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Visual culture and artworks, as representations and products of the context in which they were produced, offer considerable value for tracing the circulation of social and political ideas across various social segments throughout history. Whether they reveal meaning directly or indirectly, it is accepted in modern scholarship that works of art reveal the political, social, class, gender, racial and religious tensions of the culture in which they were produced.\(^1\) However, while providing views of historical moments, artworks are not transparent windows, and meanings must be studied through an analysis of the stylistic techniques and symbology artists utilise.\(^2\) Here is often exposed a gap in the secondary literature available on studies of the art of the American Civil War. Historians are often cautious in detailing visual symbols and guilty of merely using artworks to illustrate historical events. On the other hand, art historians may too often be selective in their studies of ‘high’ over ‘low’ art and find a study of disparate works, such as those of the Civil War, inconsequential in light of other artistic movements.\(^3\) This essay thereby attempts to bridge this divide. It will focus on the portrayal – in various forms of art - of the heated debate in the North over emancipation of slaves around the years of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, as well as within the context of contemporary political struggles and hostilities between pro and anti-slavery Unionists.

In contemporary scholarship, slavery as a subject has generated an enormous variety of publications. Despite this, the imagery of slavery, when included in the text or even on the cover, is often secondary or complementary, used merely to illustrate or highlight meanings. Images of slavery are rarely explored as reflecting meaning within their own right. Of course there are exceptions to this generalisation, but when examining the vast extent of serious scholarly literature on the slave trade, abolition or slave history, rarely do writers closely examine or technically and theoretically analyse imagery to the care that is applied to quotations from written sources.\(^4\) Additionally, there remains the issue that only a tiny proportion of image sources related to slavery could be deemed ‘high’ art, and so while historians may often be tempted to merely use artworks to illustrate historical events or entertain, art historians have been equally as guilty of ignoring bodies of works which fall under ‘low’ art or popular culture.
Nonetheless, few scholars in humanities and social sciences would disagree that art portrays and helps shape ideas, prejudices, stereotypes and social attitudes. The body of works depicting the tensions between slavery and its abolition, whether fine art or commercially distributed illustrations, embodies the societal ideas and fears relating to the history and future of the institution of slavery, and should be considered texts worthy of serious study. In what follows, selected works will be used to argue the ways in which images of blacks and slaves exemplify societal and political conditions and aid historical meaning.

“The Unresolvable Representational Crisis”: Drawing Meaning From Disparity

The Civil War period was, indeed, a time of abundance for artworks and artists. In November 1863, Harper’s Weekly noted that the scope of investment in contemporary arts highlighted, “a care that the future of the country which [the Union] intended to redeem should abound in every influence of beauty and truth.” However, both contemporary critics as well as modern scholars have often remarked on the failure of the war to stimulate ‘war painting’, as well as the failure of artists to engage deeply with the trauma of war. In reviewing the annual exhibition of the National Academy in New York in the spring of 1865, a critic for Harper’s Weekly noted, “we should gladly have seen more works inspired by the war, which is so profuse in romance, tragedy, and comedy.” In fact, from 1861 to 1865, less than five per cent of paintings in annual exhibitions dealt with the subject of war at all. While a considerable number of artists (mostly Northerners), observed and recorded wartime events, this was often in the form of ceremonial portraits, genre scenes depicting life in the camps or on the home-front, or battle scenes which emphasised landscape over action, and so rarely dealt with the horror and tragedy of war head-on.

The lack of works which deal directly with the war could be explained by what Steven Conn and Andrew Walker refer to as “an unresolvable representational crisis”. Faced with the trauma of a devastating war that did not yet have a clear meaning or outcome, American history painters found themselves unable to lend it legitimacy or purpose. While America was faced with a crisis of confusion of the war’s larger meaning – was the conflict over political notions of state and ‘union’ rights, humanitarian ideals concerning slavery and its emancipation, economic principles such as ‘free labour’, expansionist arguments? – history painters were faced with a crisis of
representation in attempting to portray a clear didactic purpose through their art. Taking this notion further, for our purposes, this ‘representational crisis’ of mixed messages and meanings is remarkably evident throughout artistic depictions of the institution of slavery, and either the hope or fear for its abolition, in the plethora of viewpoints and ideas that aid historical understanding by highlighting a nation not merely engaged in physical conflict on the battleground, but ideological conflict tearing through society.

