African Abrahams, Lucretias and Men of Sorrows: Allegory and Allusion in the Brazilian Anti-slavery Lithographs (1827-1835) of Johann Moritz Rugendas

Robert W. Slenes


To cite this article: Robert W. Slenes (2002): African Abrahams, Lucretias and Men of Sorrows: Allegory and Allusion in the Brazilian Anti-slavery Lithographs (1827-1835) of Johann Moritz Rugendas, Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies, 23:2, 147-168

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/714005238

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
African Abrahams, Lucretias and Men of Sorrows: Allegory and Allusion in the Brazilian Anti-slavery Lithographs (1827–1835) of Johann Moritz Rugendas

ROBERT W. SLENES

The burial procession, rising into view from the valley below, has halted for the priest to read from his book of ritual (Figure 12). The dark skin of the deceased and of the mourners, together with the palm trees on the left, remind the early-nineteenth-century observer that this is not Europe, despite the Italianate church dome in the distance. Indeed, the legend to this lithograph identifies its subject as the ‘Burial of a Black Man in [Salvador] Bahia’. This is the last of 100 illustrations in J.M. Rugendas’s *Malerische Reise in Brasilien* (‘Artistic Travels in Brazil’), a book published in instalments, in separate German and French editions, between 1827 and 1835.1

‘Black’ (*neger*), as used by Bavarian artist Rugendas, has the meaning that was current in Brazil at the time; Portuguese *negro*, while denoting colour, strongly connoted ‘African’, ‘slave’ or ‘ex-slave’. Whether or not the deceased in this picture is a bondsman, his simple bier indicates modest status. Yet he has clearly ‘died well’. His body merits the attendance of a priest, several acolytes, pall-bearers dressed in their ‘Sunday best’ and a substantial cortège. Furthermore, it is not destined for the municipal field (located in the valley, far to the right), where indigents and most slaves were interred; thus it must have been en route to a church or churchyard for consecrated burial.2

Rugendas, however, is not concerned here only with ethnographic accuracy. He insists on associating the corpse of the ‘black man’ with another body: that of the suffering Christ, the ‘Saviour’ honoured by the city’s name. Shown explicitly on the crucifix at the head of the procession and implicitly in an acolyte’s banner bearing the sign of the skull (symbol of Golgotha, the place of the Crucifixion), Christ’s body is present above all in the church of ‘Our Lady of Mercy’ (*Piedade*, or *Pietà*), which presides in
the background, metaphorically bringing the Virgin, mourning her Son, centre stage. The ‘black man’ here has not just died ‘in Christ’; he has become the ‘Man of Sorrows’ – a striking image, particularly given its place in the sequence of Rugendas’s prints. Artistic Travels is organized in a Humboldtian manner, first presenting Brazilian ‘landscapes’ (human beings in the natural environment) and then focusing on people, with sections devoted sequentially to ‘portraits and dress’, ‘manners and customs of the Indians’, ‘European life’ and finally ‘manners and customs of the blacks’. Why does Rugendas leave the section on blacks/Africans/slaves to the end, and why does he want the Christianized ‘black man’ – indeed, the ‘black man’ subsumed to the suffering Christ – to be the last image the reader receives from Brazil?

The lithographs in Artistic Travels have usually been regarded as mimetic in character, based (as their legends insist) on sketches ‘drawn from life’. Indeed, Rugendas spent three years in Brazil (1822–25) as the artist in a Russian scientific mission led by naturalist G.H. von Langsdorff. Although he broke with Langsdorff shortly before returning to Europe, his Brazilian work reflected his employer’s concern for
accurate representation of mankind in nature, as well as his own solid artistic training. The combination much impressed the doyen of naturalists at the time, Alexander von Humboldt, on whose recommendation the *Artistic Travels* was published. The book’s prints, for their part, largely remained true to Rugendas’s final pictures; clearly, the artist closely supervised the lithographers. Thus, one may properly speak of ‘Rugendas’s lithographs’, even though he signed his name to only three of them.

Yet, despite the artist’s concern for accuracy, I argue here that the *Malerische Reise* was more of a ‘lamp’, directed with political intent, than it was a ‘mirror’. Rugendas had an intellectual and artistic agenda that guided his ‘documentary’ work and that must be understood before his scenes may be safely scanned for other purposes. An examination of the subjects and sequence of his prints in conjunction with his text (written by his friend and collaborator, the journalist Victor Aimé Huber) demonstrates the artist’s repudiation of the slave trade and slavery, his defence of the ‘moral character’ of Africans and his optimism for the future of Brazil as a racially mixed nation. A close reading of ‘Burial of a Black Man’ and other lithographs that highlight the suffering bodies of male and female slaves then reveals the central place of allusion and allegory in his argument. By associating Africans with biblical moral figures and perhaps a classical heroine, Rugendas exalted them as worthy founders of the new Brazilian nation. Yet, his unusual images, conceived in Paris largely between 1826 and 1828, did not express a radical political vision; rather, they expounded a conservative Christian reformism that was typical of mainstream French anti-slavery thought of the time.

