

The New York Society Library Launches *A Belief in Books: The 270th Anniversary Exhibition*

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The city's oldest cultural institution and one of the first libraries in the United States, the New York Society Library is entering its 270th year. *A Belief in Books* reveals how this beloved city resource, founded on Enlightenment principles, is also deeply entwined with the history of slavery in New York.

The exhibition showcases books and artifacts from the Library's unique archives and collection. It is free and open to the public from January 18 through December 31, 2024; visit nysoclib.org for opening hours, events, and further information.

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The New York Society Library, founded in the spring of 1754, was one of the first libraries in the United States and is the city's oldest cultural institution. The Library founders, all Enlightenment men committed to personal freedom, religious tolerance, and the separation of church and state, believed that a subscription library, open to all, would inevitably lead to a better society.

A Belief in Books addresses the fact that while Enlightenment thought demanded individual rights for white men, it also upheld the idea that slavery was part of the natural world order. Every aspect of New York's economy relied on the slave trade, as did the fortune of every colonist, including the Library's founders. Only British ships with British goods could enter New York harbor, and the ships that carried books from London also carried enslaved Africans to the American and Caribbean colonies.

Books and periodicals on display from the Library's collection between 1754 and the outbreak of the Revolutionary War illustrate the wide variety of genres and titles read by Library members, including:

- Henry Baker, *The Microscope Made Easy*
- Issac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*
- Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator*
- Tobias Smollett, *The Complete History of England*

The exhibition catalog, available for purchase at the Library, contains essays by Director and Head Librarian Carolyn Waters, Special Collections Librarian Barbara Bieck, and historian and author Dr. Leslie M. Harris.

Dr. Harris offers a keynote lecture on themes related to the exhibition and to African American reading practices of the 18th and 19th centuries on Thursday, February 22 at 6:00 PM. The lecture is open to the public in person and via livestream; free registration at nysoclib.org is required.

A Belief in Books is dedicated to Harriet Shapiro.

This exhibition is generously supported by Elizabeth A.R. Brown and Ralph S. Brown, Jr., The Felicia Fund, Ada Peluso and Romano I. Peluso, The Hazen Polsky Foundation, The H.W. Wilson Foundation, and Humanities New York.

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The New York Society Library is the city's oldest library and a thriving community of readers, writers, and families. The Library is open to the public for reading, reference, exhibitions, and many events, with membership providing book circulation, use of reading/study spaces, and access to e-books and online resources. Our landmark home on 79th Street and Madison Avenue was built as an Italianate townhouse around 1917 and has been the Library's fifth home since 1937. It offers 300,000 print books, magazines, quiet reading and study rooms, and a children's and young adult library. The Assunta, Ignazio, Ada and Romano Peluso Exhibition Gallery on the second floor, free and open to both members and visitors, showcases books from the Library's rare and historic collections with other materials of historical and literary interest. *nysoclib.org*