

Imagining the Abolition of Slavery

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In 1792, Samuel Jennings, a native of Philadelphia living in England, painted an allegory symbolizing the abolition of slavery for the reading room of the Library Company of Philadelphia, the oldest private library in the United States and a center of antislavery thought and action. This lesson challenges students to interpret the rich symbolism in the painting to reveal what the painting meant to the directors of the Library Company who instructed Jennings, and more broadly about how they imagined slavery should be ended.

Suggested Grade Level

Middle and High School

Recommended Time Frame

One +/- fifty-minute session

Objectives and Essential Questions

Students will:

- connect the antislavery movement of the Revolutionary generation to the principles of liberty and natural rights;
- learn how the religious principles of Pennsylvania Quakers shaped abolitionism in Pennsylvania and helped make Philadelphia a center of antislavery thought and action;
- and
- develop skill to interpret allegorical images used by early American artists to deliver political messages.

Materials and Resources



Liberty Presenting the Arts and Sciences (1792) by Samuel Jennings is one of first works of art by an American to express antislavery ideas (Library Company of Philadelphia).

1. *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or The Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, Samuel Jennings, ca. 1792, Library Company of Philadelphia.
2. *Study For Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or The Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, Samuel Jennings, ca. 1791–92, artist's sketch Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
3. *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*, Samuel Jennings, ca. 1792, copy for engraving, Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library.
4. Four details from *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or The Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, Samuel Jennings, ca. 1792, Library Company of Philadelphia.

Background Knowledge

The American Revolutionaries appealed to ideals of liberty, equality, and natural and civil rights to explain the aims of their revolution against British rule.

On January 12, 1790, Samuel Jennings, who was living in London, wrote to his father in Philadelphia to say that he had learned that the Library Company of Philadelphia would soon move to a new building. The Library Company, which had been founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731 was one of the most important libraries in America. Jennings asked his father to approach the directors of the library with his offer to paint a picture for the new library building. He suggested a painting of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, who was also a patron of the arts and of trade, but said he would be honored to paint anything the directors wanted.

On April 3, 1790, the directors wrote to Jennings accepting his offer. They described the scene they wanted Jennings to paint:

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, etc., 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 at her feet, and in the distant back Ground of a Groupe of Negroes sitting on the Earth, or in some attitude of expressive of Ease & Joy.

The painting Samuel Jennings made for the Library Company of Philadelphia invoked the Revolutionary ideals of liberty and natural rights to advance an abolitionist message.

The directors of the Library Company who wrote to Jennings were in favor of the abolition of slavery. Philadelphia had one of the largest and most vocal group of antislavery advocates in the country. The city had been founded by Quakers, among whom were some of the first and most active opponents of slavery in the colonies. By the Revolution Philadelphia was the largest and most cosmopolitan city in British America, widely admired for its dedication to rational improvements—clean, well-lit streets, a hospital, a library, access to clean water, fire companies—and its commit-

Members of the group agitated for the Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1780. Despite this victory, the abolitionists still had work to do. They believed Americans had escaped the tyranny of the British monarchy and that Americans must extend the blessings of liberty to people held in slavery. The directors of the Library Company asked Jennings to paint a scene reflecting this ideal. Jennings agreed and completed the painting in London in 1792 and shipped it to Philadelphia, where it was displayed in the Library Company's building.