The illustrations regarding ‘the manners and customs of the blacks’ begin with a dramatic portrayal of the Middle Passage. In ‘Blacks in the Ship’s Hold’ (Figure 13), the frequent dearth of water on the slavers, referred to explicitly in the text of *Artistic Travels*, is personified in the African who is straining to obtain drink through the hatch and in the dead body being removed by sailors; indeed, ‘lack of water’ is transformed by these figures into a powerful metonym of desperation and death. Subsequent prints then follow Africans from their disembarkation in a Brazilian port to their sale in a slave market, their trip into the interior of the country and their integration into the slave quarters on their new owner’s estate. In other scenes, bondspeople are portrayed working hard — and being punished — in rural, then urban contexts. ‘Black’ dances and amusements are shown next: the *batuque*, the *lundu* and the ‘game’ (martial art) of *capoeira*. Although these are clearly of African origin, Rugendas’s interpretation of them is that of English traveller Henry
Koster, whose book *Travels in Brazil* (1816) he quotes at length. Koster believed that Africans were rapidly being assimilated into a new Luso-Brazilian culture. Dances brought by the slaves ‘are now as much the national dances of Brazil as they are of Africa’. Furthermore, cultural borrowings between masters and slaves bring ‘the superior and his inferior … closer together’. Rugendas adopts the same viewpoint elsewhere in his book, by showing people of the master class dancing a *lundu* in front of a plantation ‘big house’; clearly, the ‘black’ *lundu* of the last section must be seen in this context.

Indeed, the penultimate illustration in the book (Figure 14), portraying the ‘Festival of Our Lady of the Rosary, patroness of the blacks’, with its ‘King and Queen of Congo’ elected by the Rosary brotherhood’s members, makes Koster’s influence explicit. For Koster, such holidays, even with their ‘Congo’ royalty, had the effect of distancing Africans ‘from any thought of the customs of their own country’. Luso-Catholic Christianity, he argued, rapidly brought Africans under the aegis of European civilization, unlike English Protestantism in the Caribbean. Rugendas cites Koster on this question in his text, making the same comparison with the English colonies, and then transforms argument into image. He shows the King and Queen of Congo wearing European clothes (a detail stressed by Koster) and
places a Catholic church prominently in the background. The point is reiterated in the final ‘Burial of a black man in Bahia’, where integration into Christianity appears complete. By the time Rugendas’s readers reached this point, however, the book’s text had informed them that manumission was common in Brazil and that freed people of colour had some access to social mobility. As a result, they probably concluded that the protagonist of this lithograph had not only ‘died well’ spiritually, but also socially – at the very least as a freedman.9

With some reflection, Rugendas’s readers also would have perceived that he had taken them ‘full spiral’, to the original point of departure but at a higher level in the story: for the Christian death of the ‘black man’ in Bahia is implicitly contrasted to the death of the African in the initial slave ship. The text explains this opposition, still echoing Koster: ‘One may think it strange to find among the blacks [Africans] of Brazil so few traces of the religious ideas and customs of their country; but in this fact … one sees proof that for the blacks the crossing which takes them to America is a veritable death’ [my italics]. In Brazil, however, Africans ‘begin a new life’, and ‘rapidly become devout Christians’. In sum, the dead man in the
ship’s hold is not just a metonym for the horrors of the slave trade; he also represents the original African’s social and cultural death. In contrast, the final burial in Bahia portrays the black’s rebirth in Brazil, now incorporated into free society under the sign of European civilization and Christianity.10

The argument may sound familiar: when, in 1933, Gilberto Freyre formulated his thesis about the acculturative nature of Brazilian Catholicism, he based his conclusions heavily on Koster.11 Yet, neither Koster nor Rugendas had Freyre’s concern with constructing an integrative Luso-Brazilian ‘tropicalism’ as a final objective. If they gave Brazil and the English Caribbean different scores on their acculturative powers, they did this primarily as a strategy for demonstrating the ‘moral capacity’ of Africans and their descendants: that is, the capability of these people to assume work responsibilities, feel the higher sentiments of family love and altruism and assimilate Christianity.12

