Memo on the Relocation of the Jennings “Liberty”

January 2022

Michael Barsanti

In early January we moved the 1792 painting by Samuel Jennings, “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences” from the prominent position it has occupied in the first floor reading room to a less prominent spot about 20 feet away. The proximate cause for moving the painting was repair work that had to be done to the HVAC system in the Reading Room, but moving the painting had been the subject of many internal discussions before that, and the HVAC work became an opportunity to act on those conversations. We do not plan to move the painting back to its prior location.

The Jennings painting has profound importance for the history of the Library Company of Philadelphia, but also for the history of the Abolition movement in the United States, and even for the United States itself. It has been called the first Abolitionist painting, and one of the first artworks to represent freed African Americans. The story of its creation shows the Directors of the Library Company and the artist bravely taking a controversial stand, all the more daring when one considers that it dates to the time when the Library Company was serving as the library for the new government of the United States. It has long been a cherished emblem of our institution, expressing our support for abolition – and the role that libraries and learning play in ensuring liberty -- from the earliest days of that movement.

It is also deeply problematic, even for people who know its history. Some contemporary viewers see the representations of African Americans as derived from and perpetuating racist caricatures. Others note the visual hierarchy of races in the painting – the purely white figure of liberty, seated above the supplicant African American figures, bestowing them with knowledge. Beyond the figurative elements of the painting, there is the allegory itself, which seems to imply that the study of the arts and sciences (and the catalogue of the Library Company) is somehow sufficient to free enslaved people. Such an argument naively underestimates (if it does not obtusely conceal) the level of organized violence that perpetuated the institution of slavery, and the responsibility of enslavers and enslaving societies for it.

Connecting all of these critiques, which I have heard directly and indirectly from staff, scholars, visitors, consultants, and even a board member, is a general impression the painting conveys of the inferiority of African American people to white people. For those who feel it, this impression is immediate and visceral. While knowing the history of the painting may lessen this response, it does not remove it. Staff members who have worked around the painting for years describe becoming “deadened” to the feeling over time, but then re-experience their discomfort with it when they have to explain it to the readers and visitors who find it alarming. One staff member in particular described a visit by a group of African American students who were offended by the painting and refused to have their picture taken in front of it. Our Mellon Scholars and Interns regularly comment on the painting as part of their summer internship program, usually wondering why it is on display.

In my conversations I heard that a lot of the strongest responses to the painting have come from younger people, and have come in the last few years. One could say that this reflects their relative lack of education, and that it is the responsibility of the Library Company to put the painting in its proper context. But I have also heard that older, (and very highly educated) people have had the same response, but have either felt it was not worth raising with an institution that is known for resisting change, or where (as fellows or speakers, anyway) they were being paid by the institution and felt it was inappropriate to complain.

Our strategic planning process several years ago produced an uncomfortable discovery that was not directly incorporated into the final plan documents: a small but significant number of our fellows and other researchers, particularly people of color, reported to our consultants that they did not feel comfortable working in our reading rooms. They referred to an atmosphere that made them feel like they were being treated with suspicion and were being surveilled by staff. Some also referred to the lack of images of people of color in the Library Company – and that the one image that does have people of color in it, the Jennings painting, the African American figures are supplicant caricatures. Indeed, the placement of the Jennings painting in the reading room adds to the problem, as it seems to provide an implicit commentary on the work of readers in that space and their relationship to our institution.

So we have a dilemma. The painting is an important part of our history, with such a powerful intended message, that it seems wrong to hide it. However, the painting is also offensive to some of the very people we are trying hard to bring into our community, so it seems wrong to show it, at least without context.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our eventual solution to this problem will be to find a dignified and accessible place to hang the painting, but one where it can put into context, and where it has less of an emblematic prominence. In 2023, we are scheduled to award two Innovation Fellowships to a scholar and an artist, who will develop a project in response to the painting. Without placing too much of a burden on this process, we are hopeful that it will help us generate ideas for a better interpretation of the painting.

In the meantime it will remain on view in a public space, and we will keep talking about how it should be interpreted. We will replace it with the Peter Cooper view of Philadelphia, which now hangs in an awkward spot above the front desk. This is a much better location for the Cooper, as it will not be subject to the changes in climate that come from being so close to the front door, and it will be easier to see. (The Cooper was actually located in this same spot in the reading room before the Jennings was moved there in 2008, so one could say we’re just moving it back.)

1. In November I asked the staff to develop a label to hang next to the painting to establish some context for it, but conversations among the collections staff eventually led to this idea being rejected, as a) many people who see the painting can’t get close enough to it to read a label, and b) even having read a label, it was thought that the painting would still be disturbing and offensive to some viewers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)