

Summaries of the articles by Vlach and Lovell

Generally my identification of the thesis comes in the first paragraph, my summary in the following paragraphs and my discussion of relevance to class in the last. I use the last paragraph to identify not just the topic the article relates to but how it may either augment or contradict material from class.

Vlach: “The Plantation Landscape”

Vlach gives you his thesis in the second paragraph when he describes *the act of creating the slaves’ landscape as being a reaction to the landscape and plans of the white landowner* – plans which involved the assertion of their control and dominance over nature and other people. As a result, *in order to understand how slaves refashioned the landscape to suit their own social needs, we must first understand how the landowners shaped the landscape. Only then will we have a complete picture of the plantation landscape.*

Vlach then proceeds to do exactly what he has laid out in the preceding introduction. He begins with some history of the earliest plantations which showed little interest in the “look” of the land or building, to the arrival of the Georgian style and the elite plantation. It is interesting that he uses Bacon’s Castle as one of his examples, since the textbook also included this house but did not discuss it in terms of the growth of plantations. (In fact, it was impossible to know from the textbook’s paragraph that this was a plantation manor.) Vlach continues to discuss the growth of the landscape and makes a reference to Dell Upton’s discussion of the “articulated processional landscape” (on page 101) although he only refers to the part of Upton’s discussion which relates to plantations.

Although his thesis concerns the ways in which African Americans “remake” the plantation landscape, slightly less than half of the essay is devoted specifically to this issue. This part of the article focuses on the ways in which a plantation’s slaves staked out territorial claims to land which they technically did not own. Here we get another statement of the author’s thesis: that although these appropriations or territorial claims were often invisible to other people’s eyes, they were an important part of the slaves’ attempts to rebuild their lives and social connections.

The article relates to the first unit of class material in two important ways: it fills in the many gaps in the textbook related to the organization of plantations and it provides a much fuller context for understanding paintings such as “Plantation Scene.” Using Vlach’s argument, we need to see it as more than a reenactment of the slaves’ cultural memories. This reenactment (if it is one) is being done as part of the goal of claiming the land for their own social needs.

Margaretta Lovell: “Reading Eighteenth-Century American Family Portraits”

Lovell doesn't seem to have an explicit thesis as her article is more concerned with a “detailed investigation” of paintings in order to discern “commonalities” and “patterns of usage,” as she states on page 244. But having said that, her article does do more than just describe numerous paintings. What seems to be her thesis comes at the end of that same paragraph where she says that *these family portraits should be understood as social documents, rather than as representations of “specific realities.”* As a thesis, it is not controversial but it is interesting in that she appears to be suggesting that we should not approach these paintings with a goal of analyzing their painterly and pictorial qualities so much as a goal of reading the social changes that are documented through a comparison of changes in these paintings over the course of a century.

She then proceeds to analyze (or read) a rather large number of paintings, including both family portraits and paintings of the husband and wife, noting that after around 1760, family portraits become much more common than they had been. Lovell identifies the representation of the child as one of the important changes and relates it to changed attitudes about the family and the role of children in the family with the development of more permissive child-rearing procedures. Yet, Lovell notes, not all of the changes can be attributed to changes in social relationships and expectations – depictions of these changes are accompanied by artists' increasing skill in the rendering of anatomy and perspective. But even as she notes this development, she asserts that the changes are not artist-specific but period-specific. Because this period is not one which gives equal rights to women, it is still difficult to explain the increased focus on the mother in the family portrait. Lovell tries to explain it by suggesting that her importance reflects the growing importance of the role of the mother in preparing the next generation, and to some degree, this is a valid explanation since it does conform to historical understanding of those changes. But she then undercuts it by noting that at the same time that these changes are taking place, some artists are attempting to “secularize” religious subject matter by basing portraits on religious icons, and other artists are continuing to make paintings which look like the earlier, formal style of portraits.

The article has a very direct relationship to class – it is probably quite likely that the authors of the textbook used Lovell as one of their sources for some of the discussions of family portraits and the topic is clearly relevant since this was a primary form of art-making in the colonial period. It also contradicts any attempt made to see early portraits as having a concern with revealing the inner personality or persona of the subject in the painting. This is a partial contradiction of some of the textbook's discussion but it may be one of the weaknesses of the article.