For over two decades, African American artist Kara Walker has been making work that weaves together imagery from the antebellum South, the brutality of slavery, and racist stereotypes. Best known for her use of the cut-paper silhouette, she transforms the genteel eighteenth-century portrait medium into stark, haunting tableaux. Walker plays with the idea of misrepresenting misrepresentations, stating, “The whole gamut of images of black people, whether by black people or not, are free rein in my mind.” Her work has stirred controversy for its use of exaggerated caricatures that reflect existing racial and gender stereotypes and for its lurid depictions of history, challenging viewers to consider America’s origins of racial inequality. In Walker’s art, the present is defined by the past and the past exerts a savage power.

*Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* is a series of fifteen prints based on the two-volume anthology published in 1866. To create her prints, Walker enlarged select illustrations and then overlaid them with large stenciled figures. The shadowy images visually disrupt the original scenes and suffuse them with traumatic scenarios left out of the official record. Mangled and grotesque figures escape the boundaries of the anthology’s pictures, expanding into the margins and the space of real life.

Walker’s prints are presented alongside a selection of the original *Harper’s* images on which they are based. Seen together, the two bodies of work shed light on Walker’s artistic process and her approach to history as an always-fraught, always-contested narrative. Her ghostly scenes assert the influence of racial history on contemporary life and create a provocative dialogue between the past and the present.

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Kara Walker and are credited as Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2008.19.1.1—15.

**Exhibition Credit:**
*Kara Walker: Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by the Crown Equipment Exhibitions Endowment.
Harper's and the Civil War

First published in 1866 under the title Harper’s Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion, the lavish two-volume anthology is composed of 836 pages of scenes, maps, plans, portraits, and writings on the conflict and its personages. Harper’s, the most widely read weekly magazine of the era, featured foreign and domestic news, essays, illustrations, and humor. Writing from New York in the war’s immediate aftermath, the editors described their aims in the preface:

We have undertaken to write the History of the Great Conspiracy which finally culminated in the Great Rebellion in the United States. . . . We purposed at the outset to narrate events just as they occurred; to speak of living men as impartially as though they were dead; to praise no man unduly because he strove for the right, to malign no man because he strove for the wrong; to anticipate, as far as we might, the sure verdict of after ages upon events.

Kara Walker’s appropriation of Harper’s engravings suggests the impossibility of any such “impartial” telling of history. Her silhouettes obliterate some scenes and disrupt others—altering Union movements as much as Confederate ones—suggesting that the stories she tells have little to do with official events. Her overlaid narrative is as if out of a nightmare: happening at the same time but having little to do with the storied battles that share their frame.

Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Foote’s Gun-Boats Ascending to Attack Fort Henry, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Pack-Mules in the Mountains, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Signal Station, Summit of Maryland Heights, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper
**Signal Station, Summit of Maryland Heights, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion**, vol. II, p. 396
1862
wood engraving on paper
Alfred Rudolph Waud
born London, England 1828–died Marietta, Georgia 1891
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1972.85.14V

**Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War**, vol. I
Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, eds.
McDonnell Bros., Chicago, IL, 1868
Courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries

Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, eds.
Harper & Brothers, New York City, 1866
Courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries

**Kara Walker**

Kara Walker (b. 1969) is a painter, sculptor, printmaker, filmmaker, and installation artist, best known for her room-size tableaux of cut-paper silhouettes. Her work explores race, sexuality, violence, and identity in the context of the antebellum South and the Civil War.

Born in Stockton, California, Walker moved with her family to Atlanta at the age of thirteen. She remained there until 1991, when she received her BFA from the Atlanta College of Art. “Spending my formative years in the South,” she says, “I came to see the Civil War as an internal conflict.” She completed her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994.

In 1997, she received the MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award, and in 2008, the USA Eileen Harris Norton Fellowship. In 2012, she became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2007, a major retrospective of her career was organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; it also traveled to Paris, New York, Los Angeles, and Fort Worth. Walker’s work is found in the collections of museums around the world including the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, and MoMA in New York, the Menil Collection in Houston, the Seattle Art Museum, the High Museum in Atlanta, the Tate Gallery in London, and the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo (MAXXI) in Rome.

Kara Walker, photo by Ari Marcopoulos
Soldiers and Silhouettes

“The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does.” — Kara Walker

Although Kara Walker’s silhouettes may appear to echo and interact with the scenes beneath them, there is no clear narrative between the two. Her shadowy figures represent a hidden history running parallel to these published scenes. By imposing the silhouettes over the soldiers and battles, Walker makes history’s invisible participants visible again—the flat opacity of their forms grabbing our attention and boldly obscuring the subject of the original print. But the motivations of her figures remain mysterious and the lives they lead are purposely cryptic, even as they force us to confront themes of race, gender, and power. According to Walker, “I don’t think that my work is actually effectively dealing with history. I think of my work as subsumed by history or consumed by history.”

*Occupation of Alexandria*, from *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

*Banks’s Army Leaving Simmsport*, from *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

*Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta*, from *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

*Confederate Prisoners Being Conducted from Jonesborough to Atlanta*, from *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

*An Army Train*, from *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*
2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, eds.
Harper & Brothers, New York City, 1866
Courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries
Caricatures in Walker’s Art

Kara Walker’s work exposes a dark period of oppression and racism in America’s past. Throughout the nineteenth century, particularly during and after the Civil War, African Americans were portrayed with vicious and dehumanizing caricatures. Used as propaganda, the depictions sought to demonize black people to justify slavery and later to legitimize Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation. Walker revisits these images in her work, often exaggerating the racial caricatures and emphasizing the violence perpetrated against them in order to confront the fictions that gave rise to stereotypes. Her work has spawned controversy because it does not explicitly denounce or undercut these distorted views. Instead, Walker challenges viewers to confront the discomfort these misrepresentations provoke and the unconscious prejudices they unmask, prodding us to consider how racist imagery of the past shapes attitudes in the present.

“I think there are many open-ended questions that artists can pose and we can ask communities to feel empowered enough to reply, respond, rebel, and feel amazed by the relentless spiraling of thought and image and action that is the artist’s profession.”
—Kara Walker

Deadbrook after the Battle of Ezra’s Church, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Scene of McPherson’s Death, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Buzzard’s Roost Pass, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Cotton Hoards in Southern Swamp, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Crest of Pine Mountain, Where General Polk Fell, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Lost Mountain at Sunrise, from Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) 2005
offset lithograph and screenprint on paper

Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry M. Alden, eds.
McDonnell Bros., Chicago, IL, 1868
Courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries