Memory, Reason, Imagination: Enlightenment Classification in the 1789 Catalog of the Library Company of Philadelphia, and a Vision of Black Emancipation in Samuel Jennings’1792 painting “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences”

by James N. Green, Librarian Emeritus

In 1789, the Library Company of Philadelphia published a book catalog of its holdings organized by subject. Its earlier catalogs had been organized by the size of the book – folio, quarto, etc. – and then by the order of acquisition, so a subject catalog was a novelty, at least in America. But what was really new was the subject classification *scheme* the Library Company used, which had never before been used in any library catalog. I have long been interested in this amazing catalog, and in the somewhat enigmatic painting it helped inspire, Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, by Samuel Jennings. Now that the painting is the topic of a community discussion, I’d like to share some of my findings with you, because I believe that the in order to fully understand the painting, we need to see it in the context of the Library Company’s history.

The subject classification scheme of the 1789 catalog is described in its preface:

The inconvenient arrangement of the former catalogues having been much complained of, as tending to prolong and perplex the inquiry, after particular authors, and affording no general view of the different subjects contained in the library, the following plan was suggested. … In conformity to the general delineation of human science, laid down by Bacon, and afterwards illustrated and enlarged by d’Alembert, the books have been divided into three classes, corresponding with the three great divisions of the mental faculties – Memory, Reason and Imagination.

Opposite the preface is this table of contents: **Slide 1.**

The preface refers to Francis Bacon’s tripartite division of the faculties of the human mind, as set forth in his *Advancement of Learning*, first published in 1605. Bacon associated each faculty with a kind of learning: memory with history, reason with philosophy, and imagination with literature. The scheme appealed powerfully to the French philosophes, and so it was revived as a template for the classification of different types of knowledge in d’Alembert’s famous *Discours Préliminaire*, which appeared in the first volume of the Diderot/d’Alembert *Encyclopédie,* published in 1751. The *Discours* was hugely influential. As Richard Schwab wrote in the introduction to his translation of the *Discours*, “From the moment of its publication in 1751, many leaders of the Enlightenment recognized it as a masterful statement of their ‘philosophy.’” Condorcet called it one of those “invaluable books which two or three at most appear in each century.” Schwab himself calls it “incomparably the best introduction to the French Enlightenment.”

Here is the folding table that is part of the *Discours Preliminaire,* outlining D’Alembert’s scheme. **Slide 2** When I first came across the Library Company’s 1789 catalog nearly 40 years ago, I was immediately struck by what a perfect example this was of the migration of enlightenment ways of thinking to the new world via print. The only problem is that the Library Company did not own a copy of the *Encyclopedie* in 1789, nor did anyone else in Philadelphia. So how did the Library Company some to know about this classification scheme, and how was it adapted for use in a library catalog?

My answer to these questions (and I’m summarizing furiously here) is that Thomas Jefferson happened upon a copy of the second edition of the *Encyclopédie* (published in Lucca, Italy, 1758-1771) in the shop of an obscure merchant in Alexandria, Virginia in 1783, was intrigued by its classification of the different types of knowledge, and decided to modify it in very interesting ways to form a subject catalog for his own library. Just before he left for France in 1784, where he joined Franklin as Minister Plenipotentiary, he made a manuscript catalog of his library, which he used to avoid duplication as he scoured the city for more books. The catalog survives, organized according to his scheme, and prefixed by a summary chart that was clearly modeled on the folding table in the *Encyclopédie.* When he donated his library to the Library of Congress in 1814, his classification scheme was retained and prefixed to LC’s 1815 catalog. **(Slide 3)** This much I know; what follows is my first hypothesis.

In Paris, I believe Jefferson showed his catalog to Franklin, who was also intrigued enough by his classification scheme to make a copy of it. When Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1785, he added a large library room to his house, which he filled with all the books he had accumulated over a lifetime. They were arranged somewhat randomly, but he made them accessible by means of a manuscript catalog organized by subject. His grandsons penciled a shelf location mark in each book, and wrote that mark next to the title in the catalog, which sadly no longer exists. Edwin Wolf proved all this in his reconstruction of Franklin’s library in the 1960s.

