Description of a Slave Ship c. 1789

James Phillips

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006
**Description of a Slave Ship, c. 1789**

James Phillips
London
Woodcut
M12284

**Historical Context**

The Peabody Essex Museum holds two prints in its collection that show the plans of slave ships and how captive occupants might be arranged to maximize the use of space. The cramped conditions frequently led to the spread of disease and even suffocation. Their strategy was to attack the slave trade first, and then to address the institution of slavery itself. Abolitionists widely distributed images such as this slave ship plan in order to support their argument that the slave trade was a demoralizing and inhumane way to treat human beings. More than 8,000 copies of Description of a Slave Ship were hung in homes and public spaces, such as pubs, as a political protest.

James Phillips was a publisher and printer for British Quakers. He published anti-slavery material from his shop to be distributed to a wide audience.

**Art Historical Context**

The relief process used to create woodcuts was in use in Asia long before it first appeared in Western art in the early fifteenth century. The technique became especially important after Johannes Gutenberg perfected a standardized system for printing with movable type in the 1450s. Because both the woodcut illustrations and the type were in relief, they could be printed simultaneously. The ability to distribute ideas and images to a wide audience dramatically changed Western communication and culture.

To create a woodcut image, an artist first sketches a design on the surface of a smooth piece of wood. Then, the artist removes all the material that is not part of the design (this area is called the “negative space.”) What remains is the raised image that is then coated with ink. A sheet of paper is pressed against the inked surface, and creates a mirror image of the wood design. Because wood is relatively inexpensive and fairly durable, woodblock prints were (and still are) an economical and popular means for creating multiple copies.

**Sample Guiding Questions**

- Describe the plan of this slave ship.
- Count the number of people in one block section of the plan and try to estimate how many people would be packed into one level of this ship.
- What do you think it would be like to travel on the ocean on a long voyage in conditions like this?
- This print was hung in taverns and public spaces. How do you think people felt when they saw it? What is your reaction to seeing the conditions on this slave ship? How does it make you feel today?
- How do you think the artist felt about the slave trade? Why do you think the artist and publisher wanted to distribute this picture?
- Who do you think they hoped would examine it?
- What do you think they hoped the readers would do in response to seeing this picture?

**Suggested Learning Activities**

- Compare this object with Lucy Cleveland’s Free! and/or the Printed Handkerchief. Consider how the viewers of these objects might be different. Does it matter whether only a few people see an object with a “protest” message, or whether thousands of people see it?