

Facing History

The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940

Guy C. McElroy
with an essay by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

and contributions by
Janet Levine, Francis Martin, Jr., and Claudia Vess

edited by Christopher C. French



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The Corcoran Gallery of Art

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.
January 13 through March 25, 1990

The Brooklyn Museum
Brooklyn, New York
April 20 through June 25, 1990

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Editor/publication manager: Christopher C. French
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Bibliography

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cover John Singleton Copley, *Head of a Negro*, 1777-1778.
Oil on canvas, 21 × 16¼ (53.3 × 41.3). The Detroit Institute of Arts,
Founders Society Purchase, Gibbs-Williams Fund

frontispiece Jacob Lawrence, *Ironers*, 1943. Gouache on
paper, 21½ × 29½ (54.6 × 74.9). Private Collection

Blacks seem to have felt the need to reconstruct their image since 1619, when the first boatload of slaves disembarked in Virginia. African-Americans commenced their cultural lives in this hemisphere as veritable deconstructions, so to speak, of that Western culture so ardently wished to be. Almost as soon as blacks gained literacy, they set out to redefine – against already solidified stereotypes – who and what a black person was, and how unlike a racist stereotype black men and women indeed were. To counter racist stereotypes, both white and black writers lined up on the side of nobility, posing a series of equally fictitious black archetypes, from James Fenimore Cooper's Abraham Lincoln in *The Pioneers* (1823) to Alex Haley's Kunta Kinte in *Roots* (1976). The first serious efforts at black intellectual reconstruction commenced in the antebellum slave narratives, published mainly between 1831 and 1861, and climaxed with the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s. This period, rather than the politically defined period between 1867 and 1876, marked the crux of black intellectual reconstruction (figs. 9 and 10). With the right of suffrage, postwar Reconstruction was characterized by a dramatic upsurge of energy in the black body politic, but a survey of the black literature and visual art that emerged after the Civil War shows that the arts clearly enjoyed no similar vitalization. Between 1867 and 1876, for example, black people published only two novels, one in 1867 and one in 1871. On the contrary, blacks published more novels between 1853 and 1865, when they were fighting slavery, than they did in the period when they were at least nominally free. Between 1895 and 1925, at the height of racially inspired violence towards African-Americans, however, black writers published at least 64 novels.

In one of the paradoxes of black intellectual history, one of the most important contributions to literature for the black person during Reconstruction came not from black authors, but from Mark Twain's *A True Story* (1874), which purports to describe "Aunt Rachel's" oral narration of her own enslavement, rendered entirely in "dialect." The great and terrible subject of black slavery did have a momentary attraction for visual artists when blacks were freed, but it found no immediate literary counterpart. Instead, once Redemption had degenerated into a new form of strictly legislated, de facto enslavement for blacks, African-Americans pursued a public voice much more stridently than even during slavery.

If Reconstruction did not produce a black renaissance of letters, the period between 1895 and 1925 was an era that witnessed the creation of the New Negro, a mythic figure in search of a culturally willed myth. The New Negro was a paradoxical metaphor that combined a concern with history and cultural antecedents with a deep concern for an articulated racial heritage that would establish once and for all the highly public faces of a once-subjugated but now proud race. This figure, which combines implicitly an eighteenth century vision of intellectual utopia with nineteenth century ideas concerning optimistic progress, climaxed by the end of the nineteenth century in the dream of a self-made, coherent, and powerful identity signified by the upper case

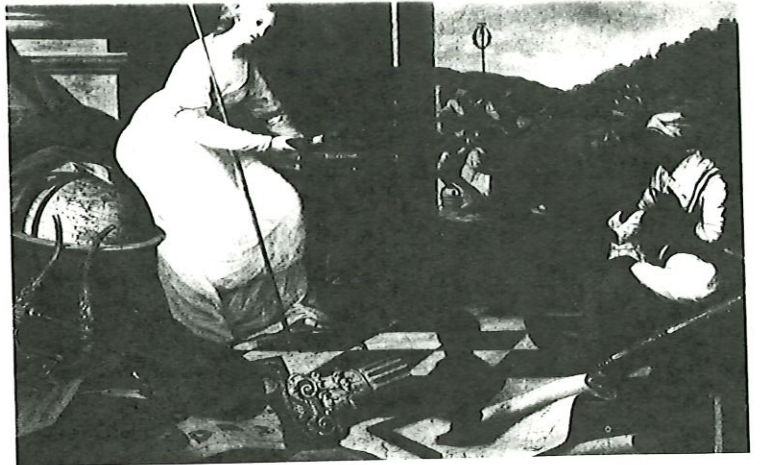


fig. 7 Samuel Jennings, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*, 1792. Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 73 1/8 (153 x 185.4). Library Company of Philadelphia