To be sure, both Koster and Rugendas took pains to represent themselves as dispassionate observers. Rugendas’s text, for instance, advocates gradual not sudden abolition for Brazil. Furthermore, although he rejects racist arguments for the defence of slavery, he also distances himself from those ‘philanthropists’ (meaning the Abbé Gregoire, widely considered a social radical) who affirmed the total intellectual and moral equality of Africans and Europeans. In fact, Rugendas even declares that ‘every day things occur which, putting aside the advantage of civilization, prove the real and physical superiority of whites over blacks’. At the same time, however, he leaves open ‘the possibility that “blacks” may one day become equal to whites in every respect’.13 The two phrases are not contradictory, when examined in the light of the dominant theory of the time regarding human origins: that which affirmed both ‘monogenesis’ (common ancestry), and ‘recent’ creation. As the historian Philip Curtin observes:

With polygenesis disposed of, it was necessary to assume that these ‘inferior races’ had become inferior at some finite point in time – and not long ago, since the creation itself was thought to be only a few millennia away. If their ‘inferiority’ had been acquired so quickly, it might disappear with equal speed.14

Indeed, evidence that Rugendas viewed racial natures as fluid and ‘blacks’ as ontologically close to Europeans, can be found elsewhere in the text and particularly in his illustrations. Evoking contemporary ideas about the malleability of racial characteristics under the influence of climate and environment, Rugendas asserts that ‘Crioulos’ (blacks born in Brazil) are
proof that the ‘African race’ has improved in the New World, not only ‘spiritually’ but also ‘physically’. He illustrates this idea in his portrayal of the Rosary festival (Figure 14), where several blacks to the left of the King of Congo, in a group which rises above the level of the crowd and is positioned beneath an *araucária* pine tree (a native species), have more Europeanized features and ‘single-plane’ faces than most of the others in the scene. Some of those in the main crowd, in fact, are conveniently profiled to display their prognathism and receding foreheads and chins – surely a reference to Petrus Camper’s and Julien Joseph Virey’s theses about the reclining ‘facial angles’ of Africans compared to those of Europeans. Indeed, the musician with protruding stomach, just to the right of the bagpipe player, is an exact representation of Virey’s 1824 description of the physical characteristics of blacks, offered in a book which later (in English translation) contributed to the resurgence of polygenism in the American South. Virey’s blacks, in addition to being characterized, irrespective of habitat, by prognathism, a ‘retreating chin’, ‘lower forehead’, and ‘teeth set obliquely and projecting’, had a stomach organ which was rounder and extended further upwards than in Europeans;
furthermore ‘almost all’ had ‘slender calves, knees always half-flexed, a
tired demeanour, the body and neck inclined forwards … [and] protruding
buttocks’. Yet, although Rugendas includes this strange figure, most
people in his crowd are not caricatured in this way; witness especially the
standing flag-bearer to the left and the King and Queen of Congo, with
their elegantly-proportioned bodies, erect postures and much less
prognathic profiles. In sum, Rugendas alludes to Virey’s theses about
African facial angles and bodies, only to subvert them, first as reliable
descriptions of most Africans and second as measures of innate, permanent
differences between blacks and Europeans.

All of this is consistent with the fact that Rugendas’s defence of
Africans’ moral capacity begins on their home continent. His text qualifies
African societies as ‘civilized’ (albeit less so than European), not ‘barbaric’
or ‘savage’ as they were more commonly portrayed. Drawing attention to
the existence in Africa of powerful empires, large cities and commerce, it
blames the continent’s current woes on the disruptive impact of the slave
trade. The message is clear: Africans transported to the New World had no
inner impediment to achieving ‘civilization’ anew.

The argument is continued in the lithographs. In ‘Dwelling of the
Blacks’, portraying slaves in front of their quarters during their time off,
Rugendas asserts Africans’ capacity for self-directed labour (Figure 15). There are clear signs here of industriousness, not just leisure: a man plaiting
a mat, assisted by a woman preparing palm-leaf fibres for the task; two other
men who, although resting, seem to have just finished another mat,
stretched on a frame; finally, a water-carrier in the background. Lest there
be any doubt about the meaning of this scene, Rugendas insists that
‘everyday experience shows with what indefatigable activity the slaves take
advantage of all free moments, indeed even their periods of rest from heavy
labours’. The words and the image challenge the presumption of slavery’s
defenders, that ‘blacks’ ‘only work under compulsion.’

