

To: Dr. Michael Barsanti

From: Linda August on behalf of the Staff Collections Committee

Re: Proposal to relocate *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* to Reading Room Annex

Date: 11/19/2021

The Library Company of Philadelphia is committed to creating a more inclusive environment that welcomes and respects its researchers, staff, and guests. To this end, it is necessary to think about naming conventions, contextual descriptions of the collection, and reevaluating the artworks on display in our public spaces.

The Graphic Arts Department has embarked on a two-year remediation project for its 1,600 catalog records for the African American History Graphics Collection with the goal to better describe the items with updated language and to clearly denote racist pieces, eliminating the passive, neutral voice.

A potentially harmful materials and description statement has been added to our website and to the record for the mummified hand, which acknowledges there are offensive and hurtful items in the collection. There is also a feedback form that patrons can use to respond.

An Innovation Fellowship will fund two fellows, an academic humanist and a creative practitioner, to contextualize and respond to Samuel Jennings's *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*, a painting gifted to the Library Company by the artist in 1792. Due to the pandemic, the Innovation Fellowship has been delayed until 2023. Recognizing the racist and anti-Black imagery in the painting, we cannot wait for the Innovation Fellowship project to be proactive in facilitating an intervention in regard to the display and reading of this complex work. We believe that interpretive text alone, i.e. a label, will not mitigate the harm and visceral reaction people have upon viewing the painting.

The Staff Collection Committee proposes:

- Relocate *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* from the Reading Room to the Reading Room Annex.
- Relocate Peter Cooper's *South East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia* from the Lobby to the Reading room.
- Relocate the two William Strickland paintings of landscapes with temples from the Reading Room into the 3rd floor storage room.

The Library Company's commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion justifies the expense needed to hire art handlers to re-install the paintings. Atelier necessitates an on-site consultation for \$65 to create an estimate. Atelier or a fabricator that works with designer Barb Barnett can provide an estimate for a curtain or drape to cover *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* that can be opened to reveal it when necessary after it is hung in the Annex room.

When the Innovation Fellows examine the painting in the near future, their research and created content will facilitate further remediative outcomes. Additional ideas have also included the authoring of interpretive text including a QR code that leads to a website with more information,

such as multiple perspectives about the painting, explanation of the allegorical and symbolic imagery, the history of its creation, etc.

Addressing the public presentation of *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences* is a first step in re-examining the other artworks on exhibition, as well as the narratives that are told to better convey the complex and sometimes unjust past in American, Philadelphia, and the Library Company's history. Figures such as Benjamin Franklin and James Logan are portrayed as polymaths and bibliophiles but not enslavers. Harmful and offensive items in the collection are used in marketing and promotional material. *Imperfect History*, which explores the historical and cultural biases of the Graphic Arts Collection through a gallery and online exhibition, digital catalog, and as a publication can serve as a model for this kind of work of candidly exploring the complicated past reflected in our holdings.