HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Visual *Veritas*

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www.legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/normative-case-studies and www.justiceinschools.org

Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. Community Care Resources are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

BACKGROUND

The nonfiction case "Visual *Veritas*" helps facilitators initiate discussions about the legacy of slavery at Harvard through a nonfiction case that examines the ethical challenges that arise when universities memorialize historically complex figures through visual culture. With an institutional commitment to truth and a more inclusive student body,[1] what are the tradeoffs to consider when revisiting artistic representations of and monuments to complex historical figures around campus?

As the oldest institution of higher education in the United States—founded in 1636, over 150 years before the country itself came into existence—Harvard University's history is enmeshed with the history of the nation. For centuries, University faculty, staff, students, alumni, and donors have influenced the development of government, civic life, commerce, religious life, and education.[2] These traces are visible the moment one sets foot on campus. In libraries, dining halls, classrooms, dormitories, and grassy quadrangles, members of the campus community bear witness to the university's lengthy history in the form of paintings, sculptures, and

[1] *Veritas*, meaning "truth" in Latin, is Harvard's motto. For a history of this motto and different visual representations of it on Harvard's campus, see: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/05/seal-of-approval/. Universities and colleges in the U.S., Harvard among them, have long had truth-seeking missions. To learn more about Harvard's commitment to truth-seeking, see the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard's "The Freedoms of a University": https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UzH1C65saYE6stVxTuFyVFspWJMO9OWm/view.

[2] For a few examples of how Harvard was woven into the history of higher education and the nation, see: Thelin, J. R. (2011). A history of American higher education (2nd ed). Johns Hopkins University Press (pp. 1, 6, 7, 12, 14, 22, 23, 28, 29, 37, 108, 126-27, 133, 147-48, 156, 159, 188, 199, 201, 263-64).

photographs of individuals who contributed to Harvard's legacy. However, this institutional past is complicated: while some Harvard constituents have served as champions of justice and equality, others have been advocates for exclusion and oppression. Some people have filled *both* roles over their long careers, both at Harvard and on the national stage. Such figures inspire complex discussions as current members of the University community try to determine whether, and if so, how, these historical leaders should be memorialized in the visual culture of the campus.[3]

DEFINING VISUAL CULTURE

Everything in a physical space contributes to its visual culture. In 2021, Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage defined it broadly, noting that visual culture encompasses "all of the elements [that] bear messages, as powerful as they are implicit, about what the institution values, who it celebrates, and what kind of community it aims to foster." Visual culture includes signage that makes a campus easier or more difficult to navigate, architecture, classroom design, and public art works, including "pictures on walls and busts on plinths."[4] Building on the task force's work, Harvard in 2023 established the position of Chief Campus Curator, who now leads visual culture renewal efforts across campus in collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and other key stakeholders.[5]

Campus iconography like statues and portraits represents a commemorative dimension of visual culture. When members of a campus community or visitors look around, which important figures from Harvard's history do they see represented? The FAS Task Force found those represented on Harvard's campus tended to be emblematic of "a 'traditional' Harvard," represented by "gilt-framed portraits of bygone leaders."[6] In assembling their report, the Task Force discovered that "many among our community value the experience of a 'traditional' Harvard."[7] At the same time, other community members expressed "anger about the willingness of the institution to persist in celebrating historical figures who defended prejudice and subordination against the egalitarian currents of their own time."[8] Such celebration conflicts with Harvard's commitment to fostering belonging among a diverse campus community.

[3] Sociologists and historians have documented the difficulties of capturing complex and nuanced histories in visual culture. See, for example, Wagner-Pacifici, R., & Schwartz, B. (1991). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a difficult past. *American Journal of Sociology*, *97*(2), 376–420.

[4] All quotations in this paragraph have been taken from the Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 3. https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

[5] To learn more about the role of the Chief Campus Curator, see https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/02/brenda-tindal-named-inaugural-fas-chief-campus-curator/.

[6] Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 7, https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

[7] Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 7, https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

[8] Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 11, https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

This tension between "valu[ing] Harvard's past" and "account[ing] for the lived experience of the Harvard community in the present"[9] creates a number of challenges for those making choices about campus iconography. Many of the "bygone leaders" memorialized on Harvard's many campuses are alumni who contributed to the university in some capacity – as administrators, faculty, or donors – and alumni who held prestigious roles in their community or on the national stage; in some cases, they inhabited both categories. Yet the impacts these individuals made on Harvard and the nation were often problematic, contributing to the inequalities and injustices that have plagued both the institution and the nation since their founding.

