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Free the Slaves -- and Then What?

By Image of the Black Archive & Library 4/23/13 12:37AM



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This large, impressive painting, so redolent of the ideals of liberty and future prosperity, is rooted in a staunch commitment to the abolition of slavery. Yet beneath all of its altruism lies the issue of what to do with the slave after emancipation, a matter so complex that it still has repercussions today.

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Samuel Jennings had grown up in progressive circles of Philadelphia philanthropy and social activism. In 1790, while he was living in Great Britain, his father informed him that the Library Company, one of the city's renowned cultural institutions, was moving to grander quarters. He immediately offered to memorialize the occasion with the gift of a painting of an allegorical figure of the arts.

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The directors of the Library Company, many of whom were Quakers, responded by suggesting an entirely transformative approach to the work. For the symbolic element, they proposed the figure of Liberty surrounded by attributes of the arts and sciences. Most significant of all was the concept of Liberty's bestowal of these gifts of cultural agency upon a group of newly freed slaves. Through this remarkable interchange with the artist, the Library Company, which hitherto possessed no works of visual art, had been induced to create one of the earliest pictorial expressions of abolitionist aims on either side of the Atlantic.

In the background, a group of blacks are gathered on a verdant lawn before the Temple of Liberty to celebrate their newfound freedom. They are described in the minutes of the Library Company as "a Groupe of Negroes sitting on the Earth, or in some attitude expressive of Ease & Joy." They sing and dance around a liberty pole topped by a laurel wreath. Large sailing ships ply the water beyond them.

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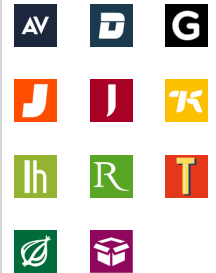
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A feature that could not have been foreseen by the directors is the bust in the right foreground of Henry Thornton, a prominent British banker and major advocate for the abolition of the slave trade. In 1791, as the painting was under way, Thornton helped establish the Sierra Leone Company. This initiative founded a colony for the resettlement of freed slaves in Africa, specifically African Americans who had fought for the British in the American Revolution. American blacks from other circumstances were also allowed to settle in the new colony.

Do the rejoicing figures in the background of the painting in fact represent freed slaves not in America but in Sierra Leone? This interpretation is reinforced compositionally by the placement of Thornton's bust directly below the scene. Certain articles of clothing — such as the tignon-like headdresses and aprons worn by the women, as well as the ensembles worn by the men — also suggest a locale other than the United States.

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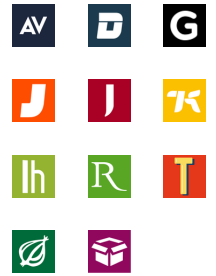
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African Americans themselves were profoundly divided on the issue of resettlement. The Philadelphian James Forten, while at first supportive of the creation of another colony of freed American slaves in Liberia, later publicly opposed it. The Massachusetts Quaker Paul Cuffee, however, fully participated in the effort to "repatriate" American blacks both to Sierra Leone and to Liberia.

The [Image of the Black in Western Art Archive](#) resides at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. The director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute is Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is also **The Root's** editor-in-chief. The archive and Harvard University Press collaborated to create [The Image of the Black in Western Art](#) book series, eight volumes of which were edited by Gates and David Bindman and published by Harvard University Press. Text for each Image of the Week is written by Sheldon Cheek.

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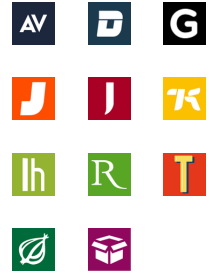
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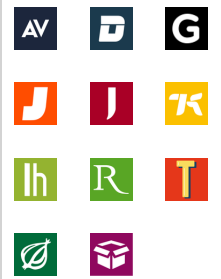
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