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From: Emma Lapsansky-Werner <elapsans@haverford.edu>

Date: Feb 4, 2022 11:54 AM

Subject: Re: Hello and a question from the Library Company

To: Michael Barsanti <mbarsanti@librarycompany.org>

Cc:

Hi. Nice to hear from you! And indeed I DO have strong feelings about ways to acknowledge "outdated" artistic markers. My feelings are simple and direct! I do NOT feel we should "whitewash" history by *removing* aspects of history that are "embarrassing" or "out of fashion." On the contrary, how to REMEMBER and be reminded of "never again", if we think of what we "know" "now" without recognizing how we got it WRONG in eras past.

If it were I making the decision, I would leave the painting in its place of prominence, and use it as a "teaching moment" to discuss how the founding fathers were fascinated with people and cultures that could be "exoticized" "studied," "experimented with" and --perhaps--"civilized."

So I'd **leave the painting exactly where it is,** and place a prominent placard underneath:

"This piece of art, as PATRONIZING and DEMEANING as it is to the twenty-first century eye, is a stark reminder of the curiosity, ignorance, and cultural myopia with which the founding fathers viewed the variety of "others" they encountered as the modernizing travel possibilities gave Europeans access to countries and cultures beyond their hitherto limited worlds. There are ironies here: these early European "explorers" were fascinated with modern science and experimentation, and in that context, some, like Benjamin Franklin, harnessed lightning, others--e.g., John Bartram, experimented with hybrid plants; others --such as Anthony Benezet and Dr. Bray opened schools to see if African children could learn European language and culture. Others--such as Carolus Linnaeus, tried to categorize people, "race" and hierarchy, and engaged in a stimulating international conversations, artifact-collecting, and intellectual discourse that resulted in institutions such as the American Philosophical Society and the Library Company of Philadelphia collecting--and preserving for our modern-day edification--a considerable array of information on that European cultural myopia--including information on early American black muslims, and the writings of such as political activist Olaudah Equiano, whose writings suggest the degree to which Africans--looking back from the other side--viewed Europeans as violent, uncivilized, and unclean.

Thus, Jennings' painting--eighteenth-century distortion of "civilization" seen through a European eye, painting offers the modern researcher an invitation to re-evaluate "civilization" through both the European lens AND the African lens.

So Sammuel Jennings welcome to the Library Company of Philadelphia, where twentieth-century librarians--inspired by the long curatorship of Phillip Lapsansky, have assembled and organized the tools with which to

follow this trail backward. The Library Company welcomes people of all backgrounds who wish to explore this complex story.

So, Michael, there you have my take on things. Happy to talk by phone too.

Let's make a telephone or zoom date? 610-653-6153

On Fri, Feb 4, 2022 at 10:47 AM Michael Barsanti <mbarsanti@librarycompany.org> wrote:

Professor Lapsansky-Werner-

This is Mike Barsanti from the Library Company. We've met a couple of times, back in the old days before COVID. I'm writing because I'd love to talk to you about an issue that has come up here at the Library Company that I think you might have an opinion, or an idea, about.

We have recently chosen to move the famous painting *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* by Samuel Jennings from its prominent location in the reading room to a less prominent spot nearby. This move has come after years of conversation about how to make the Library Company a more inclusive and welcoming community. We are committed to continuing to display the painting, but many of us (hearing the complaints of people who find it offensive) feel that it needs to be put in context. Until we have determined the best way to do that, we intend to keep the painting where it now is, available to anyone who wants to see it, but not with the "pride of place" it has had in recent years .

As you might expect, this move has angered some members of our community. We are planning to put together some learning sessions around it & hear opinions and research from all sides, which will inform how we display the painting in the future.

I'm wondering if you have any thoughts or advice on the subject? Can we set up a phone call to discuss it?

Hope so, and looking forward,

Mike

Michael J. Barsanti, Ph.D.

Edwin Wolf 2nd Director

215-546-3181 x. 124

The Library Company of Philadelphia

1314 Locust St | Philadelphia, PA 19107

librarycompany.org

Pronouns: he/him

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Emma Lapsansky, Ph.D.

Department of History, Haverford College

developmental editing/historical research consulting

Pls note: Generally, I do not read/answer email btwn 8 PM and 8 AM or on weekends.

"True Godliness don't [sic] turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it."--William Penn

["By the time the wise woman has found a bridge, the crazy woman has crossed the water." \(Wild River Review\)](#)

<https://www.haverford.edu/users/elapsans>

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