Given this dual mission to value Harvard's past—including being "honest and forthright in reckoning with those painful aspects of our history"[10]—and to honor current community values and demographics, how should Harvard make choices about which existing iconography should remain publicly displayed? For those individuals who continue to be memorialized on campus, how and where should that memorialization take place?[11]

ICONOGRAPHY AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Harvard Law School (HLS) has been grappling with questions about iconography for a number of years. In 2016, the Harvard Corporation—Harvard's highest governing body—approved HLS' request to retire the school's shield, which was based on the family coat of arms of Isaac Royall, an early benefactor of the University whose family wealth was generated by enslaved labor.[12] In 2021, a new shield was approved, after a development process that included students, faculty, staff and alumni. Despite this very public and even contentious change, however, few additional alterations were made over the next few years to other forms of visual culture at HLS. Indeed, while the committee that recommended replacing the original seal noted that "names from the past associated with now-rejected beliefs and practices litter the present, often in places of apparent honor," they took "no position on what, if anything, should be done with them."[13] This lack of guidance left important questions unanswered about what, if anything, should be

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[9] Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 9, https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

[10] Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page 1, https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf.

[11] In early 2016, the *New York Times* collated several of its recent stories on the multitude of responses to complex historical figures associated with the visual culture of different colleges, including the University of Texas at Austin, Harvard Law School (see Case 1: Joseph Story), Amherst College, Yale Law School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Cape Town, Oxford University, and Princeton University. See here: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/29/education/college-symbol-controversies.html.

[12] Harvard students began advocating for the replacement of the Harvard Law School shield in October 2015. One impetus for the movement was the 2015 publication of Daniel R. Coquillette and Bruce A. Kimball's *On the Battlefield of Merit: Harvard Law School, the First Century*, which brought renewed interest in the relationship between Harvard Law School and the Royall family. See: https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2015/11/2/harvard-law-seal-change/, https://time.com/4248102/harvard-law-school-supports-removing-shield-with-ties-to-slavery/, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDlMi9Auyq0 (17:45 - 19:42).

[13] Recommendation to the President and Fellows of Harvard Collegeon the Shield Approved for the Law School, page 10. https://hls.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Shield-Committee-Report.pdf.

changed in existing memorial iconography on the HLS campus, particularly for figures with complicated legacies.

Case 1: The Statues of Joseph Story

Associate Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (1779-1845) was Harvard University's first Dane Professor of Law,[14] member of the Board of Overseers and Corporation Fellow, and the youngest person ever confirmed to the Supreme Court.[15] As of 2026, Story was featured among the busts in the undergraduate first-year dining hall and portrayed in a full-size statue at the entrance to Harvard Law School's Langdell Hall, which serves as the largest Law School building and hosts its Library. In Langdell Hall, a small plaque on the wall behind the bust provides a short biography of Joseph Story and his connections to Harvard.[16]

Story, an alumnus of Harvard College, served as a professor and dean of the Law School for fifteen years while ascending in the national legal system. In his role at the Law School, he was responsible for several rounds of fundraising that kept its doors open. On the federal bench, he issued treatises which became "fundamental tools in creating a national legal system,"[17] and opinions that diminished the legality of the African slave trade. For example, he authored the opinions in *United States v. The Amistad* and *Fales v. Mayberry*, which, respectively, held that the illegal kidnapping and transportation of enslaved persons could violate international treaties and law and criticized the horrific nature of the slave trade. However, Joseph Story was not an abolitionist. Despite issuing opinions criticizing slavery, he also authored the Supreme Court decision in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* defending the 1793 Fugitive Slave Clause and permitting the seizure of a mother and her children who had escaped to the North. This decision overturned state-based personal liberty laws in the North and exposed 170,000 free Black Americans in the North to recapture and kidnapping.[18] The plaque alongside his statue explains, "Story hoped to preserve the Union and saw this decision as an acceptable compromise. History would prove him wrong."[19]

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[14] For more on Nathan Dane, the namesake of the Dane Professorship of Law, and the subsequent visual culture around him, see: https://hls.harvard.edu/today/origin-story/.

