

The Archive as an Engine of Social Change

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[slide 1]

Samuel Jennings' 1792 *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, the Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks* has been placed over the heads of early American readers at the Library Company of Philadelphia ever since the LCP received the image it commissioned for their new building. Yet, the LCP today admits that Jennings' image is more likely to cause cringe than inspiration with over its oversize representation of white saviorship, and the LCP has consigned the painting to its less public, reading room for researchers, as a space that ostensibly contains more reserved responses.

Without wishing to diminish concerns over white privilege, I want to argue that in spite of its flaws and insufficiencies, Jennings' canvass has three noteworthy achievements.

First, it endorses Black revolutionary violence as a technique for emancipation.

Second, the painting seeks to shift the viewer from conceptualizing liberation as a gift granted by whites to one that sees Black empowerment as a self-enabling process, if only Blacks are given the same tools that non-elite white Europeans had themselves relatively recently received throughout the eighteenth century.

[slide 2]: LCP catalog

Lastly, Jennings conceptualizes the LCP as an activist institution dedicated to deploying knowledge acquisition in order to make manifest an enlightened politics. The scholarly archive is meant to be an engine of social transformation. Jennings message—endorsed and, in fact, dictated to him by the LCP's directors—to all those reading the library's collection is that if their learning is not explicitly placed in service to the abolition of social control, then these readers are the problem, not the solution. To use today's language, an archive that isn't woke-making is not one worth having in Jennings's view.

My claims here may seem unusual only because there is practically no extended published reading of the image, except for two, in 1949 and 1965, both by Robert C. Smith, which have not only *not* been subject to critical response, but, moreover, present incorrect claims that use the category of “allegorical painting” to misread and obscure Jennings’s aesthetics of formal deployments in the service of historical transformation. Let me explain.

While there’s little known about Jennings, he was Philadelphian who moved to London to work as a painter within Benjamin West’s network, largely as a copier of Old Master paintings, or, if one believes William Dunlap, as a forger.

Hearing that the Library Company was moving to a new site, Jennings successfully got his Philadelphia-based father to have the LCP commission what would be Jennings’ largest and most formally innovative image. While Jennings initially proposed a more conventional representation of classical figurations of History and so on, the LCP’s directors had something more daring in mind.

They rejected Jennings’ proposal of Minerva in favour of one of Liberty with the revolutionary cap, a representation of the LCP’s catalogue, and an image of “a Group of Negroes sitting on the Earth or in some attitude of Ease and Joy.” In other words, they wanted a picture of Jubilee after emancipation.

[slide 3]: the eye’s trajectory

Jennings not only took up these suggestions, but also furthered them but adding other images and inserting a background of ships, in order, as he explained to the LCP, to help “[lead] the Eye to a greater distance & acting as an intermediate object, between the distant Groups of Negroes & the Sky, for I have endeavoured to conduct the Eye, in the most pleasing manner possible, beginning with the Figure of Liberty, which is the principle object in the Picture” through what he calls the other “grand Groups.”

I propose that we take Jennings notion of ocular movement at his work and see the painting as having a temporal trajectory, a historical movement formed by a sequence of foreground,

midground, and background, rather than a frame composed with the otherwise homogeneous simultaneity or disconnect events typically associated with allegorical paintings of the period.

[slide 4]: the bust

To make a claim for Jennings aesthetic purpose, I want to start with the problem that bedevilled the critic Robert Smith – the image of the bust in the lower third of the painting.

[slide 5]: Wilberforce

In his first 1945 piece, Smith claimed that this was a representation of William Wilberforce, “who in 1787 had brought in a bill for the repatriation of large numbers of Negroes to Sierra Leone.”

[slide 6]: Thornton

When Smith revised and extended his commentary in 1965, he rejected this first attribution, and now argued that based on visual similarity, that the image is of Henry Thornton, who was chairman of the Sierra Leone Company, on grounds that Jennings had previously done a life-sitting portrait of Thomas Clarkson, “another abolitionist contemporary of William Wilberforce.”

[slide 7]: Brissot

Yet given the LCP’s insistence on dictating the paintings’ elements, why would they accept a bust of English abolitionists who they had never met and knew of only by reputation? Instead, despite all ensuing curatorial assumptions that Smith is correct, I propose that the bust is of Jacques Pierre Brissot, founder of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks.

[slide 8]: Brissot’s text

Not only had Brissot travelled to the US between 1788 and 89 to meet with American abolitionists, but in 1791, the year of Jennings' work, Brissot published his three volume *Nouveau Voyage Dans les États-unis de l'Amérique Septentrionale*. And this was quickly translated into English.

[slide 9 and 10]: Brissot's texts

The first volume is largely dedicated to fulsome praise of Philadelphia's Quakers, whom he met on the trip, and particular the intellectual merit of freed Blacks, who need only liberty and education to equal or surpass whites, much as whites themselves had shortly before required.