The varying viewpoints over the institution of slavery of Northerners can be seen visually through the methods and techniques in portraying slaves and freedmen aesthetically and thematically across a spectrum ranging from caricature to idealisation. As can be seen in Eastman Johnson’s *Negro Life at the South*, 1859 (Figure 1), the attempt to emphasise the humanity of slaves and idealise the figures in this genre scene also idealises the life of the slave, showing a domestic, harmonious scene neither befitting of the true nature of slavery, nor the social tensions surrounding the institution.

![Figure 1](image-url)  
*Eastman Johnson, Negro Life at the South, 1859*  
Oil on Canvas  
91.4 x 114.9cm  
The New-York Historical Society, Robert L. Stuart Collection
The work highlights the romanticised view of the slave narrative propagated by Southerners and Southern apologists who tried to assure that abuses were no longer rife in the system. Throughout the scene, slaves appear to dance, play music and interact in what appears on the front to be a harmonious, idyllic existence. The festivities have caught the attention of a young white woman on the far right, who appears to mirror the curiosity of the white audience the work was painted for. The small dog in the foreground of the canvas, caught in a playful moment, acts as a well known visual symbol of loyalty and fidelity, further seeming to reinforce the contentedness of slave existence under the white master. To further idealise the notion of slavery, the lack of a centre in the composition of the work seems to signify that what we witness is not a staged scene but implies a photographic impression of daily life.

One Northern critic, quoted by Tuckerman, however, saw a deeper message, believing the inclusion of the deteriorating environment and building foresaw the metaphorical demise of the institution,

“The very details of the subject are prophetical. How filthy do the dilapidated and decaying quarters typify the approaching destruction of the “system” that they serve to illustrate!...We behold the very reality that the enthusiastic devotees of slavery have so often painted with high-sounding words. And yet this dilapidation, unheeded and unchecked, tells us that the end is near.”

The morphing of the truths of the horrors of slave life into a romanticised vision served more of a purpose to Southerners than simply a propagandised counter-action to abolitionism in the North; it served to perpetuate their fearful denial of slave rebellions.

While images of these kinds were indeed insulting to the real experiences of the slave, cultural racism extended to art criticism, and the somewhat narrow-minded conventions of what could be deemed ‘high art’. The critic for the Crayon noted that,

“Notwithstanding the general ugliness of the forms and objects, we recognise that its sentiment is one of beauty, for imitation and expression are vitalised by conveying to our mind the enjoyment of human beings in new and vivid aspects.”
While this reviewer obviously saw praise in the ability of Johnson, and art in general, to transform the ‘ugly’ into the beautiful, there is also the inherent belief that the African American form was ultimately not a thing of natural beauty. Although Johnson was praised for many stylistic features of the work when it was exhibited, critics claimed that ultimately, by arranging the composition around Negroes and including the only white woman in the far right margin of the frame, the work could not be deemed ‘high’ art. Falling below what was deemed worthy of the Grand Manner style, the most beautiful emotions were not expressed through the most beautiful of forms, as despite the beautiful qualities of the work, the Negro body was not a thing of beauty.\textsuperscript{16}

