

If you've ever visited the Reading Room at the Library Company of Philadelphia, you've seen it. You cannot miss it: the painting by Samuel Jennings, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* commands more than five feet of wall space in the center of the room and its visual prominence cannot be denied. Whether you remember having seen this painting, or can accurately describe its details may depend upon your race especially if you are only a casual visitor to this place. Let me explain.

The Library Company of Philadelphia is located at 1314 Locust Street, adjacent to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Unlike its grand column bedecked neighbor, the Library Company facade is flat and fairly ubiquitous. But step inside and you will encounter a treasure trove of the Founding Father's books (the books they used to write the Declaration of Independence a few blocks away) and one of the most robust collections of early African American history. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin as a subscription library, the Library Company of Philadelphia was formed to bestow the "divine" benefits of education through literature for the "common good."

While the study of history has accurately revealed that Benjamin Franklin, like the majority of America's Founding Fathers, was an enslaver, holding African men, women and children in captivity for their accumulation of wealth, history also reveals that Franklin "evolved" and became the president of the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society in 1787.

About the painting. Artist Samuel Jennings proposed a painting to commemorate the Library Company's move to a new location. In response to his offer, the trustees of the Library Company, including Franklin, requested a painting that depicted "Liberty" displaying the classical arts with a broken chain at her feet and a "Groupe of Negroes sitting on the earth or in some attitude of expressive of Ease and Joy." Jennings honored their request and in 1792, the painting, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences or the Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, was gifted to the Library Company of Philadelphia. The oil painting depicts a large white female Liberty figure teaching supplicant Blacks while other Blacks are seen happily dancing around a "liberty pole" in the background.

So what does race have to do with ones impression of this painting? Well as a Black woman and a trustee of the Library Company, the painting is

cringeworthy and having seen it once, I cannot erase it from my visual memory. While I leave to the historians a deeper discussion of the racist tropes inherent in this painting, for me it's less about what I see or think about this painting than how whites I've met react to it. Blacks I know who have encountered the painting remember it vividly for all of the pain of white superiority it invokes. In contrast, whites I know seem to have only a vague recollection of the painting and seem fairly oblivious to its daunting presence. I believe their comfort around the painting is borne out of their unspoken view of the natural order of things: white power and privilege over Black inferiority and gratitude. When I've discussed the painting with whites, they usually defend it as a quaint, but well intentioned and bold expression of abolitionism in the 18th century. I had a well meaning white friend describe the Blacks in the painting as naked-in fact they are fully clothed but his visual memory spoke to a deeper, unconscious racist image of the Black savage, naked and uneducated.

So what's my point? There has been discussion that the Jennings painting should remain in a less prominent space at the Library Company so it will not continue to offend staff and visitors, particularly Black visitors and staff of color, who are sensitive to its racist implications. This discussion, however, smacks of the same protective paternalism inherent in the painting. The Jennings painting is a white dilemma not a Black one, because it contains a false narrative of white supremacy. I am Black and I have suffered discomfort from this painting. Is the majority white LCP Board willing to experience similar discomfort, the type of discomfort necessary to address and dismantle the racial bias and white privilege that has allowed the Jennings painting to hang all of these years without question? No matter how well intentioned we believe the 1791 LCP Trustee Board was in seeking this visual confirmation of their abolitionist ideology, the Jennings painting, almost 250 years later, continues to loom over the Reading Room as an expression of who belongs there and what that hierarchy of access and privilege should be.

We have an opportunity for an important conversation where all should participate, but let's make certain we correctly assess agency, and accountability and clearly state our values as an institution.

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