[15] Coquillette, D. R., & Kimball, B. A. (2015). On the Battlefield of Merit: Harvard Law School, the First Century. Harvard University Press, 157. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674089068; Supreme Court Historical Society. (n.d.). *Life story: Joseph Story (1779-1845)*. Retrieved February 16, 2026, from https://supremecourthistory.org/supreme-court-civics-resources/life-story-joseph-story/.

[16] To view the Story statue, see: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tGemYr28epmz0dNxUFli4Lch1uqQDbk_/view?usp=sharing. To view the plaque that accompanies the statue, see: https://drive.google.com/file/d/19zgowEfubiLpV4UyiNApija1ENKYNQW8/view?usp=sharing.

[17] Paul Finkelman, Supreme Injustice: Slavery in the Nation's Highest Court (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 112.

[18] All biographical material and widely accepted opinions about Story's jurisprudence in this paragraph preceding this footnote came from the following sources: Coquillette, D. R., & Kimball, B. A. (2015). On the Battlefield of Merit: Harvard Law School, the First Century. Harvard University Press, 157-163. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674089068; Finkelman, P. (2018). Supreme injustice: Slavery in the nation's highest court. Harvard University Press, 114, 119, 133-144, 169.; Newmyer, R. K. (1985). Supreme court justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic. The University of North Carolina Press, 370-372; Supreme Court Historical Society. (n.d.). *Life story: Joseph Story (1779-1845)*. Retrieved February 16, 2026, from https://supremecourthistory.org/supreme-court-civics-resources/life-story-joseph-story/.

[19] To view the plaque that accompanies the Story statue, see: https://drive.google.com/file/d/19zgowEfubiLpV4UyiNApija1ENKYNQW8/view?usp=sharing.

Case 2: The Portrait of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Unlike the memorial statue to Story, which students bustling into the Law Library or to faculty offices for meetings with professors easily breeze by, the Law School's portrait of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.[20] is more difficult to ignore. Like Story, however, Holmes presents the dilemma of how professional views and actions that have far-reaching consequences should be weighed.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was a Harvard College and Law School alumnus who went on to serve on the Harvard Law School faculty, Massachusetts Supreme Court, and ultimately the United States Supreme Court. Serving on the highest court from 1902 to 1932, Holmes remains one of the longest-serving jurists, known for his opinions upholding progressive legislation and work related to civil liberties and American constitutional democracy. He advocated for broad free speech protections, creating the often cited "clear and present danger" test that speech is protected so long as it does not incite panic or immediate danger. He is also known for arguing that judges should not impose personal views that are not supported by the Constitution in their decisions.[21] Holmes' portrait is prominently featured at the front of the Ames Courtroom at HLS's Austin Hall, home to one of the most prestigious Moot Court competitions in the country[22] and listed on the National Register of Historic Places,[23] where he stares down upon law students arguing their cases.

As a justice, Holmes often ruled in favor of state legislatures, presuming that they knew more about their local circumstances and needs than he could as a jurist far removed from their communities. This perspective from the bench led Holmes to uphold an Alabama voter registration law that disenfranchised Black citizens in *Giles v. Harris (1903)* and rule in favor of Virginia's forced sterilization law in *Carrie Buck v. John Hendren Bell, Superintendent of the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble Minded (1927)*. In his majority opinion, which came at the height of the American eugenics movement, Holmes—seemingly sympathetic to what would come to be called Social Darwinism—upheld forced sterilization for individuals deemed "unfit" or "feeble-minded" by the state, declaring that "three generations of imbeciles are enough."[24]

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[20] "To view the portrait of Holmes at Harvard Law School, see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_54mFyQaKDuoaHrX23AgWZRWtJv0lcRt/view?usp=sharing.

[21] All biographical material, quotes, and widely accepted opinions about Holmes's jurisprudence in this paragraph preceding this footnote came from the following sources: Budiansky, S. (2019). Oliver Wendell Holmes: A life in war, law, and ideas. W.W. Norton & Company, 1-3, 56-65, 134-37, 163, 167, 179-82, 291-95, 377-78, 383-85, 391; Fox, J. (n.d.). Biographies of the robes: Oliver Wendell Holmes. Thirteen PBS. Retrieved February 20, 2026, from https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/supremecourt/capitalism/robes_holmes.html; Justia. (n.d.). *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.* Retrieved February 16, 2026, from https://supreme.justia.com/justices/oliver-wendell-holmes-jr/.

