

EDITORIAL | editorial

Harvard should openly discuss Louis Agassiz and his racial attitudes

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Harvard University could have avoided a recent dispute with a Swiss activist group hoping to exhibit a series of racially degrading photographs commissioned by one of Harvard's most beloved professors in the 19th century by simply allowing the group to use the images.

According to Pamela Gerardi, director of external relations at Harvard's Peabody Museum, the university denied the request because the group wished to blow up the sensitive images and print them on a large banner. Gerardi worried that that format might further exploit the photographs' subjects — American slaves and Brazilian natives who had been stripped naked and displayed like scientific specimens to prove their supposed biological deficiencies. While that sensitivity is understandable, it wasn't strong enough grounds to deny the request, especially not without further clarification from the group. While enlarging the photographs could have been distasteful, it could also have been a powerful way of exploring the images' sinister history.

Nonetheless, the incident has highlighted the fact that Harvard can do a better job grappling with the legacy of Louis Agassiz, the professor who commissioned the photographs. According to Harvard's website, "Few people have left a more indelible imprint on Harvard than Louis Agassiz." The naturalist was one of the "founding fathers" of the modern American scientific tradition, while his efforts to elevate Harvard, through fundraising and the founding of his Museum of Comparative Zoology, helped make the institution into the powerhouse it is today.

But Agassiz's theories also helped legitimize deep-seated racism in the United States and beyond, by lending credence to the now-discredited idea that there is a scientific basis for treating people of distinct races differently. Through his research, Agassiz attempted to prove that people of different races actually came from different species, and that lighter-skinned humans were biologically superior than those with darker skin.

Harvard doesn't hide this history: The university has provided extensive access to the body of work Agassiz left behind in 1873. But the university doesn't dwell on it, either. In one rare instance, the university notes on its website that "Agassiz took a very dim view of racial mixing." Well, that's one way to put it.

Instead of assessing Agassiz's legacy itself, the university has left the task to scholars such as Louis Menand in "The Metaphysical Club" and Stephen Jay Gould in "The Mismeasure of Man." Those works should be applauded, but don't excuse Harvard from the responsibility to present a fully rounded view of its great patron. An official study of Agassiz's work on racial differences, perhaps accompanied by a public symposium, would be useful. So too would an effort to approve more requests to exhibit Agassiz's more troubling works — unless the requests are truly malicious. Harvard should use Louis Agassiz's career as a vehicle for teaching the importance of scientific exploration — but also how the prejudices of the day can infect the work of even the greatest thinkers.