fig. 8 Winslow Homer, *The Watermelon Boys*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 38 1/8 (61.3 x 96.8). Cooper-Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design



abolitionists, he was introduced early in life to the issue of black freedom through his association with the Philadelphia Society of Friends. Jennings attended the University of Pennsylvania and was active as a painter of miniatures, portraits, and allegorical works. At the end of the 1780s Jennings moved to London to pursue further artistic studies; by 1789 he was exhibiting at the Royal Academy and the British Institution. Jennings remained active in England through 1834; although the details of his later history are unclear, he probably never returned to the United States.

Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, 1792
Oil on canvas, 60 1/4 x 73 1/8 (153 x 185.4). Inscribed on a roll of paper, lower right: *S. Jennings Pinxt 1792*. Library Company of Philadelphia

Jennings conceived *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* in 1790, when the Free Library of Philadelphia began building a new library. He proposed an instructive moral composition that he thought suitable for the noble aspirations of the Free Library: a symbolic representation featuring either Clio, Calliope, or Minerva. Responding to his proposal, the Committee of the Library Company specifically requested that he portray the Goddess of Liberty displaying the symbolic emblems of the arts for a group of free black Americans, who would appear "resting on the earth or in some attitude expressive of ease and joy." The motivation for these strong abolitionist sentiments undoubtedly came from the Library Company's membership, which counted such notable individuals as Benjamin Franklin as founding members.

Depicted as a white noblewoman clothed in contemporary rather than Greco-Roman dress, Liberty is seated before a classical facade, surrounded by symbols of the arts and sciences and some of the notable texts of modern literature. Across her shoulder rests a pole that displays a Liberty cap. Flanked by volumes labeled "Agriculture" and "Philosophy," she holds a text identifiable as the catalogue of the Free Library. Beneath her feet lies a severed chain that demonstrates her opposition to slavery. Resting on the floor before her among these attributes is a classical bust that appears to display the likeness of Henry Thornton, a well-known abolitionist leader of the period.

The gestures of gratitude on the faces of the freed slaves kneeling to the front right of Liberty suggest the happiness with which they anticipate access to the full life of free citizens. In the middle distance of an allegorical landscape Jennings has placed a group of blacks who have erected a Liberty Pole, while in the far distance boats suggest the everyday concerns of commerce. In spite of the well-intentioned benevolence of Jennings's composition, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* avoids presenting images that describe individual black people. Nor does it suggest the capacity of blacks for defining their own destinies. Jennings's idealized heraldic scheme flies in the face of the severely restricted rights and debilitating working conditions that confronted most African-Americans in the new nation.

G. C. M.

TOUR: CORCORAN GALLERY - January 13, 1990 to March 26, 1990
BROOKLYN MUSEUM - 9 weeks, end of April through June 1990

The Corcoran Gallery of Art Loan Agreement

17th Street & New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006 Telephone 202-638-3211

Exhibition The Black Image in American Art 1750-1930

Loan Period 12/1/89 - 7/31/90

Lender The Library Company of Philadelphia Telephone (Home) () _____
(Business) (215) 546-3181

Address 1314 Locust St. Philadelphia, PA 19107-5698

(Unless otherwise instructed below, work will be shipped from and returned to this address)

→ Credit Line The Library Company of Philadelphia
(Exact form of lender's name for catalogue, labels, and publicity)

Title of Work Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences

Artist Samuel Jennings Dates _____

Medium or Materials and Support oil on canvas, framed

→ Is the work signed? no Where? _____

→ Is the work dated? _____ Where? _____

Dimensions:

→ Painting, drawing, etc. (excl. frame or mat): H 60 1/4" W 74"

Outer dimensions of frame: H 69" W 82"

Sculpture or relief (excl. pedestal): H _____ W _____ D _____

Approximate weight: _____

Pedestal: H _____ W _____ D _____ Detachable? _____

Is work for sale? _____ Selling Price (see conditions on reverse) _____

Framing: Is the work framed? yes If necessary, may we reframe or re-mat? no

→ May we substitute plexiglass? _____

The work will be returned to the lender in its original frame and/or mat unless other arrangements are made in writing.

→ Condition: Is the work in good condition? yes Please note any special condition or special handling requirements
crate for travel

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Value of work (U.S. dollars) (Insurance cannot exceed selling price, if any) \$100,000.

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→ Do you prefer to maintain your own insurance? no

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