

The work that hung in this spot for twenty years was painted by Thomas Hovenden in 1881; his model was his African American neighbor, Samuel Jones. We removed the painting because it perpetuated racist stereotypes created for blackface minstrel shows made for white audiences beginning in the 1830s.

Hovenden depicted Jones smiling, dressed in tattered clothes and seated in front of a scuffed and dented wall, the broken cane seat of his chair hanging down. The title, in black dialect, refers to the smell of possum cooking on the stove. In this painting Hovenden drew on a specific racist servile stereotype—from the “happy slave” to the recently discontinued “Uncle Ben” rice label—to appeal to his white audiences and collectors.

I am deeply sorry that this painting has been hurtful and offensive to visitors over the years. As a white curator and director, I left this racist stereotype on the wall, unquestioned, for far too long, which demonstrates how racism can persist in white-dominated institutions.

There is much to learn and to unlearn from this gallery, and to teach. The Fleming Museum staff are undertaking this reckoning with our past in public as we go. As we invite perspectives other than our own, we will work with our communities to reimagine our collections in an inclusive, nuanced, and responsive way.

-JANIE COHEN, Director

Absence

Seeing and Unseeing the Fleming's Collection