Cultural racism was not unique to the world of fine art, however, but can be seen to have crossed the border between high and low modes of art. While the fine arts usually denied a central place for marginal racial and ethnic groups, or, in the case of Eastman Johnson, perpetuated a romantic vision of slavery through his attempt to humanise and idealise forms, in popular art outsiders frequently took centre stage in the composition but were stereotyped through comic or caricature.\textsuperscript{17} Henry Louis Stephens’ \textit{The Highly Intelligent Contraband} (Figure 2) highlights such a portrayal of the African form popular in cartoon prints of the illustrated press. Although distortions are a basis of caricature sketches, it is the racial attributes of the contraband which are here massively distorted, through the sharp slope of the forehead and the nose and lips strongly protruding. The cartoon shows a prediction of Horace Greeley running from the “general stampede” of contrabands (fugitive slaves used in the Union military) he so tirelessly championed would help the Union cause. The reversal of figure and shadow signifies fears of racial role-reversal as the once ‘shadow’ of the Negro has become a monstrous figure which haunts the streets, while the white man has become a fleeing shade of his former self.\textsuperscript{18}
Similarly, Frank Bellew’s cartoon from Harper’s Weekly of May 1863, The Slave Owner’s Spectre (Figure 3), highlights both the racial distortion of blacks frequenting the illustrated press, as well as the precarious issue of emancipation within society through a haunting parody of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”. Sitting in a dark, cramped room, the slave-owner, ruggedly dressed and unshaven, with a thick black cloud of smoke rising above his head and holding an upright dagger to emphasise his hellish and violent demeanour, scowls at a raven-like man sitting above a bust of the abolitionist Horace Greeley. To the slave-owner’s question, “Will you blacks be Cattle, as you used to before?”, quoth the man-Raven, “Nebermore”. With the Constitution as his spittoon, while ironically hunched over his Bible, the slave-owner here is clearly demonised.
The visual symbol of the shadow as a metaphor for darker forces has been used in art and sketches for centuries. The thick shadows looming over the room symbolise a living hell that the slaveholder sees before him, while simultaneously, the man-raven casts its shadow over the world, haunting the white mind. However, the most disturbing element of the work is perhaps the monstrous half-human, half-raven creature who, through its ambiguous state, symbolises the uncertain position of blacks as neither wholly slave nor free, as well as the inability of whites to come to terms with former slaves as their equals and fully ‘human’ beings. This disparity
between ethnic groups that could not be seen to amalgamate, like the opposites of black and white on a painter’s palette, or light and dark in nature, infiltrated nineteenth century stereotypical beliefs, and was perpetuated through art, literature, and scientific ‘evidence’ in different forms ranging from cultural racism to romantic racism, which will be explored in the following section.

**Cultural and Romantic Racism: The Fears and Hopes Surrounding Emancipation**

Cultural racism through artworks of the period extended to the notion in many Northern minds of ‘romantic racialism’. This idea was sourced from a mixture of the stereotyped slave depicted in pro-slavery visual and literary culture, as well as a heightened consciousness of white racial characteristics to consider the ‘different’ black as a kind of anti-Caucasian which could never integrate into society. This romantic racialism, that saw blacks stereotypically as docile, child-like and inferior, was reinforced in the North in the early stages of war through the failure of Slaves to engage in an uprising once their masters had left for war. Charles Sumner reinforced this point in October 1862, when he argued that emancipation would not lead to rebellion because, “the African is not cruel, vindictive, or harsh, but gentle, forgiving and kind.”

The climate of war and the imminent collapse of slavery naturally provoked much speculation on what would happen to slaves after they were emancipated, and this debate was in no way exempt from the world of art. It is also significant to note that, as is evident from the complex web of opinions on the social, political and racial implications of emancipation, the division of the country in the Civil War was not as simple as North and South. In the North, it was not uncommon to find varying degrees of notions of white superiority and cultural racism among even critics of the slave system. Seen in the context of a country that was still very much an ‘experiment’ - a representative government stretched over a huge land mass, held together by law rather than memory, and a product of a global history of European ideas, African slavery, conquest of land from American Indians and European powers, as well as extensive European migration - it is not surprising that the social and political climate consisted of a complex web of ideas, in a country of millions of individuals who held just about every view imaginable. Further, where ideas of emancipation were often connected to economic and political agendas for both Northerners and Southerners, slavery was often disconnected from issues of race, and
the racially derogative prejudices which infiltrated contemporary language did not necessarily equate to a support for slavery.\textsuperscript{27} Emancipated slaves were seen to hold the capability of being either a help or a hindrance in restoring the Union and securing victory.\textsuperscript{28}