My second hypothesis is that the subject scheme in Franklin’s lost library catalog was Jefferson’s, and my third hypothesis is that that he somehow communicated it to the Library Company Directors and its Librarian Zachariah Poulson, who used it to arrange the 1789 catalog. Their decision was probably influenced by the fact that in 1786 Franklin had intimated to the Directors that he intended to bequeath his library to the Library Company. With some 4,276 volumes, it was probably the largest private library in the United States, and almost as large as the Library Company’s existing collection of 5,487 volumes. This, of course, would have required a new library building, the planning for which began at about that time. When Franklin died in 1790, the Directors must have been dismayed to learn that he had bequeathed his books and papers to his grandson. The new building was by then already under construction.

In a letter of January 12, 1790, Samuel Jennings, a young artist raised in Philadelphia and then studying under Benjamin West in London, wrote to the Directors of the Library Company to say he had heard they were erecting “an Elegant Building,” and offered to “present a painting to the Company that would be applicable to so noble, and useful an Institution.” Wishing to “contribute my Mite to the Encouragement of the Arts and Sciences,” He proposed an allegory of “Minerva -- Goddess of Wisdom and all the Arts.” Taking him up on his offer, the Directors wrote back suggesting instead

…the figure of Liberty (with her cap and proper insignia) displaying the arts by some of the most striking Symbols of Painting, Architecture, Mechanics, Astronomy, &c. 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,* a Broken Chain under her feet, and inthe distant back Ground a Groupe of Negroes sitting on the Earth, or in some attitude expressive of Ease & Joy.”

Jennings followed their instructions in every detail. **Slide 4.**  The Director’s reference to the library’s new catalog suggests that they were proud of it, and that they wanted their proposed allegory of knowledge, enlightenment, and emancipation to refer to its subject arrangement. **Slide 5.** They evidently sent Jennings a copy of the catalog in its original drab blue-gray paper covers, with the spine title lettered by hand, and he rendered it all too realistically in his painting, making it the focal point and in effect the embodiment of all the arts and sciences. Here is a photograph of a copy of the catalog in its original binding. The blue gray paper cover has been clumsily repaired, but enough of it survives to show its color. **Slide 6.** Jennings even reproduced what must have been the hand-lettered title on the spine.

To my eye, this is the most peculiar aspect of the painting. Because the spine title is so small and the book so drab, the reference to the Library Company and to its novel catalog is practically invisible to ordinary viewers. Since the painting was hung quite high for most of its subsequent history – **Slide 7** in this gouache sketch from 1879 it is just barely visible handing from a balcony in our reading room – people would have had to get up on a ladder to see it. **Slide 8.** Until quite recently, the painting was hung in our main reading room, over our not yet entirely outmoded card catalog, still too high for most people to see what book Liberty is holding. It still works as an allegory of an American Enlightenment, but not a very successful one, because it is only partly legible, and because we as an institution have made little no or no effort to interpret it.

Nowadays, however, what strikes visitors most forcibly is the image of a white savior goddess doling out books to a group of African Americans kneeling submissively and reverentially before her. It is a puzzling image, and we fear, offensive to some. What were our Directors thinking when they asked Jennings to substitute Liberty for Wisdom and to include in his allegory not only striking symbols of the arts and sciences but also “a Groupe of Negroes sitting on the Earth, or in some attitude expressive of Ease & Joy”?

Most of the Library Company’s Directors and many of its shareholders were Quakers. Thanks in large part to the efforts of anti-slavery Quakers, Pennsylvania became the first state to pass a gradual emancipation act in 1780. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, founded in 1775, was formally incorporated in 1789 with Franklin as its president. Even before Franklin’s death, the Library Company had already decided to take its founder as the patron of its new building, commissioning a monumental statue of him to stand in a niche over the front door (and in our present building behind a thick glass shield, now covered over); and it wanted this grand allegorical painting to reinforce that tribute inside.

