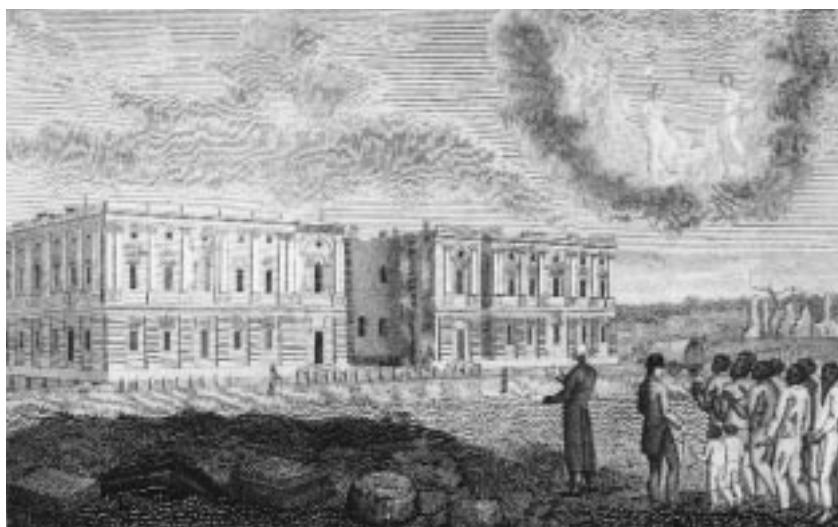


Preface

Art and Empire focuses on the roles of race and politics in the decoration of the United States Capitol during the nineteenth century, but the topic is a timeless one, given the symbolic associations of the building with our country's democratic government and its ideals of liberty and equality. Alexander Lawson's 1814 engraving, *View of the Capitol of the United States after the Conflagration in 1814*, makes clear the relationships among the building, liberty, and slavery.¹ In this illustration from an abolitionist text, chained and whip-scarred slaves stand to the right, looking at the building under the "cloud-borne 'geniuses of Liberty and humanity.'" Chapter 8 in *Art and Empire* clearly indicates that Jefferson Davis, secretary of war in charge of the Capitol Extension's decoration after 1850, worked to erase any references to slavery in the U.S. Capitol decoration, especially the dome statue by Thomas Crawford. Within this context, the absence of the dome and Rotunda that had yet to be inserted in the U.S. Capitol building symbolically registers the silence on the subject of slavery that some statesmen attempted to achieve in its decoration.

Thomas Nast understood the relationship between Crawford's *Statue of Freedom* (1863) and slavery. Nast's *The Emancipation of the Negroes—The Past and the Future*, published in *Harper's Weekly* on January 24, 1863, shows Crawford's triumphant statue atop an oval frame in which an African American



Alexander Lawson, after Alexander Rider. *View of the Capitol of the United States after the Conflagration in 1814*. Engraving. From Jesse Torrey, *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1817). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

family participates in domestic activities under the watchful eyes of Lincoln, whose portrait hangs by the fireplace.² Given the forced separation of slave families prior to 1863, the presence of the mother, father, sons, and daughters together at last around the hearth signifies that Lincoln's act enabled former slaves to form a tight nuclear family. The vignettes outside the oval on the left side illustrate the hardships of slave life, including beatings, the auction of male slaves, the tearing of families apart, and forced labor. The right side shows the prosperity and family life that African Americans will enjoy as free people; they exchange money at a bank, attend school, and exist as a family. Nast placed the *Statue of Freedom* in front of the word "Emancipation," which is emblazoned in light and clouds, clearly connecting the statue with the very conditions of African American Southern life that entailed slavery and the hope for freedom. Justice, at the top right, holds the scales, while on the left, allegorical figures, perhaps the Demons of Slavery, chase slaves in a field. Nast implies that Crawford's statue promises emancipation and now stands proudly viewing the scenes below, a message counter to Secretary of War Davis's intentions.³

Both Lincoln and the statue, Nast suggests, ended the horrors of the past and issued the promise of the future that seems to be illustrated in the smaller encircled motif below, in which Father Time holds a white child on his lap. These two figures probably represent Kronos, a newborn child who symbolizes dawn and the beginning of a new day, and Orthros, who appears to take the chains off the African American man standing before him, symbolizing the new day of freedom for his race.