Those in the North are generally acknowledged to have held two views on the question of emancipation and the ultimate destiny of freed slaves: that of the more radical abolitionists who saw blacks as permanent Americans who could make a valuable contribution to society, versus the more conservative who felt that, in light of the “natural” Christianity inherent in blacks, colonisation was both necessary and desirable.\textsuperscript{29} Lincoln initially supported colonisation, remarking in a meeting with African American leaders in August 1862,

\begin{quote}
“You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races. Where it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence.”\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

The establishment of black colonies in Central America or the Caribbean was supported with a new urgency by Lincoln and the Republican Party in the belief that it would solve the problem of racial divisions through offering freedom and independence for the blacks in light of what Lincoln obviously regarded as the unalterable facts of race relations.\textsuperscript{31} The original controversy over the future of slavery in new territories had escalated in intensity until Lincoln’s election and the secession of the South in 1860 and 1861, and the struggle over which institution would ultimately triumph did not halt with the issue of emancipation.\textsuperscript{32} However, following the decision to enlist blacks in the Union Army, whatever its original motivation, the effect dramatically reduced support for colonisation, as it was difficult to ask a man to fight for a country he had no right to live in.\textsuperscript{33}

The hellish extent of the debate over slavery and emancipation is represented in David Gilmour Blythe’s work \textit{The Higher Law (Southern Attack on Liberty)} of 1861 (Figure 4). Almost unique among his contemporaries, Blythe bridged the divide between high and low art by incorporating sensational and grotesque cartoon symbology into the medium of oil painting, creating an artistic hybrid that presented the war as a phantasmagorical nightmare.\textsuperscript{34} Both a fervent Republican and an opponent to abolitionism, Blythe showed contempt for almost all groups of people, which is
evident in his works that appear to criticise not one, but all viewpoints. Both the radical abolitionist and the Southern slaveholder in this work are demonised through their pointed ears, though the Southerner more so, which is highlighted through his and his slaves’ harsh shadows, as well as the thick cloud of smoke which falls behind, stretching towards the wounded figure of Liberty. Bleeding from both sides of her chest, she has been stabbed literally and metaphorically by both sides of extremist debate, the disastrous calamity of which is emphasised through the engraving on the tombstone behind her, “In Memory of Common Sense, 1861.” The effect on liberty through disregard for the law is symbolised by the crumpled and torn pages of ‘Human Law’ under the foot of the abolitionist and ‘Compact’ or Constitution under that of the Southerner. The book held by the abolitionist, entitled ‘Higher Law’, makes a clear reference to William H. Seward’s 1850 speech which denounced the Fugitive Slave Law by appealing to “a higher law than the Constitution,” thereby highlighting corruption in the law, while the bales of cotton stacked behind the Southerner highlight the economic motivations behind the corrupt institution of slavery.
The future plight of the emancipated slave is highlighted through the figure on the far left who, in the shadows of the white man, wears an apron to reiterate that he still must work as a servant, which is reiterated by the hunched, pathetic figure of the slave on the far right who wonders, ‘What dat nigga ‘bout ober da?’. Additionally, while the abolitionist’s back is turned, the seemingly ungrateful Negro takes the time to pick his pocket. The demonic undertones of the work, underscored by the fiery dragon in the hellish centre of the work, and a palette of fiery reds and earthy browns, create a Last-Judgement type artistic structure, though with the absence of a heavenly side, thereby reiterating Blythe’s view that political extremism from either side not only threatens the Constitution, Union and liberties, but is also leading society to an apocalyptic destination.38

