

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Library Company Opens Groundbreaking Exhibition on Gay History in Early America

“That’s So Gay: Outing Early America” runs through October 17, 2014

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—January 27, 2014—late gay activist Harry Hay thought history knew more about gay people than it knew it knew. “That’s So Gay: Outing Early America” Exhibition Curator Cornelia King couldn’t agree more. As with so many areas of historical inquiry, the source material for the study of gay history has been waiting patiently on the Library Company’s shelves for the subject to become a focus of scholarly interest. Benjamin Franklin’s library, with its extensive collections of books, prints, ephemera, and photographs covering more than three centuries of early American history, contains stories about all kinds of loves and all kinds of gender identifications.

The exhibition, which opens to the public on February 10, does not try to say definitively whether a person who lived in the past would be considered lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender in today’s terms. Rather it looks at individuals who took part in same-sex relationships, wrote poems and novels celebrating such relationships, deviated from gender norms, and suffered for transgressive behavior in well-documented ways.

Walt Whitman and Harriet Hosmer are especially good examples of people whose lives and works reveal a gay sensibility. In the third edition of his *Leaves of Grass* (1860), Whitman added a section of forty-five poems – the Calamus poems – which celebrate relationships between men. In Greek mythology, Kalamos was a youth who chose to drown rather than outlive his friend Karpos, who had drowned while the two boys were competing in a swimming contest. Kalamos was then transformed into a marsh reed that blooms with a phallus-shaped spike. Regardless of what Whitman may have done behind closed doors (or along the “margins of pond-waters”), his Calamus poems relate to the “love of comrades,” and have become important texts for readers looking for gay content.

The sculptor Harriet Hosmer depicted strong women in myth or history who persevered despite adversity at the hands of men. In one particularly striking portrait of Hosmer—with her “short, thick, brown curls, which she tosses aside with her fingers, as lads do”—she appears next to her *Daphne* (1853). In Greek mythology, Daphne is a beautiful nymph who prays for help when Apollo is chasing her. The earth goddess Gaia answers her prayer by swallowing her up and then turning her into a laurel tree. In her private life, as an American living in Rome, Hosmer was one of the “jolly bachelors” in Charlotte Cushman’s social circle.

Throughout the 19th century, men and women studied in sex-segregated schools and participated in a multitude of sex-segregated activities, so common they were rarely remarked upon. In recent years, however, biographers have scrutinized the evidence that Abraham Lincoln may have had intimate relationships with one or more of his male friends. Similarly, when we in the twenty-first century look at the life of temperance activist Frances Willard (1839-1898), the “smashes” she developed on other girls at school, and the other passionate relationships she formed with women, it is easy to see her as a gay person.

Gay cultural expressions—in fiction, poetry, and art—are also a significant part of the exhibition. Consider the characters Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* (1851), who Melville describes as a “cosy,

loving pair.” Placing characters in same-sex environments, whether on board ship in the South Seas or in elite boarding schools, allowed writers to explore the dynamics of intimate same-sex friendships. Similarly, staged scenes depicting two or more women in a private setting became popular in turn-of-the-20th-century genre stereographs. Thanks to modern technology, we can even show them in 3D in the gallery!

The Library Company is proud to have previously made groundbreaking contributions to historical research in African American History and Women’s History through diligent curation of our unrivaled collections of print and visual source material for early American History. With *That’s So Gay* we would like to think that we will have a similar influence on scholarly research in the field of Queer Studies. We are grateful for the support of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Bowman Properties, Lois & Julian Brodsky, John Alchin & Hal Marryatt, Mel Heifetz, Davida Deutsch, Robby Brown, the Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation, and Visit Philadelphia for their generous support of this project.

That’s So Gay: Outing Early America will be accompanied by a series of special programs. On February 14, we will present a talk by David Halperin, author of the groundbreaking *How to Be Gay*, in conjunction with the William Way LGBT Community Center. Later in the spring, the Mauckingbird Theatre Company will reprise its production of “The Temperamentals,” Jon Marans’s play about the life of gay activist Harry Hay, as a table reading and Philadelphia Voices of Pride will perform in concert, drawing inspiration from the Library Company’s sheet music collection. On October 1, 2014, we will co-host a talk by Marc Stein, author of *City of Sisterly and Brother Loves*, with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Check www.librarycompany.org for event dates.

The Library Company of Philadelphia

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company is America’s oldest cultural institution and served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War to 1800. The Library Company was the largest public library in America until the Civil War and includes the extensive personal libraries of such prominent early American bibliophiles as James Logan. Open to the public free of charge, the Library Company houses an extensive collection of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera, prints, photographs, and works of art, and one of the world’s largest holdings of early American imprints. Particular strengths of the collection include economic history, women’s history, African American history, history of medicine, history of philanthropy, and visual culture. To find out more, please visit www.librarycompany.org.

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