‘Dwelling of the Blacks’ also confounds slave-owners’ beliefs that
Africans did not have the moral capacity to form strong family ties. To be
sure, the several adults and children portrayed in this scene, certainly
residents of more than one hut in the slave quarters, are not explicitly
organized into family groups. Rugendas’s intentions, however, are clear
from his composition, which in the context of his contemporaries’ disputes
over slavery establishes an ‘internal narrative’ of family formation. Most of
the human figures are arranged in a triangle, with the couple that is linked
by pipe and firebrand – or, more precisely, the woman who emerges from
the hut, in command of the firebrand and the ‘hearth’ from which it came –
positioned prominently at the upper apex. With this central couple thus
highlighted, many viewers of the time would have perceived the significance of the representations of certain children. Immediately below the apex of the human triangle, two youngsters direct their gaze at the couple: one (the infant) with arms outstretched towards them, the other (the standing figure) with a posture that suggests quiet admiration.

The ‘keepers of the hearth’ could be these children’s parents; alternatively, in view of the two adult women who seem to mediate their relationship with the youngsters, they could represent the founders of an extended family. Whichever the case, politically aware observers of the time would have recognized that Rugendas was invoking an argument dear to opponents of the slave trade, but inverting the terms in which it was usually presented. Artists and writers more commonly asserted the capacity of Africans to have strong family feelings by showing their anguish upon being separated – thus simultaneously confounding the slavocrats’ denial of this capacity and denouncing the consequences of forced labour. This was the strategy pursued by Sophie Doin, in her novel *La Famille Noire* (1825), and before her by English artist George Morland in the painting ‘Execrable Human Traffic’ (1788, reproduced as a print in Paris in 1794), which was probably one of Doin’s points of reference.20 (In both Doin’s and Morland’s works, an African mother and her child are separated from their respective husband and father.) Rugendas himself may have deliberately played upon his readers’ acquaintance with Morland’s image in constructing his picture. The firebrand demonstrating the union between the central couple in ‘Dwelling of the Blacks’ sharply contrasts with the raised stick of the slave trader, which threatens their separation in ‘Execrable Human Traffic’. Likewise, the standing child observing this couple in Rugendas’s lithograph is portrayed from the same angle as the Africans’ son in Morland’s picture and has similarly upraised arms; his (or her) erect body, however, expresses serenity, not the desperation conveyed by the English painter’s figure with his forward-leaning posture, backwardly-thrust head and arms raised even higher, as he clings to his mother.

In any event, politically-attuned viewers would have perceived Rugendas’s unusual concern to show family creation, not disruption. And they would have understood this reversal, not as a defence of slavery, which the artist condemned explicity in his text, but as evidence for a prospective case in favour of ‘black’ moral character in Brazil and elsewhere. Rugendas was keen on showing Africans’ success in integrating themselves into Euro-Brazilian civilization, because he knew that this would be powerful proof of their innate ability to do so in other parts of the Americas. A scene showing the destruction of families by Brazilian slavery would not have suited this purpose. Neither would it have contributed to his argument about the
acculturative nature of Brazilian institutions, particularly the country’s allegedly mild form of forced labour, to which he refers repeatedly: most notably in an illustration highlighting the palm paddler rather than the whip as the typical ‘domestic’ punishment.21

The proof of these assertions is that when his theme was the slave trade, Rugendas was quite willing to demonstrate Africans’ moral capacity by showing their pain at parting. In ‘New Blacks’ (Figure 16), picturing recently arrived Africans awaiting sale in a Brazilian slave depot, the two female figures almost certainly would have called to readers’ minds standard images about the trade’s impact on family ties. To be sure, the bared breasts of the larger woman might, on first sight, have evoked stereotypes about Africans’ sensuality, contradictory to bourgeois ideals of family. Rugendas counters this impression, however, by giving this woman
a stooped posture – head and shoulders drooping forward, the back curved in such a way as to make the belly prominent and the breasts somewhat receding – which suggests modesty, and at the same time is in keeping with her dejected mien. The result, in this case, is nudity ‘naturalized’, relieved of sexual connotation. Thus the desolate central figure, her eyelids laden with melancholy, and the smaller woman looking up at her with sad solicitousness would have recalled stories such as those told by Doin and Morland: here again were a mother and her child, torn by sale from their respective husband and father.