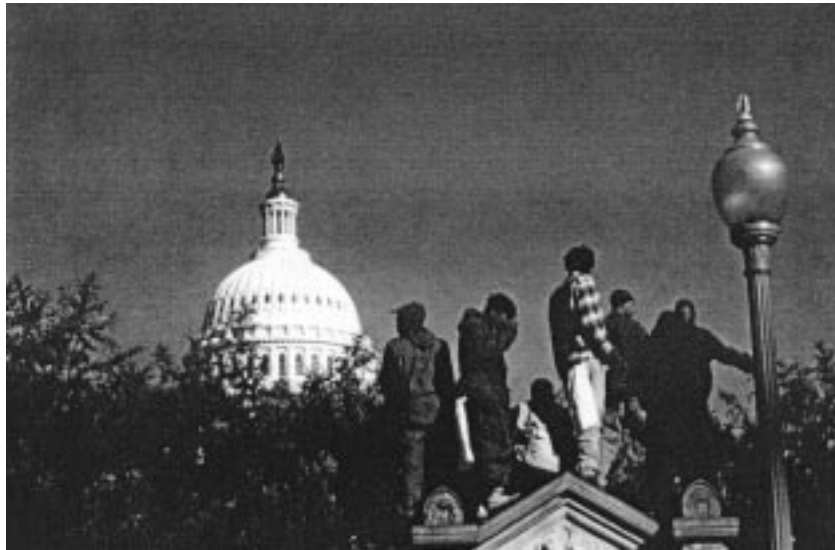
Carlton Wilkinson's photograph of the Million Man March that took place in Washington, D.C., in 1995 further indicates the power of race and its con-



Thomas Nast. *The Emancipation of the Negroes, January, 1863—The Past and the Future.*
From *Harper's Weekly*, January 24, 1863. Photograph by Herb Peck.

traditions inherent in the U.S. Capitol decoration. The figures standing on top of a fountain in Wilkinson's photograph and the statue on the U.S. Capitol dome form a series of similarities and polarities. The black men and the *Statue of Freedom* both establish dark shapes against the blue sky: the statue in the distance and smaller, the men in the foreground and larger. The height of the statue that seems pushed upward by the gleaming Capitol dome competes for attention with these proud men who view the masses in attendance at this march, but also assert their position in the United States as African American men who will lead their people toward unified goals of prosperity and education. The men are free, but their ancestors may have been enslaved in the South. Even if this is not the case, all blacks—not just those with Southern roots—trace the current atmosphere of racism to the former oppression of slavery. The men participated in the Million Man March to share their universal suffering, strengthen their spirits, and pledge to rebuild communities. The female figure of the statue, on the other hand, symbolizes the very oppression of black people that these men march to protest against. She stands unmovable with sword in hand, supposedly ready to enforce democracy throughout the world; but for Jefferson Davis in the 1850s, democracy could not apply to his slaves. The immobility of the statue contrasts with the men who are poised for action, ready to move forward with their freedom and claim it as their human right.

Wilkinson's photograph captures the hopes and dreams that still need to be realized for the African American men who wait outside the U.S. Capitol building, not unlike the slaves in Lawson's engraving. For a black audience (Wilkinson himself is African American), the men stand above the fountain to



Carlton Wilkinson. *Standing on Capitol Hill*. 1995. Ilfordchrome print.
Courtesy of Carlton Wilkinson.

proclaim their rightful place within the nation, not separate from the government nor from the freedom promised by that government. This photograph indicates that the issues of race embodied in the Capitol decoration of the nineteenth century still have meaning for us today.

It is my hope that this book will enable us to understand racist attitudes of the past toward African Americans and Native Americans as they applied to the U.S. Capitol decoration, especially now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the population of the United States moves increasingly toward the domination of minority groups. Rather than attempting to hide examples of the stereotypes and racist attitudes of the past (by removing from the Capitol, for example, Luigi Persico's *Discovery of America* and Horatio Greenough's *Rescue*, a topic addressed in chapter 4), we should instead retain them in the building and study them as a way to remember and change such attitudes still prevalent in our culture today. It is my hope that the greater accessibility of this book in paperback for the general public will enable Americans and people of other nationalities to understand the past as a means to change the present.

I would like to thank the Ohio University Press, especially its director, David Sanders, for publishing this book in paperback, making it more affordable for visitors to the U.S. Capitol. I also want to express my appreciation to the United States Capitol Historical Society and especially to Chief Historian Donald R. Kennon for their assistance with the cost of publishing the illustrations and for enabling this book to be a part of the Perspectives on the Art and Architectural History of the United States Capitol series. Susan Sochaki did the arduous task of writing for permission to republish these photographs, for which I am grateful. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my daughter, Emma Renee Fryd, who was a baby when I looked over the galleys of the first book manuscript and who now understands a little of what I do when I am in my "professional" role as scholar and art historian.

Notes

1. I first learned about this image from John Davis's "Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South* and Urban Slavery in Washington, D.C.," *Art Bulletin* 80 (March 1988): 71.

2. I would like to thank Jochen Wierich for making me aware of this illustration.

3. The wood engraving furthermore evokes Christ in the *Last Judgement*. Here Crawford's statue replaces Christ to become a secular savior; on her left appear the saved African Americans who are free, on her right are the damned who suffer under slavery. Traditionally the damned are located on Christ's left and the saved on the right. Nast's engraving may reverse this traditional location of damned and saved, thereby placing the viewer in the position of Christ as Judge.