The full title given to the painting expressed the connection between the promulgation of useful knowledge and the emancipation of the enslaved. The plaque on the frame – also hard to see – reads “Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences; or, the Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks.” This painting is the first image to link the icon of Liberty with the emancipation of enslaved Africans. “The figure of Liberty (with her Cap and proper insignia)” that is, her staff surmounted with the liberty cap breaking the chains at her feet, was a familiar icon. It had first appeared in 1765 after the repeal of the Stamp Act, where it represented freedom from tyranny, not from slavery. And it was from the start connected with the erection of liberty poles. In the background of our painting, the newly emancipated slaves are expressing their “attitude of ease and joy” by dancing around a liberty pole. One of them is playing a banjo, the earliest known depiction of that instrument. Whereas enslaved people were up to then usually represented as barely clothed, these people are wearing garments of freedom, not European clothing, but really splendid African clothing. It is a picture not only of freedom granted but also of freedom restored. This painting is all in all the first image of what Black emancipation would look like. Of course, it was not to be, not yet.

The years between the commissioning of the painting in 1790 and its hanging in the new library building in 1792 can be seen as the high-water mark of hope for emancipation. In 1792 the Haitian Revolution hadn’t happened yet, nor had the Reign of Terror, both of which strengthened the hand of reaction and counter-revolution. The turn of Southern planters away from slave-produced sugar and tobacco to the much more lucrative cultivation of cotton was just beginning, helped along by the invention of the cotton gin in 1794. In 1792, it really looked as if emancipation was just around the corner, not just to Quaker abolitionists but to enlightened people of all persuasions, even in the South. Our painting is an expression of this hopeful vision in terms that would have been clearly understood by any contemporary. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Twenty-first century eyes see something very different. In the words of the historian Laurel Thacher Ulrich, “visitors are troubled by the image of a cluster of African-Americans bowing before an immense white woman. To some it evokes critiques of white benevolence, …. [where] the conditions for ‘emancipation’ are another form of oppression. Feminist activists from the nineteenth century to the present have been equally hostile to a form of representation that uses idealized images of white women to dignify a history focused on men.” This argument is compelling. Benevolence, especially benevolence ordered up by associations of elites, has long been recognized as a conveying a burden on its objects, and we can only hope that the benefits conferred outweighed that burden, at least in the long run. It may not be enough to say our benevolent Quaker directors meant well, but they cannot have foreseen the horror that would result from the abject failure of their vision of universal emancipation. Even today, after a civil war, constitutional amendments, the civil rights movement, and our recent reckoning over structural racism, this vision remains only partly realized. We are still waiting hopefully for a time when all people will be able to live free, in “attitudes of ease and joy.”

This difficult painting could once again be inspiring, perhaps even more inspiring than ever because of the way it shows how long we have been hoping and how much more work it will take to realize those hopes. But we can’t do that by hiding it away. Instead we should rise to the challenge it presents, display it prominently, and do the hard work it takes to interpret it, not just to librarians and historians, but to everyone.

1. The bust prominently featured in the foreground of the painting is said to be a portrait of either William Wilberforce or Henry Thornton, both prominent in campaign for the abolition of Britain’s Atlantic slave trade that was then ongoing. However, a recent Library Company fellow, the University of Warwick literary historian Stephen Shapiro, believes the bust is much more likely a portrait of Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville (1754-1793), the founder of the Société des Amis des Noirs, which advocated not only the abolition of the slave trade but also the immediate emancipation of all slaves in France and its colonies. For this reason, and following the language in the full title of the painting, I use the term emancipation rather than abolition for the vision it expresses. Franklin knew Brissot in Paris, and met him again when he traveled to Philadelphia in 1788-89, where he visited the constitutional ratification convention, met with the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and was proposed for membership in the American Philosophical Society. He even visited the African School, where the pupils showed him their work, and the Library Company, where he noted approvingly that “half of the library is generally in the hands of readers.” His bust would have been recognizable to a great many Philadelphians. He was a leader of the French revolutionary government until he was guillotined by the even more radical Jacobins in 1793. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)