Some of Rugendas’s more specialized readers, however, would have perceived a deeper meaning in this illustration; for the artist would seem to allude here to the description of a particular case of separation recounted by Luiz António de Oliveira Mendes in an 1812 memorial on the Portuguese slave trade, published by the Royal Academy of Sciences of Lisbon and well-known to students of Brazil. Indeed, Rugendas’s scene appears to illustrate several points in Mendes’s text. The enclosure in which the slaves find themselves could well be the Brazilian depot described by Mendes: ‘a large [humid] storeroom … on the ground floor, which is underneath the master’s residence’. Furthermore, the figure at the left, examining his big toe with one hand, while pinching his other thumb and index finger together, as if securing a small object, seems to bring to life Mendes’s description of the bicho do pé. This scourge of newly-arrived Africans ‘was like the smallest flea’, and especially proliferated ‘in the feet, in the corners and around the edges of the toenails’. Finally, the leaves on the floor – placed by the artist next to the renowned reinvigorant, sugarcane, to indicate their medicinal nature – resemble those of the castor-oil plant or of the ‘herb of Saint Caetano’, which Mendes says were commonly used by traders to treat the skin ailments of slaves awaiting sale.

It is Rugendas’s two women, however, who seem to leap from the pages of the Portuguese author’s book. Mendes describes a family separation that had occurred in Luanda: ‘In one of the lots [of captives] there had been a certain slave woman, with a daughter … aged seven to eight years, who had lost all taste for food because of the effects of banzo [extreme melancholy].’ The cause of the woman’s depression was that she believed ‘her husband, whom she loved deeply, had given her, with ingratitude, to harsh slavery and, with her, her much-esteemed daughter, as if returning her pledge of marriage’. The woman’s ‘eyes were two rivers’ – the drooping eyelids and downturned mouth of Rugendas’s protagonist fit the description – and she ‘continually sat with her head on her knees’, as does the seated slave in the lower right corner of our artist’s illustration, conceivably portraying the emotion of the scene’s central figure at a different moment. The Luanda
woman’s refusal to eat eventually brought about her death, upon which the European witnesses to the event ‘esteemed her child as the daughter of a heroine of love and constancy’.24

Mendes’s text, actually written in 1793, ostensibly proposes reforms in the African trade with a view towards making it more lucrative for colonists and king. Yet it is also a defence of the moral character of Africans. Although Mendes’s story about the woman begins as if it were an archetypical slavocrat’s tale – note the husband/father’s apparent perfidy – in fact it subverts planter prejudice by making its protagonist a model of conjugal love, who surrenders herself to death when convinced of her partner’s treachery. Furthermore, the story is not extraneous to Mendes’s book, but an essential part of the argument. Mendes is careful to give it authority before his readers by attributing it to a slave trader, who could not be suspected of undue ‘afrophilia’. In addition, the characteristics of this heroine are those which he recognizes in Africans in general, whom he calls ‘faithful, resolute, extremely constant [constantíssimo] and susceptible, in the utmost degree, to feelings of love and hate’.25 Mendes here may evoke stereotypes of the passionate nature of peoples of ‘hot climes’, but he also engages in battle with contemporaries who portrayed non-Europeans as inconstant and therefore fundamentally different from whites in their moral characters.

One suspects, then, that Rugendas was moved to ‘illustrate’ Mendes’s text because the cause it defended resonated with his own and because many of the scientists in his audience, beginning with Humboldt, would have understood the allusion and appreciated its meaning.26 Yet it may have been a peculiar detail in an alternative version of Mendes’s text that triggered his decision. I refer to an allegory that is present in a limited ‘second printing’ of the Portuguese author’s essay, which may have reinstated the original manuscript in reaction to earlier censorship.27 The allegory is constructed by giving the African ‘heroine’ a name that makes her story compellingly memorable. Mendes here adds the crucial information that the child ‘was later called Lucretia’, and notes that ‘this having occurred more than 20 years past, only two years ago there were letters [received attesting] that Lucretia was alive’.28

In so baptizing the daughter, the intent was clearly to honour the character of the ‘heroic’ mother. Given the context, readers would have perceived the name as an allusion to the chaste Lucretia of Roman legend who, when raped by the Etruscan king’s son, Sextus Tarquinius, preferred suicide to dishonour for herself and her beloved husband. This Lucretia’s action supposedly provoked the uprising which overthrew the much-hated Tarquin dynasty (which had already ‘raped’ Rome) and founded the
Republic. The story of the African Lucretia does not have these overt political overtones. Still, the two women are similar in other ways: in their desire for death after being ‘violated’ and above all in the peculiar moral qualities which lead them to ‘suicide’. Like the African woman in Mendes’s account, the Roman Lucretia also is a heroine; indeed, in the European imagination she is undoubtedly the female personification of love and constancy. By associating his African woman with the Lucretia of classical times, Mendes strengthened her claim to be a moral heroine: constantíssima she indeed was! Above all, he impressed her upon the minds of his readers.