Sequence and Procedure

1. First introduce the final version of the painting owned by the Library Company of Philadelphia. Explain the title and the concept of allegory, an image that uses symbols to convey a moral or political meaning. The revolutionary generation frequently used symbols from classical antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome), historical examples of a democracy and a republic that inspired revolutionaries and artists alike.
2. Point out some of the symbols in the paintings and ask students to identify as many as possible and brainstorm what revolutionary values they might represent. Here is a list of the symbols and their basic meanings, although students may have different interpretations:
 - Liberty herself, representing the promise of the Revolution. During the Revolution, liberty was depicted in various ways. The liberty tree and liberty a pole were among the most common. Liberty could also be depicted as a classical goddess, and during the Revolution and in the years afterwards, Liberty was most often depicted in this way. The white robes she wears represent the purity of the blessings she bestows on humanity. Instead of a toga-like garment worn by classical goddesses, Jennings version of Liberty wears more contemporary clothing.
 - Broken chains under her feet suggest the emancipation of the slaves, the liberating power of knowledge, and the intention of the Revolutionary project to end tyranny and bondage.
 - Liberty bears a *vindicta*, a long rod used in the ancient Roman manumission ceremony topped with the *pileus*, the white cap of a free man. Freed slaves would be touched with the rod and put on the cap when they were released from bondage.
 - The goddess is holding the Library Company of Philadelphia's catalog, symbolizing knowledge. The Library Company was one of the greatest repositories of knowledge in the United States. Members pooled their resources to purchase books, which were more expensive to make and purchase than they are today.
 - The black people in the painting wear Western dress and are represented as free people rather than as servants or slaves. This is highly unusual in Western art of the eighteenth century. One of the main goals of the abolitionists during this era was the education of freed blacks, and the painting shows them gratefully receiving knowledge from the goddess. Ask the students to come up with adjectives to describe the black characters in the painting to tease out what abolitionists believed their efforts would achieve.
 - The two books resting beneath the plinth next to Liberty are labelled Philosophy and Agriculture, two subjects that were important to the success of the newly independent states and important to the directors of the Library Company. Philadelphia was the home of the American Philosophical Society and Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture.
 - Volumes of Homer and Virgil, the two masters of classical poetry, lean against the column where Philosophy and Agriculture are placed.
 - Modern English literature is represented, in the lower left corner with volumes of John Milton, William Shakespeare, and the Scottish poet James Thomson.
 - Science is also represented by sheets of calculations in the lower right with geometry calculations and a diagram titled "mechanics."
 - The globe represents geography.
 - The lyre represents music, it is set on top of a scroll with notes from "Come, ever-Smiling Liberty" from Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabeus*.
 - The telescope represents astronomy.
 - Palette and brushes represent painting and the visual arts.
 - The bronze bust of the man in the foreground is probably of a British abolitionist, either William Wilberforce, abolition's most ardent champion in British parliament, or Henry Thornton, the chairman of the Sierra Leone Company, which sought to return freedmen to Africa.
 - Commerce is represented by ships in the background, since seafaring was key to business and prosperity in the Revolutionary era.

3. After interpreting the symbols as a class, have the students to write down what they think the main idea or message of the painting is and then ask them to share it with the class.
4. Ask students to split into small groups to identify the differences between the three versions of the painting, keeping in mind that the artist's sketch held at the Metropolitan Museum was made for an American audience and the version at the Winterthur Museum was intended for a British audience. Jennings created the copy at the Winterthur Museum because he wanted to sell engravings of the image to British abolitionists. Ask the students what these subtle differences suggest about the purpose of the portrait in the transatlantic antislavery movement.

Questions to consider as a class:

1. *Achieving liberty was a key goal of the American Revolution. How would you define Liberty? What does this painting tell us about how the early antislavery movement thought about Liberty?* Have each student consider this question by themselves for two minutes before discussing it with a partner.
2. *What does this painting reveal about the intentions of the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Revolutionary ideals that informed its mission?*
3. *Why do you think the Library Company wanted to acquire an allegorical painting like this?*
4. *What does the depiction of African Americans in this painting tell us about how early abolitionists thought the abolition of slavery would change the lives of people who had been enslaved? How did they believe this change could be accomplished?*
5. In February 1790, within days of the directors of the Library Company receiving Samuel Jenning's offer, Benjamin Franklin petitioned Congress on behalf of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. As a class, *compare the main ideas of the petition with the main idea of Jenning's painting. What does Franklin's statement reveal about the intentions and motivations of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the message the Library wanted to send in the painting in 1792?*

Philadelphia February 3, 1790

Respectfully Sheweth,

That from a regard for the happiness of Mankind an Association was formed several years since in this State by a number of her Citizens of various religious denominations for promoting the Abolition of Slavery & for the relief of those unlawfully held in bondage. A just & accurate Conception of the true Principles of liberty, as it spread through the land, produced accessions to their numbers, many friends to their Cause, & a legislative Co-operation with their views, which, by the blessing of Divine Providence, have been successfully directed to the relieving from bondage a large number of their fellow Creatures of the African Race. They have also the Satisfaction to observe, that in consequence of that Spirit of Philanthropy & genuine liberty which is generally diffusing its beneficial Influence, similar Institutions are gradually forming at home & abroad.

