Civil War was seen politically as supporting one view or the other. Caught in the middle were the four million African Americans and the democratic freedom expressed in the Declaration of Independence and supported by the Constitution. But even those bodies are not so clear.

Blythe was born in East Liverpool, Ohio, in 1815 and moved to Pittsburgh in 1831 (the same year as abolitionist Martin R. Delany) to work as a carpenter’s apprentice before joining the navy and serving for three years. After his service he travelled back to East Liverpool, where he began his portrait work before traveling again along the mountain ridges of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland. From this work he produced a large panoramic painting of the Allegheny Mountains—a sort of antebellum cinema. Due to financial issues, Blythe lost this work and returned to Pittsburgh in the late 1850s.

In his later years, Blythe concentrated almost exclusively on painting. His subject matter ventured on politics, social issues, corruption, and classism. He abhorred slavery and foreign immigration. The tone of his work tempered cynicism and sarcastic commentary. As a Western Pennsylvanian he must have seen or known a great deal about the active abolitionist community. He spent much time in Uniontown, Fayette County, a hotbed and frontline of the slavery-abolitionist confrontation. In Pittsburgh he would have known about the militant abolitionists in this community as well. Exposure to the world and seeing slavery in both the Caribbean during his naval years and in the U.S. from his many travels may have impacted his depiction of the debate in *Higher Law*.

Between 1861 and his death in 1865, Blythe produced numerous paintings that offered commentary on the war and the issues surrounding it. *Higher Law* is the first of those paintings and opens his artistic satire with the debate over slavery. There is much debate still today about the causes of the Civil War. Recent actions by Southern states to discount that slavery was in the debate only need to see both the literary and artistic work produced on the eve of the conflict to know and understand what the war was about. In the *From Slavery to Freedom* exhibit, *Higher Law* more than any other work of art provides the evidence that slavery was the central cause of the conflict.

Sources:

Learn More Online
Visit the History Center’s exhibition *From Slavery to Freedom* to hear stories from the region’s African American community.

See more paintings by David Gilmour Blythe.
Read the Smithsonian’s biography on Blythe.
The Higher Law, by David Gilmour Blythe, 1861.
This painting by artist David Blythe views slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War. At the center of the painting, Liberty is mortally wounded on her shield. Behind her is the grave of Common Sense, dated 1861. To the left is a Northern abolitionist and on the right a Southern slaveholder. The abolitionist holds aloft a volume labeled “Higher Law.” The Southerner clings to a paper inscribed “Our Rights” and a shackle. In the center above Liberty, a flaming dragon’s cave identifies “The Final Location of the Southern Capitol” as Hell.
Carnegie Museum of Art.