It may have been this which most recommended her story to Rugendas, if indeed the artist had access to the second printing of Mendes’s text. The simile would have been especially appealing to Rugendas if it had acquired the resonance that came from common use. That this may well have been the case is suggested by the 1788 poem which inspired Morland’s ‘Execrable Human Traffic’. In foretelling the rape of the slave woman by European traders after the couple’s separation, the poem appears to allude to certain verses of Shakespeare’s Rape of Lucrece; in both texts, similar metaphors are used in portraying the efforts of the slave couple/Lucrece to move their hard-hearted tormentor(s) to ‘soft pity’.

While Rugendas argued that ‘blacks’ had a work ethic and could feel love and constancy like Europeans, he was concerned above all to demonstrate their ability to understand and accept Christianity. This, as I have argued, is the central theme of the last two lithographs in his volume. Yet, there is a further dimension to the artist’s argument about ‘spiritual capacity’, which can be grasped only by understanding the linked allegorical meanings of the deaths portrayed in the ship’s hold and in the Christian burial procession.

In the early nineteenth century, visual artists commonly alluded to their colleagues’ works. In 1815, for example, Bavarian draughtsman Peter Cornelius represented the body of one of Goethe’s characters, the dying Valentine, mortally wounded by his sister’s seducer Faust, in almost exactly the same posture as that of Christ being carried to the tomb in Raphael’s Trasporto al Sepolcro, a work well known through reproductions and prints. Cornelius expected viewers to perceive the reference and understand his gloss: Faust was morally the ‘Antichrist’. Rugendas uses exactly the same technique in ‘Blacks in the Ship’s Hold’ (Figure 13). There, the figure of the dead African, carried by sailors, is reminiscent of the body of Christ in representations of the Entombment. More specifically, it is very close to the image on this theme engraved by seventeenth-century artist Matthaeus Merian the elder (Figures 17 and 18). Merian’s work would have been familiar to Rugendas’s audience. His
REPRESENTING THE BODY OF THE SLAVE

FIGURE 17
‘ENTOMBMENT OF CHRIST’ – DETAIL
(MATTHAEUS MERIAN)

FIGURE 18
‘BLACKS IN THE SHIP’S HOLD’ – DETAIL
(J.M. RUGENDAS)
bibilical scenes commonly illustrated contemporary editions of the Scriptures in the Germanic states and France. Goethe mentions frequently browsing through a *Merianbibel*, as such editions of the Bible were called, in his youth; and in a scene in the second part of Faust he alludes to one of Merian’s engravings, presumably expecting many readers to understand the reference.

Rugendas does not ‘cite’ Merian’s Christ as literally as Cornelius does Raphael’s; the dead African’s head is less thrown back that that of Merian’s figure, his right hand is hanging instead of being extended horizontally and his legs are not crossed. Thus the artist can maintain the illusion that this scene was ‘drawn from life’. Yet his image is close enough to Merian’s to attract the attention of his viewers – or at least of those on the lookout for pictorial allusions – and make them wonder if he might not be glossing Christ’s celebrated phrase in the Gospel according to Mark: ‘and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave [servant] of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’ Those who suspected so would have understood that Christ’s self-injunction in this passage was to assume the mantle of the ‘Servant of
Yahweh’, or ‘Suffering Servant’ of the Book of Isaiah, identified in the Christian tradition (explicitly in Matthew 12: 16–18) with the Messiah, because of his expiatory sacrifice and final exaltation. Thus, once awakened to the possibility of allegory, these viewers would have begun to notice other telltale signs in the print of the suffering black’s subsumption to Christ: the fact that the dead African was portrayed near a ‘cross’ (formed by the mast and the horizontal edge of the deck, visible through the hatch), and that the standing slave, straining for water, was reminiscent of Christ’s stretched (and thirsty) body on the cross.

What would have confirmed the artist’s intent, however, are the slaves in the hold that directly evoke images of the ‘Suffering Servant’, particularly as He (the Schmerzensmann, or ‘Man of Sorrows’) was portrayed in Germanic art. In Figures 18 and 19, the two Africans with arms folded at the foot of Rugendas’s mast may be compared with the chastised Christ in Merian’s Ecce Homo. The Schmerzensmann of the Germanic tradition, when viewed standing or from the waist up, was usually portrayed with sad mien, head inclined to one side, shoulders curved forward and arms crossed in resignation, sometimes at chest level, sometimes lower. Furthermore, He generally wore only a loincloth and
was frequently placed next to the cross or in front of the column of Pilate’s palace where he had been whipped, or exposed to the crowd. All these characteristics apply to Merian’s *Schmerzensmann* and to Rugendas’s ‘slaves of sorrow’, including the nearby column/mast. In view of the several references to the figure of Christ in this lithograph, one wonders if the head sailor, who illuminates the dead African for the viewer while making an indicative motion with his right hand, is not also saying, with Merian’s Pilate, ‘behold the Man’: or perhaps ‘behold the stages of the cross’, for his gesture, made with index finger extended but hand not closed in a fist, is more inclusive.