Traditional ‘Last Judgement’ imagery can also be seen in Thomas Nast’s *Emancipation Proclamation* wood engraving that appeared in *Harpers Weekly* in January 1863 (Figure 5), which underscores the imminent reality of emancipation.39 The composition focuses around a central scene of the freedman’s familial life, with a happy family gathered around the warmth of a stove marked “Union”, occupying the usual position of Christ in the Last Judgement structure. The centrality of this image, presenting domestic values and morality, coincides with the ideas of Northern abolitionist women, who, as the moral arbiters of social life, saw the institution of slavery as an upset to the glorified maternal bond and domestic life.40 On the left side of the “damned” are highlighted scenes of the evils of slave life under the Confederacy, with a ship arriving to the shore with human slaves stacked like livestock and fugitive slaves hunted in the top left, followed by a public slave auction, and the flogging and branding of slaves like cattle at the bottom, reinforcing the animosity and barbarism of the slave institution. In contrast, on the right, scenes show prospective visions of the freedman’s life after the war, with children going to public school and a hunched African American receiving his pay check. However, this hunched figure assumes the position of a beggar, which in effect highlights the ‘romanticised racialism’ view of blacks as humble and child-like, as well as possible fears over the failure of freedmen to integrate and fend for themselves in society. Surrounding the word ‘Emancipation’ at the top, the theme continues, with two hags and the three-headed Cerberus of the mythological Underworld, fleeing in fear, while on the right a woman holding an olive branch of peace and scales representing justice stands in victory, thereby reinforcing a wholly optimistic view of emancipation, where there is hope for triumph even if the freedman still must rely on the ‘white man’ in some respects.41
The illustration was re-issued later to celebrate the end of the Civil War, with the inclusion of a portrait of Lincoln in the smaller central circle. Although Nast portrayed African Americans with the civility and respect they had won and deserved, the portrait of Lincoln in the main central image, and especially the later addition of a central image of Lincoln in place of father time, highlight the perpetuated imagery of Lincoln as a Christ-like figure in the lives of emancipated slaves, a recurring theme which will be explored in greater detail later.

The failure to realise the competency and equality of African Americans as a race is shown in George Caleb Bingham’s controversial work, *Order No. 11* (Figure 6), the position of the black figures being only complementary to the dramatic action, further emphasising their shadowed existence in society. The work focuses on a moment of a historical incident where, on the 25 August 1863, General Thomas Ewing announced his notorious ‘General Order No. 11’, which ordered that, with only a few exceptions, all farm residents living on the border counties of western Missouri must abandon their homes within 15 days before they would be removed by
force and their properties destroyed. Although Missouri ultimately stayed loyal to the Union, the widespread conflict by the onslaught of Confederate guerrillas near the Kansas border required drastic action, though was seen by many to represent the corruption of power on behalf of the military.42

The dramatic action of the painting is focused around the left side of the work, where the melodramatic gestures of the figures highlight the tension in the scene. The old man and the officer stand vertically among the chaos, defiantly protecting their positions, while one daughter clings to her father, imploring him to control his temper while another young lady kneels, begging the officer not to draw his pistol. As is conventional in pictorial language, the women are used to charge the scene with emotion, with the two daughters in desperation, the son lying dead with his wife bent in grief over him, and the patriarch’s wife having fainted in the arms of her female slave. Here the African Americans act a step below the women, operating marginally as spectators and not directing the action of the scene. The black maid servant forms part of the core group, but acts only to support her white mistress, and the two slaves exiting the scene on the right of the canvas have been cast out of the scene, which of course also symbolises their
“freedom” into society. The vast spatial distance between the core group and the two slaves who leave the scene could be seen as symbolic of their homelessness and isolation from society, while their gestures of fear, grief and desperation signal the precarious position of newly “freed” slaves with nowhere to go. The pair, without coincidence, also appear to be a direct quotation of the figures of Adam and Eve in *The Expulsion* by Masaccio (Figure 7), relating the two expulsions and also seeming to liken the cast out slaves to children, as the children of God cast out from paradise and now left to their own resources in a new world.  

