



The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston

Maurie D. McInnis

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At the close of the American Revolution, Charleston, South Carolina, was the wealthiest city in the new nation, with the highest per-capita wealth among whites and the largest number of enslaved residents. Maurie D. McInnis explores the social, political, and material culture of the city to learn how--and at what human cost--Charleston came to be regarded as one of the most refined cities in antebellum America.

While other cities embraced a culture of democracy and egalitarianism, wealthy Charlestonians cherished English notions of aristocracy and refinement, defending slavery as a social good and encouraging the growth of southern nationalism. Members of the city's merchant-planter class held tight to the belief that the clothes they wore, the manners they adopted, and the ways they designed house lots and laid out city streets helped secure their place in social hierarchies of class and race. This pursuit of refinement, McInnis demonstrates, was bound up with their determined efforts to control the city's African American majority. She then examines slave dress, mobility, work spaces, and leisure activities to understand how Charleston slaves negotiated their lives among the whites they served.

The textures of lives lived in houses, yards, streets, and public spaces come into dramatic focus in this lavishly illustrated portrait of antebellum Charleston. McInnis's innovative history of the city combines the aspirations of its would-be nobility, the labors of the African slaves who built and tended the town, and the ambitions of its architects, painters, writers, and civic promoters.



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