had filled *The Dwelling Houses*, Smith turned to soft, pastel-hued impressionist paintings. What Smith deemed to be "right" for these rice plantation scenes were dreamy views of a land shown as if veiled in a golden haze. Created to honor the efforts of her rice-growing ancestors, these paintings diminished the presence of the large African-American community which, if depicted accurately, would have dominated every vista. When field hands had to be included to advance the story line about the various stages of rice production, Smith drew them almost as natural features of the landscape rather than as autonomous human beings (cats. 115, 116 and cat. 59, p. 116). Shown essentially as bodies that provide labor, only a handful of the workers are rendered with facial features (cat. 117). Smith painted them as the plantation's machinery, as the necessary equipment for growing rice.

In his introductory essay for the book, Smith's cousin, Herbert Ravenel Sass, declared that slavery had "worked wonders for the negro race, lifting millions of negroes out of barbarism in a shorter time than any other barbarous people had been so lifted in the history of mankind."¹⁷ In this claim he was following the line of reasoning offered by Georgia-born historian Ulrich B. Phillips, who had asserted that not only was slavery a practical way to educate "inert and backward people," but that a plantation was best understood as "a school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization."¹⁸ Sass parallels Phillips by offering a beneficent vision of the plantation wherein the planter is rendered as a kind and loving father figure who never even uses the word "slave." Sass cheerily suggests that the plantation master "called them his *people* and as he spoke of them—they were his people, not his chattels, and many of them were his loved and devoted friends."¹⁹ Such sweet words

when joined with Smith's pleasant images thoroughly neutralized the violence and brutalization that were hallmarks of the plantation system.

Because *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties* was compiled principally to offer homage to a passing ancestral generation, the rigorous documentary impulse seen in Smith's other history projects was set aside as she constructed what might best be termed an expression of romantic apology. Here, in effect, she enhanced her father's recollections by connecting them to soft-focus images that would veil any unpleasant and problematic information. The golden glow of a bright sun glinting off acres of rice as far as the eye can see suggests the potential for great wealth via a bountiful harvest, but not the human cost to those forced to do the work. By showing African Americans in most instances as people without faces, she reduces them to little more than dark bodies available for compliant service. Such figures recall Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War-era description of the slaves at Governor William Aiken's Charleston home who provided what she called "noiseless, automatic service."²⁰

PAINTING AS PROPAGANDA

Smith never commented explicitly about why she chose to render the plantation home of her forebears with a soft-focus technique. Yet impressionism had by then become her signature style and the mode of painting for which she was, and is, most highly praised. Clearly, the pastels of the watercolorist's palette suited her purposes. She deliberately sought to valorize her homeland by concentrating on "its soft haze and quiet distances, its usually gentle character and simple friendly intimacies."²¹ A Carolina rice plantation, a hard-won tract of land engineered into a vast growing machine, when viewed through Smith's aesthetic lens, became a setting where nature trumps culture. Land and sky, water and vegetation were what most often held Smith's eye—save for a few human figures rendered in a diminutive scale. In Smith's plantation paintings white people are presumed to stand above blacks even when there are no whites in the scene. Embedded in her plantation paintings was a desire to soothe the feelings of failure and disappointment expressed by Charleston elites during the decades after Reconstruction—particularly the angry complaints of her father.

The North's victory in the South's war for independence transformed D. E. Huger Smith from a would-be rice planter into a cotton broker. His dismay over his region's defeat was compounded by his considerable economic losses. All of this, and more, he reflected upon when his artist daughter cajoled him into writing *A Charlestonian's Recollections, 1846–1913*, a memoir that was not published until 1950, almost two decades after his death. Smith began his account with happy reminiscences of the family's plantation in the years prior to 1860. Tracing the arc of his career after the grim years that followed the war, he vents a litany of complaints about the behavior of the newly freed people who were no longer subject to the imperatives of whites. Almost fifty years after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Smith makes the astonishing claim that emancipation was an act of "bitter cruelty" toward the enslaved. In his view, freed blacks were loathsome: a swarm of "carrion crows" who had settled upon a prostrate country.²² Finding liberated African Americans contemptible, he types them all as detestable criminals lacking moral judgment. The idea that blacks and whites might marry and produce children nearly drives him crazy, and he brands all Negro men as likely rapists deserving "stern and violent punishment." He concludes with the observation that black people have "deteriorated frightfully since 1865." Against the backdrop of this tirade, Alice Smith decided to paint the rice plantation as a charming lost world where the sun shines brightly and the slaves tend diligently to their assigned tasks. If there were aspects of life at Smithfield Plantation that might trouble the modern viewer's conscience, improvements and adjustments could be made on paper to ensure that the achievements of the white ancestral generation would be duly appreciated.