Thus the close identification of the dead ‘black man’ with the body of Christ in the Bahian burial scene had already been made allegorically by Rugendas in his view of the ship’s hold. This is additional confirmation that the two lithographs were meant to be ‘read’ together. A further allusion to Matthaeus Merian in the Bahian picture, however, extends the allegory and defines how the viewer is to interpret the black ‘suffering servants’ of both lithographs. Rugendas’s burial scene bears a striking resemblance to Merian’s portrayal of ‘The Burial of Abraham’ (compare Figures 12 and 20). In both prints, a funeral cortège, framed by trees on either side, rises into the foreground from a city in a valley behind it. In both, similar temples are featured – exhibiting a pointed tower to the left of a rounded dome – on raised land in the distance, near the centre of the composition. Two robed and hooded figures in Rugendas’s scene (perhaps penitents of a religious brotherhood) call to mind the comparably dressed mourners in Merian’s procession. The object in the form of an equilateral triangle pointing upwards (perhaps a *matraca*, or noisemaker) that is carried at the head of the Bahian cortège repeats the shape of the lid of the Patriarch’s casket, when seen from its end; in the Christian tradition, such a triangle is one of the symbols of Abraham.

Abraham’s cortège is directed towards the two caves on the right. The black man’s procession is also directed to the right – to a church or churchyard, somewhere ‘off stage’. The artist, however, hints to viewers who do not know what is ethnographically correct in Bahia that the cortège will turn and move through the gate, which occupies the same position in the composition as Merian’s double cave. The Christ on the crucifix is properly positioned to ‘bless’ the procession’s passage through this entrance, which is decorated with vases reminiscent of funeral urns, as befits the gateway to a cemetery, and is invitingly open. To be sure, the area behind the gate, full of trees and brush, does not have the obvious appearance of a burial ground. Precisely because of this, however, it would recall to the observer of the picture, just as would the exuberant vegetation
above the caves in Merian’s engraving, the biblical description (Genesis 23: 17–18, 20) of the untamed land ceded to Abraham by the Canaanites for the interment of his family and descendants.

In the Christian tradition, Abraham and Christ are closely associated. Both are symbols of redemption though suffering and servitude. Both are the founders of a chosen people. Indeed, Christ is the ‘new Abraham’. In New Testament times it is to the ‘Children of Christ’ that God’s promise to Abraham applies: ‘You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. … And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan.’ Rugendas’s allegory, subsuming Africans and their offspring to Christ and Abraham, is now clear. ‘Blacks’, once Christianized, would eventually inherit that new Canaan, Brazil. There, they would come to form one of God’s chosen peoples, fully equal to those of Europe. For if the African, buried in Christ, was a ‘new Abraham’, then, like the Patriarch himself and (presumably) the European, he was a descendant of Noah’s first son, Shem, the embodiment of the higher attributes of human nature. He could not be, as Virey and many other thinkers of the time argued, the descendant of Noah’s accursed child, Ham, and thus condemned to a life of service to whites. The question posed at the beginning of this essay has been answered. Rugendas places the ‘Burial of a Black Man in Bahia’ at the end of his book because he conceives of the Christianized ‘black’ as the positive prototype of the future Brazilian nation.

The argument is remarkable, compared to some rival formulations of the 1820s, such as Virey’s, which foreshadow the subsequent resurgence of polygenism or the rise of scientific racism. Yet it is not unique to its time; nor is it unproblematic. Rugendas’s position on Africans and slavery seems to have been close to that of the Société de la Morale Chrétienne, a champion of social reform and the leading French abolitionist movement of the 1820s. The Société’s members ‘constituted a veritable Who’s Who of the leaders of the liberal opposition [to the Restoration] in the 1820s’. Yet their professed goals were socially conservative: ‘to come to the aid of the unfortunate, to spread in the lower classes of society practical knowledge that will help them in the conduct of their lives … [to] support the established institutions in the great tasks of suppressing crime and vice.’ While the Société preached the unity of mankind in Christ, it also advocated class harmony. Koster’s idea that Brazil’s peculiar institutions ‘brought [master and slave] closer together’ may have been accepted by Rugendas, in the first instance, to promote the defence of African moral character; however, I suspect it was not incompatible with the artist’s vision of the ideal relationship between social superiors and inferiors.
Suggestive, in this respect, is the subsequent career of Rugendas’s collaborator on the text to Artistic Travels; Victor Aimé Huber later became a leading ideologue of German ‘Christian social conservatism’, which urged the state to take an active role in promoting the welfare of the poor, for humanitarian and religious reasons, but also to avoid class struggle.43

