



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Reconstructions: The Material Culture of the Postbellum Plantation, 1861–77

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In the postbellum period, myriad aspects of the South's economy, society, and identity were in flux, and debates raged over its place in relation to the larger United States. Using material culture as a lens through which to view the period, I investigate the ways by which northern image-makers figured the southern ruined plantation as an icon of the defeated Confederacy. Most immediately, this period signaled the end of slavery, the central institution of southern life. The disintegration of a system of labor, a form of race relations, and the foundation of a distinctive planter class undermined the very physical structures that they upheld. This transition in productive systems was of interest to northerners on civilizing missions and aesthetic expeditions as well as southerners struggling to restore a semblance of normalcy to their lives. The plantation remained an obsessional object of investigation, commentary, and contestation. By analyzing four core sets of objects—a set of war-era photographs that critique the plantation, archaeological materials that testify to the appropriation strategies employed by newly freed slaves, transplanted northern architecture that took possession of the southern landscape, and an urban neighborhood far from the rural estate that replicated elements of the plantation environment—my project will chart the material formulation of the plantation as a colony occupied by the North. Figurations of the South as conquered alienated territory became the true organizing grammar for the relationship between a victorious North and a defeated South. Setting out from the discipline of art history in which I consider objects through an analytic framework informed by postcolonial studies as my primary documents, I will bring material evidence to bear on the ways that northerners came to know a South that was separate from the North and the means by which white and black southerners pushed back against this formulation. I hope to begin the process of rethinking monolithic representations of the region and to open the door for more critical readings of objects used in the postbellum South. Through my focus on the postwar plantation, I will open the possibility of new discourses of material culture inherent in the historical connections between objects and ideas.