[22] For more on the Ames Moot Court Competition, see here: https://hls.harvard.edu/ames-moot-court.

[23] See more about Austin Hall and the Ames Courtroom here: https://hls.harvard.edu/today/then-now-austin-hall/.

[24] All biographical material and widely accepted opinions about Holmes's jurisprudence in this paragraph came from the following source: Budiansky, S. (2019). Oliver Wendell Holmes: A life in war, law, and ideas. W.W. Norton & Company, 14-15, 170-72, 293–96, 413-14, 428-33. For the argument that Holmes can be associated with Social Darwinist thought, see: Vannatta, S. (2019). Justice Holmes, the Social Darwinist. *The Pluralist, 14*(1), 78–90. To view digitized primary sources from the Buck v. Bell case, from which the quotes in this paragraph were drawn, see: https://education.blogs.archives.gov/2017/05/02/buck-v-bell/.

WHAT STEPS SHOULD BE TAKEN?

Memorials like the Story statue and bust and Holmes portrait are physical entities that convey messages about both Harvard's institutional history and current culture. How should the University handle these examples of "names from the past associated with now-rejected beliefs"—though also associated with still-celebrated beliefs like the evils of slavery and the importance of free speech protections? Does the notion that judicial opinions are based not solely on personal opinion, but rather on one's interpretation of the Constitution, shift how we conceive of their decisions and the implications of those decisions? Should Harvard remove, keep, or contextualize physical memorials of complicated figures like Story and Holmes?

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences Visual Culture and Signage Task Force Report in 2021 stated, "Our institutional past bears many traces of the social exclusions and subordinations that have marred American society and higher education, and our community should be honest and forthright in reckoning with those painful aspects of our history." The committee presented several possible paths forward in terms of the "process of curating our visual culture," including the need "for new approaches to determining whom we feature in our pictures and sculptures and how we feature them." While the Task Force was quite clear that a renewed visual culture must include figures "who have struggled against [past] injustices" and "whose stories [...] have too long gone untold,"[25] its remit was diagnostic in scope, rather than directive. The committee listed a series of recommendations and guidelines to "refresh" the visual culture that might be used in making decisions about figures like Holmes and Story. Building on these recommendations, several exhibitions and renovations on campus since the Task Force Report's release point to potential specific actions that might be taken when important pieces of visual culture might cause harm if left untouched.

As a first potential course of action, institutions can simply remove memorials to problematic individuals. Harvard has taken this path before. In 2019, the faculty deans of Lowell House, an undergraduate residential building named in honor of former University president Lawrence A. Lowell, removed his portrait from the dining hall. The deans wrote, "As president of Harvard, [Lowell] was responsible for intensifying racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia at Harvard" and stated that his exclusionary practices were not consistent with today's campus values.[26] Those who argue in favor of removal note that current University affiliates who are forced to face prominent memorials to those who would have excluded them from campus spaces or otherwise discriminated against them may feel hurt or marginalized, thus hindering a sense of belonging. Those who argue against removal note that taking down memorials to problematic individuals simply sanitizes the history of an institution, allowing its members to forget its complicity in past harms.[27] The FAS Task Force noted that "what concerns our community is

[25] All quotations in the paragraph taken from the Report of the FAS Task Force on Visual Culture and Signage, page https://www.fas.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum716/files/2025-04/FAS_visual_culture_layout_final_A.pdf
[26] https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2019/03/harvard-lowell-house-changes-portraits-display
[27] A similar debate emerged when Harvard Law School debated the retirement of the school's shield that had the coat of arms of Isaac Royall. See: https://time.com/4248102/harvard-law-school-supports-removing-shield-with-ties-to-slavery/; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDlMi9Auyq0 (17:45 - 19:42).

less the institution's past than its willingness to share honest and inclusive accounts of it." Some worry that this first solution might shut down accounts of Harvard's past, rather than encouraging them. Does removing iconography of problematic figures simply revise history?