At the same time, Rugendas’s visual allegory, approximating the slave to Christ and Abraham, can probably be situated within the ‘Christian renewal’ in French culture and art of this period. It seems to echo the insistence by the priest Lamennais (in 1817) that Christ ‘came not to be served but to serve’, that He was particularly concerned about those who suffered, and that people should imitate Him, for the good of humanity, through their own redemptive sacrifice.44 One of Lamennais’s friends in the 1830s was Ary Scheffer, a leader of the renewal of French religious art, whose painting ‘Christ the Consoler’ (1837) showed Jesus succouring the ‘broken-hearted’ and slaves of various origins, including an African.45 These connections are intriguing, for Rugendas’s biographer, Gertrud Richert, states that he associated with Scheffer in Paris during the 1820s.46

The image of Christ as one whose trials made him identify with the suffering could and did evolve in some circles into the concept of Christ the social revolutionary.47 For Rugendas, however, and for most of his elite readers, I suspect that the fusion of the African with Jesus, the new Abraham, was part of a conservative vision of tutelary reform, similar to that which guided the Société de la Morale Chrétienne. Worse, it may have eased many consciences; for it could easily have conveyed the message that the trials of the African Christ/Abraham, like those of the Man of Sorrows and the Patriarch themselves, were ultimately ordained by God, and thus represented a necessary expiation before ‘blacks’ could inherit their promised land.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank professors Sílvia H. Lara and Jorge Coli for their comments and suggestions. The lithographs from Rugendas (Figures 12–16 and 18) are reproduced by permission of the Centro de Estudos Baianos, Universidade Federal da Bahia (Salvador, Brazil), from J.M. Rugendas, Malerische Reise in Brasilien (Paris and Mülhausen: Engelmann & Cie, 1835); respectively Part 4, Plates 20, 1, 19, 5; Part 2, Plate 12; and Part 4, Plate 1, detail. The copperplate engravings by Matthaeus Merian (Figures 17, 19 and 20) are reproduced by permission of the British Library, London, from: Biblia, das ist, die gantze Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments. Vertreutscht durch D. Martin Luther. Jetzt und nach dem letzten in Anno 1545 bey des Authoris Lebzeiten aussgangenen Exemplar ... (Strassburg: In Verlegung Lazari Zetzners Seligen Erben, 1630), British Library shelfmark C.66.i.6; respectively, New Testament, ff.24v, 75v; and Old Testament, f.16v.
NOTES


3. Rugendas knew the name of this church, identifying it in the legend of another lithograph (Part 3, plate 26).


6. In the case of the four illustrations on ‘blacks’ for which the final originals are extant (Ibid., pp.83, 87, 89, 111), the lithograph is faithful to its model – as it is when translating the land- and cityscapes, albeit not the portrayals of Indians (Ibid., pp.36–37, 44).


24. Ibid., p.62.

25. Ibid., p.61.


27. Identical to the 1812 edition in its frontispiece and table of contents, this ‘second printing’ of the volume of *Memórias Económicas* contains a longer version of Mendes’s text (pp.1–82), which is more openly critical of slavery and the slave trade. Of the six copies of this work known to me, all nominally from 1812, only one – in the Royal Academy of Sciences of Lisbon, the book’s publisher – is a ‘second printing’. A modern reprint of this alternative version is: L.A. de Oliveira Mendes, ‘Discurso ... ’, in A. Carreira, *As Companhias Pombalinas de Grão Pará e Maranhão e Pernambuco e Paraíba*, 2nd edn (Lisbon, Editora Presença, 1983 [1st edn 1969]), Appendix, pp. 364–420. To my knowledge, none of the modern editors or students of Mendes’s text has noted the existence of two versions. The Royal Academy does not have the 1793 manuscript.


29. Then again, perhaps it does, for if the ‘alternative version’ of Mendes’s memorial was the same text written in 1793, the ‘letters [of two years earlier] that Lucretia was alive’ would have been written in 1791 – the same year as the slave revolution in Saint Domingue.


31. The poem is in Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Vol. IV/1, p.70; the relevant lines of the *Rape of Lucrece* are nos. 586–95.