![Figure 7](image1)

*Figure 7*
Masaccio, *Expulsion From the Garden of Eden*, c. 1425-7
Fresco
Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

Although the date of the work’s production may suggest the subject included references to the issue of the newly emancipated slaves, Bingham was insistent that his focus was on the extreme and corrupt tendencies of military Power. Although the work portrays loyal citizens and servants whose lives had been overturned by corrupt policies, Bingham rejected claims that he was a Confederate sympathiser and the work propaganda for slavery. Despite his emphasis on civil rights and freedoms, he, like many Americans, could not see blacks as covered by the same constitutional rights as other citizens that so moved him to imperatively paint this response.

![Order No. 11 (Detail)](image2)
The ambiguous position of ‘emancipated’ slaves in society is further highlighted in the small, popular statuette *The Freedman* (Figure 8), by John Quincy Adams Ward, exhibited in New York shortly after the publication of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. The figure, neither standing nor seated, with broken shackles which he still grasps tightly in his right fist, signifies the ambivalent position of ‘freed’ slaves. In 1864, northern critic James Jackson Jarves wrote,

“*A naked slave has burst his shackles, and with uplifted face thanks God for freedom. We have seen nothing in our sculpture more soul-lifting or more comprehensively eloquent. It tells in one word the whole sad story of slavery and the bright story of emancipation.*”

Later, critics missed the dramatic charge of the moment in history depicted, with Lorado Taft writing rather vaguely, “*it is as notable for its containment as for its more technical excellence*”, thereby shadowing the narrative depicted with the work’s technical qualities.

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Figure 8
Bronze
49.5 x 36.8 x 17.8cm
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
African American art critic Freeman Henry Morris Murray confirmed later that critics had failed to historically contextualise the visual appearance of the statuette, noting the figure is a “Freed-man but not a Free-man”. Murray suggested the clasping of the broken chain links symbolised the isolation still experienced by Freed-men, “in schools, in public places, in social life; exclusion from political life; a curtailed school curriculum purportedly adapted to his special needs and limited capacities.” Additionally, critics had missed the significance of the solitary figure, as Jarves had remarked the statue looks to God to thank for freedom, though Murray sees the single figure as a contradiction to the popular idea that the slaves were set free and ignoring those who fought for it. Indeed, it would have been a mockery to have spoken of ‘handing’ freedom when there were currently a quarter million blacks sacrificing their lives to fight for the Union. However, despite the beauty and idealism with which the African form is finely rendered, the vagueness of action signifies the limit of slave autonomy which audiences were willing to accept, while the restraint also highlights the uncertain position of a figure who stares off into an undetermined space, symbolising both the isolation of the freedmen and women, as well as the compromised character of the Emancipation Proclamation.

**Freedom ‘Bestowed’ or Freedom Earned? How Emancipation Was Realised and Is Remembered**

Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September, 1862, perhaps brought about the greatest change in the tactics of the Union and indeed, redefined the official purpose of the war, by acknowledging that slavery played as much a part as saving the Union. After starting his office with the Republican Party and stating that, under the Constitution, Congress could not interfere with the domestic institution of slavery, or take private property without compensation, and that, on emancipating slaves he proclaimed, “I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so,” Lincoln’s plans for emancipation signalled a turning point in the Civil War whereby he announced to free all slaves in those states in rebellion. Through a need to destroy the role of slavery in supporting the Confederate cause, as well as to enlist black volunteers in the war effort, the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 1862 and the final Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, turned the destruction of slavery into a war aim and the destruction of that institution a matter of war policy. Many critics have therefore argued that Lincoln was motivated by political and not humanitarian reasons, which is
why he freed slaves only in areas under Confederate control and not within the four critical border states remaining loyal to the Union. Nonetheless, despite the motivations behind the Proclamation, and the fact that many saw the issues of slavery and race as distinct, the Act itself had the effect of arousing the question of considering the role of freed black Americans within the American Republic. The Emancipation Proclamation indeed had its limitations and achievements; it had not freed all slaves, was only valid during the war, and had certainly not dealt with the underlying racial attitudes which had originally supported the enslavement of black people.

