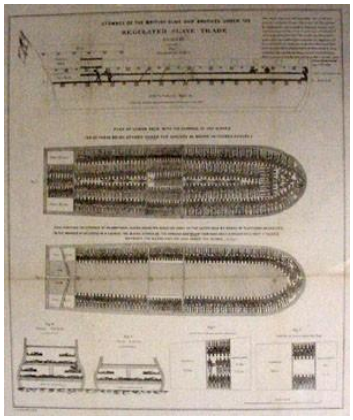
# Description of Life Aboard a Slave Ship



Thomas Clarkson and his colleagues on the "Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade" wanted to create a visual picture of a slave's life during the "Middle Passage." This is the story of how they developed, and used, their famous drawings of the "Slave Ship Brookes."

*Perhaps the most politically influential picture ever made is not a painting but a diagram; and it was devised not by an artist but by a campaign group. Its full title is Stowage of the British Slave Ship 'Brookes' under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788.*

*It was produced by Thomas Clarkson and his allies in the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. It is a landmark in the understanding of visual propaganda. It manages to communicate, at a glance, an incontestable evil. It could carry its message into the minds of those who weren't willing or able to read the committee's carefully mustered petitions and witness statements.*

*It undermined all claims about the pleasant and commodious conditions enjoyed by those taken on the 'middle passage' from Africa to the Americas. ('One of the happiest periods of a Negro's life,' said a spokesman for the slave lobby.) Its immediate focus was the supposed improvements introduced by Sir William Dolben's 1788 Regulating Act. It's still used in almost every account of slavery and its abolition. Its impact was and is immediate. Once seen, it's never forgotten.*

*The diagram wasn't, strictly speaking, a documentary record of the facts. It was a hypothetical projection. The Plymouth branch of the committee had discovered a plan of a loaded slave ship. In London, Clarkson and his colleagues applied its visual scheme to a ship that was in the news. A Privy Council inquiry into the slave trade had measured the internal dimensions of a number of vessels and published the results. The committee chose a Liverpool slaver, the Brookes, as an example: it was the first one on the inquiry's alphabetical list.*

*The picture they developed is a statistical visualisation. It demonstrates how the ship's legally permitted number of captives, 454, might be accommodated within the available space of its various decks and platforms...In fact, the Brookes was known to have carried 609 captives on a previous voyage. But the diagram stuck to the letter of the law.*

*'This print seemed to make an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it,' Clarkson wrote. It became one of the first political posters. In April 1789 it was published in an initial run of 700 and was widely circulated. Other editions and other versions followed. It was hung as an emblem in every abolitionist home. A clergyman compared it to Dante's Inferno. How does it make its powerful impression?*

*Abolitionist propaganda often used graphic depictions of human torment. The Slave Ship 'Brookes' conspicuously avoids that. It is an image of intolerable affliction, but it shows no bodies in visible pain. Its little human figures are individually as far from expressive pathos as can be. They're near enough token representations, in themselves no more likely to inspire sympathy than the symbol on a public lavatory.*

*The force of the print is partly in its very understatement, in the sheer distance between image and reality. There is the neutral, demonstrational layout of bodies in spaces that we see. And there is the human experience, of imprisonment, pain, heat, stench, thirst and asphyxiation, that is implied. The image requires the imagination to work, to think what life is like when people are stored in this way.*

*But also, this form of depiction seems to embody the mindset of the slave-trader. The diagram is itself dehumanising. It treats humans as commodities - 'live cargo' as the phrase was. In it, people have become items to be counted off, quantities to be fitted as economically as possible into an area, like fish or vegetables or books. Who can fail to notice the ingenuity, the neat patterning, by which (especially at the prow end) every last wedge of the ship's space is used? The slavers called it 'tight-packing.'*

*And probably the most horrific aspect of the Brookes diagram is that, in one sense, it is an entirely adequate representation of its subject. It is a two-dimensional image that depicts what is in effect a two-dimensional reality. The captives are confined to the flat. While stowed below decks, their bodies are restricted to a single plane, lying chained on the floor with very little headroom above.*

*What's more, there is the sense of overall squeeze. That's the other, two-dimensional fact that the image displays so explicitly: the clearly demarcated outline of the ship, the pressure of this confining boundary, the way the bodies, crammed together, are locked in by this limit. In abstract visual terms, the diagram shows a large number of distinct units, concentrated at maximum density, and held inside a simple containing shape. Translated into human terms: a nightmare.*

*The Slave Ship 'Brookes' resembles a mass grave. It would have tapped into strong contemporary fears - aroused by The Monk and other 18th-century gothic fiction - about confinement and being buried alive. No representational picture could have conveyed that terror with the visual power of this cross-section diagram.*

*Visual power? And what about morality, and intellectual argument? Samuel Johnson, himself a notable opponent of slavery, remarked in another context that 'the rights of nations and of kings sink into questions of grammar, if grammarians discuss them.' And reading the above, you might equally feel that, when art criticism is on the case, the abolition of the slave trade is reduced to a matter of pictorial effects.*

*But sometimes visual power is what is needed. Bypassing all rational resistance, and all failure of imagination, the diagram addresses its lesson straight to the eye. Anyone can see what's going on. As another early viewer remarked: 'There is a greater portion of human misery condensed within a smaller space than has ever yet been found in any other place on the face of this globe.'"*

The work of Thomas Clarkson and his colleagues was instrumental in helping William Wilberforce tell his fellow Members of Parliament:

> *Having heard all of this* [about the slave trade] *you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you did not know.*

## Credits:

Plate from: Stokes, Robert. "Regulated Slave Trade: From the Evidence of Robert Stokes, Esq., Given Before the Select Committee of the House of Lords, in 1849: With a Plate Showing the Stowage of a British Slave Ship, During the Regulated Slave Trade." 2nd ed. London: J. Ridgway, 1851. Online via U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

Quoted passage from *The Independent's Great Art* series. Tom Lubbock article, 23 March 2007.

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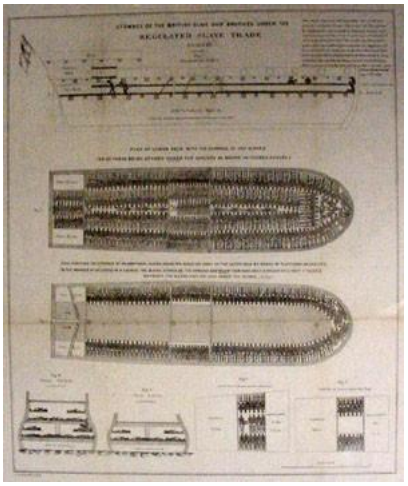
## Media Stream



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