Second, institutions can add to the collection of memorials on campus, while leaving existing memorials intact. Both Holmes and Story were affiliated with the University more than 100 years ago. In the century since, American higher education has become a more diverse space. Thus, many institutions have chosen to add memorials to more recent affiliates to diversify the iconography on campus. For example, since its founding in 2002, the Harvard Foundation Portraiture Project has added 26 portraits of those who have "served the University with 25 years of distinction."[28] This type of addition leaves intact the "'traditional' Harvard" that some on campus prize while also—ideally—creating inclusivity by featuring affiliates who would have been excluded at other times in the institution's history and highlighting past injustices of which viewers might not be aware. New additions can even directly address harm caused by existing visual culture, as in 2024 when an exhibit at Harvard's Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments included a new work of art by Colombian artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez reimagining 18th-century paintings that were once used as a tool of racial classification.[29] While such commissions can be expensive, they can also promote important dialogue on campus.[30] However, this additive approach does leave intact works that celebrate those whose words and actions harmed members of groups that make up Harvard's vibrant diversity today.

A third option is to contextualize memorials by adding plaques or other information alongside them. In Langdell Hall, the plaque next to Joseph Story begins to do this work, noting that Story's "revitaliz[ing]" impact on the Law School "came at great cost, and caused great harm." This approach can also go beyond plaques; in 2025, the Chief Campus Curator's office supported a pop-up exhibit in the undergraduate residence Winthrop House,[31] after students brought forth a denaming request in 2023, citing the association between the Winthrop family and African enslavement as well as the family's views and measures against Indigenous nations.[32] A 2025 committee report recommended that the House maintain "Winthrop" but drop "John" from its name, and the exhibit in the house lobby provided additional context for that decision.[33]

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[28] https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/01/portrait-project-adds-diversity-to-harvards-hallowed-walls/

[29] https://hmsc.harvard.edu/2024/09/25/measuring-difference-exhibition-illustrates-what-and-who-was-measured-in-the-new-world/.

[30] For example, Martin Puryear's Slavery Memorial at Brown University is meant to promote reflection on Brown's ties to trans-Atlantic African enslavement and the work of the Black people who built Brown, Rhode Island, and the United States. See: https://slaveryandjustice.brown.edu/progress/slavery-memorial#:~:text=An%20iron%20and%20stone%20sculpture,polite%20remembrance%20is%20not%20enough; https://arts.brown.edu/spaces/public-art/collection/commissioned-memorials/martin-puryear-slavery-memorial.

[31] See more about the exhibit here: https://college.harvard.edu/about/news/winthrop-installation-connects-past-present-and-future.

[32] To read more about the 2023 de-naming request of John Winthrop house, see: https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/2/23/winthrop-slavery-denaming/.

[33] See more about the 2025 Winthrop House Review Committee report: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2025/07/committee-recommends-maintaining-name-of-winthrop-house-adding-historical-context/. If you are interested in learning more about the Winthrop family and the Winthrop House Review Committee's recommendation, read the full report here: https://www.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Winthrop-denaming-report-final.pdf.

Those in favor of such contextualization argue that it provides a way for campus affiliates to grapple with both the institution's and the individual's complex pasts. A figure like John Winthrop (1714–1779) can be remembered both as one of Harvard's first presidents and as a purported enslaver, and Story can be remembered as someone who positively impacted Harvard by helping to keep the Law School financially afloat as well as someone who undermined civil rights and supported the continuation of enslavement. Public exhibits, plaques, and other contextualizing resources can help Harvard affiliates grapple with the role that their institution played in fostering that individual's thought processes and rise to positions of power. Those who oppose this direction might argue that by maintaining the memorial, the university allows contributions to the institution to outweigh larger-scale damage caused by an individual and reverence to the past to outweigh the wellbeing of current campus affiliates.

For institutions choosing some form of the second or third option, questions still remain: How should the university ensure ethical stewardship of its vast existing collection and make choices about modifications of or additions to visual culture? If context and community are important when determining the placement of memorials, how does one assess Story's statue at the entrance to the Law School library or Holmes' portrait in the center of the School's most prominent classroom? Does the context of being in an academic building or a social space change what should be displayed? Does the level of "traffic" matter? When contextualizing figures, who determines what information should be displayed and how? For a university whose own history predates the founding of the United States by more than a hundred years, how can Harvard ensure that it ethically engages with problematic histories and that the ideal of *veritas* is honored with respect to visual culture?

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