Cat. 118
THE PLANTATION STREET OR SETTLEMENT
 Alice Ravenel Huger Smith
 Ca. 1935
 Watercolor on paper
 H. 44.5 x W. 55.9 cm.
 Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art
 Association, 1937.009.0005

Smith filled her portfolio with buildings and scenes which were painted at several locales far from the banks of the Combahee River. The building shown in *The Parish Church*, for example, was not near Smithfield but sixty miles away on the western branch of the Cooper River in Berkeley County, South Carolina. Similarly, the rice mill scene depicts not the Smithfield mill but one that she saw at Fairfield Plantation on the Waccamaw River in Georgetown County. *The Plantation Church* was an upgraded rendering of a country church in Plantersville, a small crossroads town again in Georgetown County.²³ When Smith was preparing to paint *The Harvest Flow, When the Rice Is Barreling*, which shows the crop just before it is harvested, she traveled to Middleton Plantation on the outskirts of Charleston to capture a view framed by tall old-growth trees. Since rice was no longer being grown in South Carolina when she was assembling her portfolio, Smith sought the advice of former rice planters on the agricultural practices she wanted to depict. Consequently, while the scenes which she painted do indeed present key features in the cycle of rice cultivation, any resemblances to the plantation that was owned by her family could only be approximate. In Smith's watercolors the specific details of experience are overlaid by the feeling of a pleasant, passing moment, scenes recently described as creations of "rainbow hued

fantasy.”²⁴ In her paintings the bitter experience of loss and failure is cloaked with the sweet veneer of a delightful vista.

Whether Smith was motivated by obligations of filial piety or her own convictions, her work has enjoyed remarkable success as visual propaganda on behalf of the public memory of plantation owners—the people from whom she was descended. What is surprising is the extent to which her images, and others like hers, continue to inform current understandings of southern history in general and the Carolina Lowcountry in particular. That her images remain so popular is especially noteworthy given that over the last half a century the academic interpretation of the past promoted by Phillips and Sass has been dismantled, brick by brick. The Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston reports that Smith’s rice plantation images are, by far, the most sought-after paintings among the ten thousand works in its collection. Writers of history textbooks, producers of educational television programs, and directors of major motion pictures continually request permission to use her golden-hued scenes.²⁵ Two images from the series, *The Plantation Church* and *The Plantation Street or Settlement* (cats. 118, 119), are available via several Internet-based vendors, including the shopping mall giant, Wal-Mart, and surprisingly even the Baghdad Museum in Iraq.²⁶ The pairing of these two particular paintings implies, perhaps unintentionally, an unsettling connection between divine blessings and lifelong captivity. The image of the church softens the reality of bondage by implying that God looked favorably on the southern system. Implied here is a tacit promise that obedience on the part of the enslaved would be rewarded in the afterlife.

In *The Plantation Street or Settlement*, Smith’s only painting of slave quarters, a nursery for infants stands in the foreground partially obscuring the view of a row of cabins. Each baby lies in its own coiled basket tended by young girls, who in turn are supervised by a group of watchful elders. The sweet scene makes us forget the absent mothers who have been sent back into the fields too quickly. Who would know from this gentle image that on rice plantations an average of twenty percent of all slave women’s pregnancies ended in miscarriages and stillbirths or that on some Lowcountry estates almost forty percent of all slave children died before their first birthday? No wonder that when asked about slavery times freedman Ben Horry from Brookgreen Plantation referred to the period as “them dark days.”²⁷ The cruelties of slavery were not a matter that Alice Smith was willing or prepared to recognize. No hint of the slaves’ sorrows intrudes into her plantation scenes. The current popularity of her paintings suggests that many Americans likewise remain unprepared for a rigorous and honest assessment of their nation’s history. There are many gritty images from the past that can effectively carry our imaginations back to the time when black people were treated like disposable pieces of equipment, but most of us would rather not see them or consider the story that they could tell.



Cat. 119
THE PLANTATION CHURCH
Alice Ravenel Huger Smith
Ca. 1935
Watercolor on paper
H. 44.5 x W. 55.9 cm.
Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art
Association, 1937 09 04