Amongst the commemorative artworks, sculptures, monuments and illustrations which deal with the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln’s role in freedom for blacks can be seen a striking feature: the idea that freedom was ‘bestowed’ upon blacks and not necessarily earned. Certainly, without detailing arguments of motivations, Lincoln played an imperative role in the abolition of the institution of slavery, but too often the role of blacks in fighting for their own freedom is underplayed, especially in visual commemorations. Thomas Ball’s famous Emancipation Group (Figure 9), unveiled in Washington, D.C. on the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1876, remains a quintessential image of noble liberator and grateful slave. The work was so popular in fact that a replica was ordered for the city of Boston. Here Ball casts a towering figure of Lincoln outstretching his arm in a prophetic gesture, a gesture emphasised by the mirroring diagonal slope of the kneeling slave’s back. The formation attributes an almost Christ-like persona to Lincoln, as not merely just the great emancipator but the great healer also. Although a friend of Lincoln, Frederick Douglass admitted that the President, “was pre-eminently the white man’s President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men,” and that, “the Union was more to him than our freedom under our future.” Likewise, the memorial erected in Washington D.C. appears a white man’s memory of emancipation, created for a white audience. The kneeling figure accepts his freedom not as something earned but as something bestowed; the freedman is not depicted as a soldier but as a half-naked slave, while the kneeling position emasculates the man and consequently casts a shadow over the idea of what it is to truly be free.
Traditionally, nineteenth century sculpture placed subordinate or complementary figures in kneeling positions, often directing their gaze to a separate public monument of a notable white male, or when placed within the same monument, often acted as conventional allegorical figures, acknowledging their ‘deliverance’ from oppression or tyranny by the protagonist. Edmonia Lewis’ *Forever Free* of 1867 (Figure 10) shows a freedman and freedwoman adopting the same kneeling positions, this time from an artist of African American and Ojibwa (Chippewa) Indian descent. Carved from white marble, the work seems to both uphold and counteract artistic and thematic stereotypes. The material of white marble itself is ironic and could be seen as an attempt to ‘liberate’ the medium from its history of maintaining the power of white mythology and history in art, thereby elevating the status of African Americans in art. However, Freeman Murray was disturbed that the physiognomy of the kneeling female resembled a white woman, remarking that “what Black Folk really need and should strive for, is not the Caucasian’s physical features but the Caucasian’s opportunity.” The figures’ gestures and facial expressions seem to echo the same thematic difficulties with other commemorations of emancipation in that the contribution of black people to their own freedom is highly understated.
While the robust male figure holds his hand in triumph and rests his left foot on a discarded ball and chain, he gazes upward along with the kneeling female, in a gesture of gratefulness for the ‘bestowal’ of freedom from some higher power.

Similarly, religious iconography is employed in the small engraving, *Proclamation of Emancipation* by Richardson of New York (Figure 11), which perpetuates the “bestowal” imagery beyond public monuments. Similar to Lewis’ statue, the black figures kneel or grasp their hearts, throwing their arms and eyes towards the sky in gestures of thanks for their freedom. President Lincoln enters from a door on the left of the work, raising his hand like a priest blessing his congregation, while a Union soldier enters from the right, charging in like a knight on his white horse to deliver a message to a young boy. Most curious of all, the vision of the hand of God appears from the sky, suggesting Emancipation came out of divine intervention, not military necessity, and attributing again a Christ-like demeanour to Lincoln who acts as a divine messenger.
The common theme highlighted throughout these examples of kneeling slave and noble white liberator demonstrates a visual coding which signifies the common belief that white men emancipated slaves of their own free will and in turn that freedmen were somehow indebted to them. Lincoln had himself acknowledged the need for black troops in the Union Army, proclaiming,

“*Why should they do anything for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive – even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made it must be kept.*”\(^{61}\)

Clearly, emancipation, black troops, and Union victory had become intertwined. Black troops were now a necessity, freedom was their motivation and indeed they fought for it. By debasing the contribution of black people to their own freedom, the white majority could omit the confession of their sins regarding slavery, preserve the image of themselves as a democratic people, and perpetuate the myth of black inferiority and dependence on a white paternal power.\(^{62}\) Despite its achievements, the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequent abolition of slavery clearly did not dissolve the underlying racial attitudes and stereotypes which had instigated enslavement of blacks in the first place, and this cultural racialism can be seen to radiate from
the artworks which commemorate the steps towards freedom by too often demeaning the role of blacks in their own struggle which certainly did not end with emancipation, for once they had won their freedom, they would continue to fight for their equality for more than two hundred years to come.