That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his Care & equally designed for the Enjoyment of Happiness the Christian Religion teaches us to believe & the Political Creed of America fully coincides with the Position. Your Memorialists, particularly engaged in attending to the Distresses arising from Slavery, believe it their indispensable Duty to present this Subject to your notice. They have observed with great Satisfaction that many important & salutary Powers are vested in you for "promoting the Welfare & Securing the blessings of liberty to the "People of the United States." And as they conceive, that these blessings ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of People, so they indulge themselves in the pleasing expectation, that nothing, which can be done for the relive of the unhappy objects of their care, will be either omitted or delayed.

From a persuasion that equal liberty was originally the Portion, It is still the Birthright of all men, & influenced by the strong ties of Humanity & the Principles of their Institution, your Memorialists conceive themselves bound to use all justifiable endeavours to loosen the bounds of Slavery and promote a general Enjoyment of the blessings

groaning in servile Subjection, that you will devise means for removing this inconsistency from the Character of the American People, that you will promote mercy and Justice towards this distressed Race, & that you will Step to the very verge of the Powers vested in you for discouraging every Species of Traffick in the Persons of our fellow men

Franklin
President of the Society

Assessment and Demonstration of Student Learning

Have the students write one or two paragraphs about one of the symbols in the image and why this concept was key to the formation of the ideals of the American Revolution and the early abolitionist movement.

Extension

Robert Edge Pine, a British painter who was sympathetic to the American cause, painted a large allegorical canvas in 1778 he titled *America*, which he described as an allegorical scene in which “America, after having suffered the several evils of war, bewailed its unhappy cause, and lamented over the victims of its fury—her ruined towns—destroy’d commerce, &c. &c. On the appearance of Peace, is represented an extacy of gratitude to the Almighty—Heroic Virtue presents Liberty attended by Concord—Industry, followed by Plenty and her Train, form a group expressive of Population; and Ships denote Commerce.” Suffering America weeps at a cenotaph to four American heroes of the war—James Warren, James Montgomery, David Wooster and James Mercer—who had fallen in battle.

Pine employed Joseph Strutt to engrave a plate of *America*, which Pine published himself. The print is dedicated “To Those who wish to Sheathe the Desolating Sword of War And to Restore the Blessings of Peace and Amity to a divided People.” Pine emigrated to America in 1784 and supported himself painting portraits, which occupied most his time until his death in 1788. Pine exhibited *America* in Philadelphia and sold copies of the print. The original painting was destroyed in an accidental fire in 1803 (for more on the print, see [Ten Great Revolutionary War Prints](https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/treasures-of-the-american-revolution/revolutionary-war-prints/) (<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/treasures-of-the-american-revolution/revolutionary-war-prints/>)).

Members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society might have had this painting in mind when formulating a request for their own allegorical painting promoting emancipation. The members of the Society may have been familiar with the painting.

Questions to consider as a class:

1. *In the print of America, contrast what is happening on the left side of the scene with what is happening on the right.*
2. *Based on Robert Edge Pine’s description of the scene, what does the flying female figure represent?*
3. *How does the symbolism of this image made during the Revolutionary War compare to the symbolism of Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences?*
4. *What is the message of each allegory and how are they related?*

Revolutionary Achievements Category

Highest Ideals

Exploring the Revolution Category

Revolutionary Republic

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Consider the related lesson **A Plea to End Slavery: The Essay of “Vox Africanorum”** (<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plan-collections/revolution-on-paper/vox-africanorum/>) in the lesson plan collection **Revolution on Paper** (<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plan-collections/revolution-on-paper/>).

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1792
detail of books and music
Library Company of Philadelphia

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In this detail from *Liberty Presenting the Arts and Sciences*, the artist has included a page from George Friedrich Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabeus*, which follows the Old Testament story of an ancient Hebrew revolt against tyrants intent on enslaving them, a copy of John Milton's works, which include Milton's idea that religious, personal, and civil liberty is essential to civilized life, and at the bottom of the stack, a copy of the Scottish poet James Thomson's *Seasons*, a work completed in 1730 and known for its condemnation of the slave trade. What message was the artist trying to convey by including these works in the painting?

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foreground.jpg) Robert-Edge-Pine-SOC-2819x2332--scaledbackground.jpg)

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Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences
Samuel Jennings
1792
detail of figures in right foreground
Library Company of Philadelphia

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*America To those, who wish to sheathe the
desolating sword of war*
Robert Edge Pine
1781
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Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences
Samuel Jennings
1792
detail of figures in background
Library Company of Philadelphia