



The Emancipation of the Negroes, January, 1863: The Past and the Future, from "Harper's Weekly"

Date

published January 24, 1863

Primary Maker

Thomas Nast

Medium

Wood engraving on newsprint

Description

American Civil War. "Here the artist depicts both the dreadful conditions of slavery and the promise that emancipation offered. Nast was, from the start, strongly in favor of freedom and justice for all Americans. It should be noted, however, that the Emancipation Proclamation did not free the slaves in those border states (such as Maryland and Kentucky) that remained loyal to the Union." (SOURCE: Jay Williams, "Thomas Nast: America in Black and White", 2002) "This complicated cartoon is a collection of scenes about slaves' lives in the past and the future. On the left, slaves are sold by Uncle Sam, and are beaten and abused. On the right families celebrate their freedom. One family receives their first paycheck and a mother sends her children to public school. The tender central image is of a prosperous multi-generational black family, and represents the ultimate goal for African-Americans -- that former slaves would have the same opportunities as white families, and that they would be able to support themselves after years of supporting others. This cartoon is reminiscent of medieval and Renaissance triptychs with its three-part construction and clear distinction between hell, on the left, and heaven, on the right" (SOURCE: Susanna White, "Emancipation and Denigration: Thomas Nast Pictures Black America", 2008) "Nast evokes the tripartite design of medieval and Renaissance triptychs in his representation of African-American assimilation. He projects a future in which former slaves are afforded the same opportunities as their white masters through an emphasis on pathos: depicting a prosperous multi-generational black family centered around a woman tending to the hearth. On the left, Uncle Sam auctions slaves while a mother implores the seller, in an attempt to maintain her family unit. Beneath this, Nast illustrates a white man whipping a shirtless black woman. On the right, families celebrate their freedom: a mother sends her children to public school and a family receives their first paycheck. This configuration mirrors the dichotomy between hell, on the left, and heaven, on the right and demonstrates family sentiment through the female body. Nast illustrates the physical sacrifice that black women make to preserve their family, even exploiting the image of a black female body to conjure empathy." (SOURCE: Mary Bei Prince, "Thomas Nast's Conception of Nineteenth Century Women", 2019)

Dimensions

Composition: 13 1/2 × 20 1/2 in. (34.3 × 52.1 cm) Sheet: 15 11/16 × 21 3/4 in. (39.8 × 55.2 cm)