

As for Jennings, the painting is a fascinating historical artifact documenting LCP members' interest in abolitionist movements in the late 18th century. However, it has probably outlived its purpose as a solely decorative object. During my time at LCP, many Black researchers told me they were appalled to be greeted by that painting in the reading room. The main scene—depicting Black people in a subservient position to a white person/abstraction—is outdated, but the painting's dominant position in the reading could suggest that the Library Company is proud of that paternalistic viewpoint. The painting erases the history of the Black people who fought for their freedom and helped launch the early abolitionist movement. Many of LCP's fellows and researchers have produced field-changing works about Black agency and freedom struggles, but the painting is a stagnant remnant of last century's historiography. Although LCP has made tremendous strides in increasing the number of Black researchers and visitors in the past few years, most are painfully aware that for centuries the only Black people at LCP were the ones in the painting and the janitorial staff. There are likely some Black visitors and researchers who aren't bothered by the painting, but they are likely not the majority.

The painting could use more contextualization, such as an in-depth label or audio description. (I'm thinking of something similar to a museum exhibition where the curators select a few objects to spotlight with greater context.) You could feature reproductions from the collection where Black people are their own subjects, or commission artwork that speaks to our current times. W.E.B. Du Bois' research at the Library Company is one local connection that could be highlighted.

I heard that LCP staff used to use the mummy's hand in pranks to scare people. Changing societal standards towards respecting human remains in museum collections as well as Linda August's expertise in museum and artifact stewardship helped end that practice. Likewise, re-evaluating the placement and purpose of the Jennings painting is in keeping with pursuing the common good in today's world.

We are embarking on these same conversations at UVA. Our special collections library, which was constructed in 2004, has two busts of Jefferson flanking the main staircase. Ninety percent of the portraits in our reading room depict white male authors. We have a committee working to create policies and select artwork which better represent our researchers and stakeholders. We may very likely get pushback from this, but we're prioritizing creating a feeling of belonging.

It sounds like you're seeking a lot of stakeholder feedback. Good luck with this!

Best, Krystal

Krystal Appiah (she/hers)
Curator
Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library
University of Virginia