

## **Paper Mache for 5-23-25 by David Read**

The newest assault on our nation's greatest cultural institutions occurred earlier this month. President Trump fired Carla Hayden, the 14th Librarian of Congress and the first African American and woman to hold the position. Appointed by President Obama and confirmed by a bipartisan Senate vote, Hayden was recognized for her efforts to modernize the library, expand digital access, and promote diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within its collections. The White House cited concerns over Hayden's focus on DEI initiatives and the addition of allegedly inappropriate children's books as reasons for her removal. However, since the library is a research institution, not a lending library, and requires patrons to be at least 16 years old, such claims are questionable. Following her dismissal, President Trump appointed his Stormy Daniels defense attorney, Todd Blanche, as the acting Librarian of Congress.

Does anyone even think about the Library of Congress or the work it does in record keeping, archiving and curating the collected works of not just Congress but humankind? Founded in 1800, it is the oldest federal cultural institution in the U.S. and serves as the research library for Congress. It was initially established with a \$5,000 purchase of books to serve members of the newly relocated federal government in Washington, D.C. The library's collection was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1812. In 1815, Congress purchased Thomas Jefferson's collection of 6,000 books, significantly broadening the scope of the library beyond law and government to include science, philosophy, literature, and the arts. The library expanded dramatically in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the completion of its iconic Jefferson Building in 1897. Today, the library's purpose is to support the work of Congress while preserving and providing access to a vast and diverse collection of knowledge. It holds more than 170 million items, including books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, recordings, and digital materials in hundreds of languages. The library serves researchers, scholars, and the public both onsite and through an expansive digital archive. As a symbol of knowledge and learning, it reflects the belief that a well-informed citizenry is essential to a healthy democracy.

As mentioned earlier, the Library of Congress is open to the public for research and use of its collections. When I lived in the capital region, I had the opportunity to take advantage of its vast resources. An actor friend from L.A. asked me to see what I could find at the library about historic satires and parodies of Shakespeare's plays. He was working on a show, kind of a precursor to "The Complete Works of Shakespeare – Abridged." I checked in at the registration desk, filled out a request card detailing what I needed and was allowed to enter the magnificent, domed Main Reading Room. Look it up online to get a sense of the majesty of that space. Humbly, I sat at one of the desks and in about 30 minutes, a librarian brought me a stack of books dealing with the subject matter at hand and not just any books. I was handed books going back 100 – 200 years with every conceivable Shakespeare parody you could imagine...more material than my friend could every possibly incorporate into a show. I spent a couple of glorious hours looking at the tables of contents, flipping through the pages and looking at hilarious, parodic illustrations searching for any hidden gems that might translate for a modern audience. When I completed my survey, I was escorted to the copier machines room where I was allowed to press the pages of these ancient texts against the glass to make the relevant copies. Mission accomplished!