



Free!, c. 1863
Lucy Cleveland (1780-1866)

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006

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Salem, MA

Wool, cotton, silk, paper, metal, wood, leather, glass, pigment



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Women played an important role in organizing against slavery. In Salem, for example, the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society was initially organized in 1832 and re-organized in 1834. In addition to hosting a very prominent lecture series, the Society provided free Salem African Americans with clothing, goods to sell to raise funds at the National Anti-Slavery Bazaar at Faneuil Hall, and the opportunity for Salem African American girls to improve their sewing skills at a school organized by the Society. The SFASS also purchased subscriptions to the *Liberator*, which they donated to other organizations. The Society remained active until 1866, when members felt it appropriate to disband after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The final meeting minutes record, "though there was much to be done before our country could be free from the curse of slavery, but that our work was now to be done in other ways."¹

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Using typical household textiles and sewing techniques, Lucy Cleveland created vignettes of individual or multiple figure groupings that were at times humorous, touching, or political. *Free!* clearly responds to the Emancipation Act signed by President Abraham Lincoln on April 16, 1862. Though it is not known whether Cleveland created this piece with the intention of exhibition, there are records to indicate that some of her creations were exhibited at charitable fairs to raise money for causes. There are also known print and other visual sources that provided clear inspiration for at least some of her vignettes.²

Cleveland was an advocate of the abolitionist cause at least as early as the 1830s, evinced by the anti-slavery sentiment in children's books that she wrote during that time. The symbolism in this work includes the bandaged head, sling, and knotted whip that suggest the past oppressive state of slavery. Importantly, the smiling figure holds forth the proclamation of freedom, heralding better days ahead with slavery abolished.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

(Before providing information about the object, ask students the following:)

- Describe this figure. What does he wear? What is the object made from? What does he hold up for us to view?
- Was this person rich or poor? What suggests this to you?
- When do you think this was made? Why?
- Can you tell anything about the person who made this object? Was it a man or a woman? Do you know anything about their feelings about slavery? (Give reasons for your answers)
- How else do you think women could let people know what they thought about political or social issues? Is it different for women today? How?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to create (or adorn) an object (not a sign or poster) in order to promote their stand on an issue. Ask students to write about what this figure might have thought or felt at the moment portrayed.

2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 5.35, USI.31, USI 35, USI 36

¹ Meeting Minutes, Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1834-1866. Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum.

² Paula Bradstreet Richter, "Lucy Cleveland, Folk Artist" *Magazine Antiques*, August, 2000.