[slide 11]: LCP

Brissot also specifically glories the LCP as an institution where half of its collection was discharged to readers, rather than being sequestered as an aristocratic hoard, in order to indicate the LCP's social utility. And 1807 catalogue of the LCP includes Brissot's work within its collection.

[slide 12]: google ngram

A clue to Brissot's identity lies in the painting's title, which speaks about the emancipation of "the Blacks," which seems to be a direct translation from the French of Brissot's society, rather than the more normative Anglophone keyword, *Negros*, as seen even in the LCP-Jennings correspondence. It's an imprecise tool, but an Ngram suggests likewise the relative use of the two terms in English.

To foreshadow a point I'll make soon, the portrayal of Brissot in black, rather than white, marble, suggests the painting intention to indicate emergent Black canonization.

[slide 13]: Haiti

Furthermore, by attributing the image to a figure active in the French Revolution, rather than English parliamentarians, not only makes better sense as to why Liberty is seen with the

Liberty cap on the pole, but also Jennings' indication that the next theatre of popular revolution will be Haiti, specifically, and the Caribbean, more generally (rather than the American South), as seen by the island's being framed by the lower left harp.

[slide 14]: Maccabeus

The score for this instrument is Handel's 1747 oratory, *Judas Maccabeus*, which has quotes the passage sung by a Hebrew woman, "Come ever-smiling liberty/And with thee bring thy jocund train/For thee we pant, and sigh for thee/with whom eternal pleasures reign."

As the scene ends with the colonized Hebrews commitment to violent rebellion against Greek imperial rule, Handel is quoted to make the link explicit between the jubilation of freedom as granted only by taking up arms against the oppressors.

[slide 16]: Scott

In this sense the cementing corner of Jennings' painting endorses the first echoes of the Haitian Revolt that Julius S. Scott's *The Common Wind* has shown was transmitted through across long-distance, circumAtlantic trade routes.

The LCP's steady encouragement of Black Revolution is then explained by the icons of geometry that provide the code to Jennings' explicit innovation of encouraging his viewers to take a long-distance view of the future, as part of his purpose to draw the viewer's eye away from the more immediate picture of supine Blacks in the foreground to one of independent and self-organizing Blacks in the future. Not only is the mid-ground unusual for providing non-generic imagery of Blacks who are not shown wearing servile clothes, but also contains, as Laurent Dubois notes, one of the first illustrations of the banjo, as an African instrument. The mid-ground dispenses with classical referents in favour of an idealized contemporary freed from the nightmare of history.

[slide 17]: Franklin

The displacement from white prestige to Black social agency appears when we take Jennings's claims for the geometry of visual movement seriously. Let's start with the fingers, we see from David Martin's famous 1767 portrait of Franklin how the hand's geometry looks to stabilizing the mind's rational Enlightenment.

[slide 17]: hands

A similar exchange happens between Liberty and the non-supine Black woman.

[slide 19]: triangles

Likewise, the triangle became standard French revolutionary iconography and Jennings uses the geometric illustrations placed in prestige proximity to Jennings' signature, as an encoding principle for the canvass, which is replete with triangular constructions.

[slide 20]: triangle composition

In this way, the canvass leads the viewer's eye away from white centrality towards the musician, ostensibly playing the lyric of liberation, a Black Maccabee, surrounded by a gambol of joyously dancing women, in a world where whites are no longer significant, an implicitly freed Haiti.

[slide 21]: curve and line

Or another illustration, is used to both link the two woman, but suggest the eye;s line lies now with the Black female, not white liberty.

The direction thus continues to the ships of commerce. One reading of the boats might be Jennings' repetition of Brissot's endorsement of Black resettlement and recolonization of Africa. Today, few viewers would be satisfied with this vision, but recolonization schemes ought to be placed in two contexts.

First, at no prior historical point would jubilee emancipation be considered outside of the sense that the enslaved would seek return to their homelands. Second, Brissot's own argument for resettlement is that the racist prejudice against freed Blacks in America and England will be so persistent, as the resources necessary for domestic establishment will continue to be denied, that it is only through a return to Africa and rise as trading partners will equality be achieved.

Today, these Ricardo-esque economics of comparative advantage have been disproven by historical experience and the development of underdevelopment within the capitalist world-system. Yet such an economic awareness was not easily historically available in the late eighteenth century.

[slide 22] LCP catalog

Jennings' encoding iconography seeks to direct the white eye towards Black agency, no matter if that sufficiency requires revolutionary violence. As Liberty lifts the Library Company's catalogue as though to help begin this process, Jennings' image stands for all those other figures who are smaller and below over-sized Liberty, that is the Library Company's readers.

Jennings, with the LCP's official support, insists to the library's users that knowledge only has utility or has significance if it is directed for progressive political purpose. We read and discuss only in order to liberating historical transformation and to mobilize social change.

Nothing else matters. Such a reminder is one worthwhile emphasizing not only for the pursuit of American Studies, whether it happens in Philadelphia's library, and even in Brissot's home nation, such as this conference itself.

Thank you.