Innovations

Images enrich knowledge of slavery

Art, drawings show how plantation life worked.

Dale Tomich, professor of sociology, finds that artwork reveals much about plantations.

Scholars who study relations between masters and slaves need to look at that subject through a new lens. They need to look harder at the physical settings, says Dale Tomich, professor of sociology and history at Binghamton University.

“Ninety-five percent of the books we’ve read on slavery are about the master and slave in a very abstract way,” says Tomich, who has written extensively on slavery in the Americas. Few scholars have examined slavery together with the “big houses,” slave quarters, workshops and fields where the drama of plantation life took place.

“We think that if you put the actors in space, it tells you much more about how they interacted, what the conditions of slavery were, how slaves resisted and how they worked,” Tomich says.

QUESTIONS, SOME ANSWERS

Since 2005, Tomich and three colleagues have been harvesting fresh insights from plantations where slaves in the 19th century produced sugar in Cuba, coffee in Brazil and cotton in Mississippi. A $270,000 collaborative research grant from the Getty Foundation funded the interdisciplinary project, which focused on how owners constructed, and artists represented, physical space on plantations. Tomich conducted the research with historians from Brazil and Cuba. The project ended this year.

One major goal of the research was to learn how planters rearranged their properties in response to new technologies and increasing world demand for their products. Those changes helped the three regions become the world’s top producers of sugar, coffee and cotton. A related goal was to see how masters used space to organize the land and control their slaves.

Why, for example, did Brazilian planters build elaborate houses close to the fields and slave quarters, while Cubans kept more modest homes on their plantations, and planters in the Natchez Valley of Mississippi built villas in suburbs far from their crops?

“Each of these zones had a very distinctive local response to changes in the world economy,” Tomich says. But those responses had common threads. “The most common element is the reorganization of space around slave labor, depending on the crop.”

IS SEEING BELIEVING?

The researchers also wanted to learn how scholars can best use images of plantations — in 19th century paintings, engravings, photographs and maps — to interpret the commercial and social dynamics. Was the tower portrayed in a lithograph of a Cuban plantation designed as a vantage point for overseeing slaves or as a symbol of power? When a map of the railroad line...
in Cuba depicts cane fields as geometric shapes, shows clusters of sugar mills around each station and indicates the time it takes to travel from place to place, what does that say about the industrialization of sugar production?

The idea for the project arose from Tomich's studies of 19th century Cuban sugar plantations. Although he found few written records from that period, he did find rich artistic resources, such as the collection of lithographs by French artist Eduardo Laplante called *Views from the Most Important Sugar Refineries in Cuba*.

Those pictures depicted sugar production in detail, complete with the machinery used in each step. But Tomich wasn't sure whether to treat such images as objective illustrations, or as works of art shaped by the artist's imagination. He used the Getty grant to try to find out.

Tomich chose the three regions for the study because in each, from the 1820s through the 1860s, industrialization changed the ways in which planters used slaves.

Working sometimes separately and sometimes together, the scholars studied written records and visual images and visited remains of plantations. They rode horses across one coffee plantation to get a feel for the landscape. Tomich climbed to the top of the tower portrayed in the lithograph.

That ascent convinced him that the tower stood mainly as a reminder of the power that controlled the slaves, not as a platform for watching them work. Similarly, big houses on plantations in all three areas were tokens of power, visible from every corner of the property, Tomich says. “We went to a lot of plantations where the slaves had a better view of the big house than the big house had of the slaves.”

**FINDING CONTEXT**

Although planters in all three regions designed their plantations to convey this message of dominance, they laid out the properties in strikingly diverse ways. Each arrangement tells a story about local master-slave relations.

“In Brazil and the United States, there was an ideal of paternalism that governed the masters’ view of their slaves,” explains Rafael de Bivar Marquese, professor of history at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and one of Tomich’s colleagues. But planters in the two countries chose different ways to express that ideal. Brazilian masters kept slaves close to their own homes and to the areas where slaves processed the harvested coffee. Those slaves lived in barracks, with separate sections for men and women. In Mississippi, slaves lived in family groups in small cabins built far from the master’s home.

In Cuba, the master lived far from the slave barracks. In fact, thanks to the railroad, a Cuban master might divide his time between a smaller home on the plantation and an elaborate town house in Havana. “The slave quarters were separated from the master’s house but close to the working buildings, with no kind of paternalism in the relations between masters and slaves,” Marquese says. Cuban planters treated their slaves as units of production in an increasingly mechanized industry.

As for whether to treat the plantation images as literal documents or subjective works of art, the researchers decided that the answer is “both.” The pictures portray real landscapes, buildings and machines, but the artists also control how viewers understand what they see. The map of the Cuban railroad, for example, with its straight-sided cane fields and notes on travel times, shows how Cuban plantations were evolving into factory farms.

By studying actual spaces where slaves lived and worked, and artists’ interpretations of plantation life, scholars gain new perspectives on the era when slave-based agriculture met the industrial revolution, Tomich says. “I think this opens a new way of looking at history, and using these kinds of sources in ways that people haven’t used them before.”