



# Slavery and the Culture of Taste

*Simon Gikandi*

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It would be easy to assume that, in the eighteenth century, slavery and the culture of taste--the world of politeness, manners, and aesthetics--existed as separate and unequal domains, unrelated in the spheres of social life. But to the contrary, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* demonstrates that these two areas of modernity were surprisingly entwined. Ranging across Britain, the antebellum South, and the West Indies, and examining vast archives, including portraits, period paintings, personal narratives, and diaries, Simon Gikandi illustrates how the violence and ugliness of enslavement actually shaped theories of taste, notions of beauty, and practices of high culture, and how slavery's impurity informed and haunted the rarified customs of the time.

Gikandi focuses on the ways that the enslavement of Africans and the profits derived from this exploitation enabled the moment of taste in European--mainly British--life, leading to a transformation of bourgeois ideas regarding freedom and selfhood. He explores how these connections played out in the immense fortunes made in the West Indies sugar colonies, supporting the lavish lives of English barons and altering the ideals that defined middle-class subjects. Discussing how the ownership of slaves turned the American planter class into a new aristocracy, Gikandi engages with the slaves' own response to the strange interplay of modern notions of freedom and the realities of bondage, and he emphasizes the aesthetic and cultural processes developed by slaves to create spaces of freedom outside the regimen of enforced labor and truncated leisure.

Through a close look at the eighteenth century's many remarkable documents and artworks, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* sets forth the tensions and contradictions entangling a brutal practice and the distinctions of civility.

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