

SAMUEL JENNINGS (ca. 1755—ca. 1834)

43. Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences (1792)

Allegory and symbolism appear rarely in American art. They seem not to be native to our prevailing forms of thought, except when there arises some special urge to give symbolic shape to our ideals. Such an urge was strongly felt at the beginning of the Republic, when symbols like the Great Seal, Columbia as the Genius of America, and the Goddess of Liberty were created to represent a new nation and its government. The painting *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* is one allegory from this period.

Little is known of its painter, Samuel Jennings. He appears to have been born and trained in Philadelphia, where, on January 8, 1787, he advertised himself in the *Pennsylvania Packet* as a painter of miniatures and teacher of drawing. By 1789, however, he was in London, and he spent the remainder of his life there. He exhibited portraits and classical and religious subjects at the Royal Academy, the British Institution, and the Associated Artists until 1834. While Jennings's ties to Philadelphia were still fresh, he heard that the Library Company of Philadelphia was building an elegant library on Fifth Street. Through his father, who was then secretary of Green Tree Insurance Company, he offered to paint a "history" to place over the mantel of the new library's principal room. He suggested that the subject be either Clio, the muse of history; Calliope, the muse of harmony; or Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. The directors of the Library Company were pleased with Jennings's overall plan but, instead of Jennings's ideas, requested as a subject

Liberty (with her Cap and proper Insignia) displaying the arts by some of the most striking Symbols of Painting, Architecture, Mechanics, Astronomy &ca., whilst She appears in the attitude of placing on the top of a Pedestal, a pile of Books, lettered with, *Agriculture, Commerce, Philosophy & Catalogue of Philadelphia Library*.

In addition, because many of the directors were active in the Philadelphia movement against slavery, they asked for

A Broken Chain under her feet, and in the distant back Ground a Groupe of Negroes sitting on the

Earth, or in some attitude expressive of Ease & Joy. [Quoted in Smith, "*Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*," p. 89.]

This kind of additive composition, strange to us who are accustomed by the camera to images of a single instant, involved looking at one item after another and adding them mentally into a total complex of ideas. Jennings illustrated all the ideas suggested by the directors and added a few of his own, such as a bust of English reformer Henry Thornton, a terrestrial globe, a columned portico, and a distant landscape with ships under sail. The original work, somewhat stiff but decorative and pleasing to the eye, has ornamented the rooms of the Library Company of Philadelphia since 1792.

While he was fulfilling his commission for the Library Company, Jennings planned a popular version of the same subject. In the June 11, 1792, *Pennsylvania General Advertiser*, he advertised a stipple engraving, fifteen by eighteen inches, at twenty-five shillings, to be delivered to subscribers in the following year. The print was never issued, perhaps because the world was sliding rapidly into a general war between revolutionary France and the conservative European monarchies. However, Jennings did paint this small version for the engraver to work from; it is signed and dated 1792. Showing the business instinct that was to carry the artist through forty-five years of activity in the London art world, he added one detail: beside the figure of Liberty is a shield painted in the British colors. To the British public, the figure would thus read as Britannia presiding over the English abolition movement, while to the American eye, she was American Liberty.

Oil on canvas; 15 × 18 in.

Signed at lower right ". . . Jennings / . . . 1792."
Acc. no. 58.120.2.

References: Dunlap (1834), *Rise of the Arts of Design*, 1:435, 2:471; Scharf and Westcott (1884), *History of Philadelphia*, 2:1045; Prime (1932), *Arts and Crafts*, p. 16; Smith (1949), "Philadelphia Allegory"; Smith (1965), "*Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*."



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Published for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum
by the University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville

1986.

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[NUMBER 526]

526. LIBERTY DISPLAYING THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

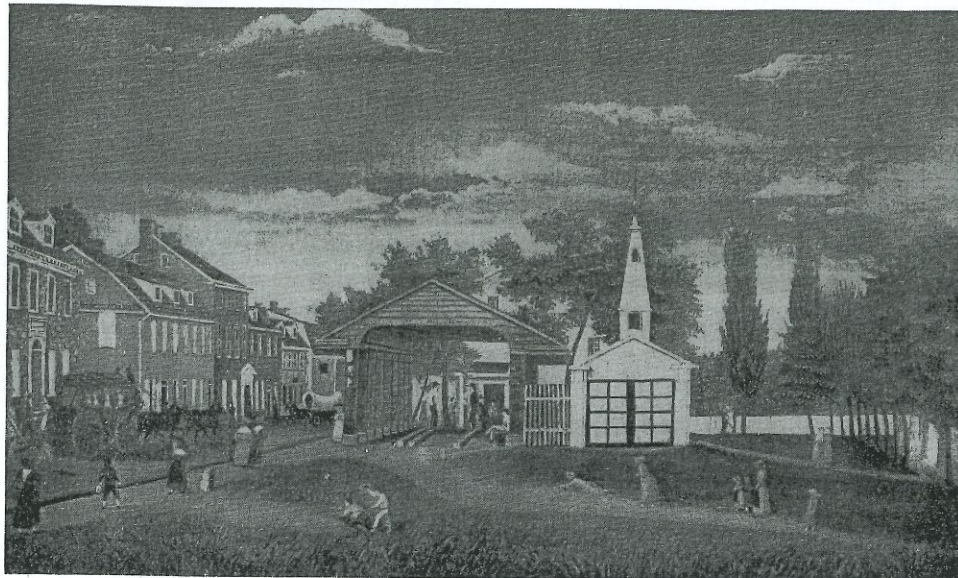
Samuel Jennings, American: fl. 1789-1834

1100- The allegorical figure of a blonde woman, robed in white, is depicted before a classical building; she is surrounded by books, a palette with brushes, a bust, a lyre, a globe, and other paraphernalia. As an emblem of aversion to slavery, she puts her foot on a broken chain, while placing a book on a pedestal. A group of Negroes pay homage to Liberty; in the rear Negroes sitting and joyfully dancing around a pole near a river, enlivened by sailboats. Signed on scroll. Canvas on board: 15½ x 18½ inches

Note: The painting represents a small version of the larger composition which the artist painted in London and sent as a present to the Free Library Company, Philadelphia, which still possesses it. This larger painting was shown in 1949 at the Art Institute of Chicago in an exhibition entitled *From Colony to Nation*. In the catalogue (no. 71) the historical facts on the painting are related. From them it can be concluded that the building behind Liberty represents the old Library, and according to Jennings' notes, Liberty is placing the catalogue of the Library on the pedestal. Since Jennings' main interest was the problem of abolition, the title he originally gave to the painting

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was changed at the exhibition to "Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks."

The present painting must have been executed by Jennings in London as a preliminary composition for the larger version in Philadelphia.

Cf. also Robert C. Smith, *A Philadelphia Allegory*, in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. XXXI (1949), pp. 323 ff.

[See illustration]

5000— 527. MARKET SQUARE, GERMANTOWN, PA. *William Britton, American: c. 1825-30*
 View of the old Philadelphia street, with its eighteenth century houses at the left, among them the Morris residence; pedestrians, a coach and a carriage are depicted on the street, and other figures on the lawn before a small white church with the date 1814 above the entrance; left of it a coach station. 12 x 20 inches

Note: A rare early Philadelphia view. The Morris house, which is still standing, has been restored as a historic site. The view shown is near School Lane.

Collection of Frederic Vaux Wistar, Philadelphia

[See illustration].

seem to recall this ended up in a public collection and Winterthur rings a bell. DD