Conclusion

Despite criticisms from nineteenth century contemporaries and modern critics of the failure of the Civil War to have produced iconic historical paintings, the plethora of works related to the war and its associated social, political and humanitarian issues show that while the problem may have been deemed qualitative, it was certainly not quantitative. Moreover, despite the identified ‘representational crisis’ in dealing with the horrors and meaning of the war head-on, it is clear that there is certainly no lack of works across the cultural and artistic hierarchies dealing with the issue of slavery which formed a major contributing factor in instigating conflict both literally on the battlefield and ideologically within societal debate.

While art historians, in studying the art of the Civil War period may overlook those works of ‘low’ culture excluded from the canon of fine art, in studying the political, racial, social, economic and moral issues and beliefs surrounding the debate over the institution of slavery, popular art prints and cartoons that frequented the pages of the various forms of illustrated press cannot be disregarded in their significance. As the American Annual Cyclopaedia pointed out,

“The tragic or pathetic element, except as developed in the numerous clever designs for the illustrated newspapers, seems to be that with which the artistic mind of the country is unable or unwilling to grapple.”

Presented with a mass readership rather than a cultivated-elite audience, artists of the illustrated press were freed from the bounds of the critical world of fine arts and as a result, relied on more direct and sensationalist techniques to convey their ideas. Further, the public circulation of popular art brought with it the greater power to persuade and propagandise than paintings which may hide in an artist’s studio or the home of a private patron, thereby allowing the various depictions of issues of emancipation to reach a larger audience. As has been shown to be
equally important is the use and power of visual imagery in history, and the relevance of visual culture to historical study. In adopting detailed analyses of visual codes and symbols, artworks allow us to embrace an alternative way of observing and learning from history. For this reason, it is necessary in studying art of the Civil War to not neglect that which is deemed ‘low’ or popular culture, but to instead follow a post-modern critique of placing fine and popular art as two sides of a coin which combine to reinforce the construction of social values, as well as recognise that insight into the historical, political and social tensions enabled by visual culture is invaluable to historical study of the American Civil War, and the history of the institution of slavery and its abolition.

2 Ibid., p. 1.
3 Ibid., p. 3.
8 Holzer, Boritt and Neely, ‘The Art of War’, p. 82.
9 Burns, ‘Cartoons in Color’, p. 66.
10 Winslow Homer is an important exception raised by Sarah Burns, who treated subjects of the war throughout his career and appeared to embrace the war’s unresolved ambiguities. However, as can be seen in his Trooper Meditating Beside a Grave, ca. 1865, the work is still restrained in its depiction of the details of the horrors of war; the soldier remains anonymous and the reality of the horrors of the war is six feet underground. Sarah Burns, ‘Cartoons in Color’, pp. 66-67.


19 Burns, *Painting the Dark Side*, p. 144.

20 Burns, ‘Cartoons in Color’, p. 76.


24 Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, p. 159-60.


27 Chandra Manning, ‘White Union Soldiers on Slavery and Race’, p. 204.


29 Ibid., p. 130.


31 Ibid., p. 138.

32 Ibid., p. 167.


34 Ibid., p. 73.

35 Ibid., p. 75.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 77


43 Ibid. 16.

44 Ibid., 18-19.


57 Ibid., 132.


59 Ibid., p. 429.


64 Holzer, Boritt and Neely, ‘The Art of War’, pp. 82-3.

65 Burns, ‘Cartoons in Color’, p. 68.

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