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# Art as Propaganda in Revolutionary America and France: A Comparative Analysis

Megan Blair
*Western Kentucky University*

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# Art as Propaganda in Revolutionary

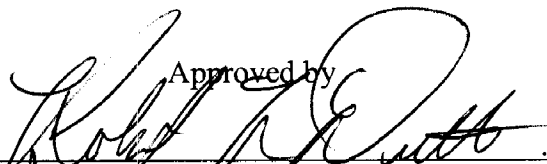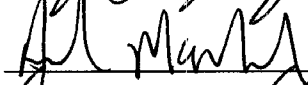# America and France:

# A Comparative Analysis
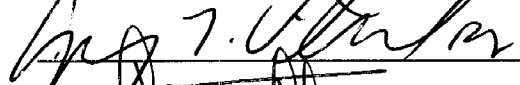
Megan Blair

Senior Thesis

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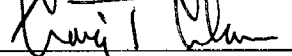Western Kentucky University

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Approved by

# Abstract

Historians should not limit themselves to studying political, economical, and social aspects of the American and French Revolutions, but should observe cultural factors, such as art, as well. Though wary of art as potentially corrupting, revolutionaries in both cultures employed it as propaganda, though focusing on different genres. In America, where formal art had not advanced either technically or in popularity, artistic propaganda was primarily exhibited through political cartoons, though a few examples of propagandistic portraiture do exist. Here, tradesmen, not trained artists, produced art. Contrarily, while there was an equally productive culture of political cartooning and pornography in France, the greatest achievements in artistic propaganda here appear through historical and allegorical painting. Jacques Louis David acted as the most prominent revolutionary artist of the time in France. This thesis argues that in both America and France, artists and politicians united to spread revolutionary ideals and influence the populace through artistic propaganda that spanned a variety of genres from painting to pornography.

# Acknowledgments

For their time and support on my honors thesis, I would like to thank the following people and organizations: Dr. Robert Dietle for serving as my honors project director, Dr. Andrew McMichael and Dr. Gary Villereal for serving as additional readers at my honors thesis defense, Dr. Craig Cobane for attending my defense, and lastly, the Honors Program for making this project possible.

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# Illustrations

The histories of the American Revolution, occurring from 1775-1783, and the French Revolution, lasting from 1789-1799, seem almost intertwined from their outset. While the revolutions exist as two distinct events involving two very different cultures, they are not entirely independent of one another. America, a nation in its infancy, could hardly have overcome its British keepers without the financial and military backing of the French that arrived in 1778. Over ten years later America's attempts at a constitutional republic based on liberty and equality garnered some legitimacy as France entered its own revolution. While America proved too politically divided after the war to assist France in her revolution, she nevertheless provided inspiration to French revolutionaries. Founded on the same Enlightenment principles of liberty, equality, and virtue, both revolutions upheld the rights of the individual, and therefore focused on the individual as the means of influencing change over the government. One of these means of individual change appeared as artistic propaganda, used in both countries to promote similar goals.

While emphasizing the political, economical, and social aspects of both revolutions, many studies often neglect to highlight cultural factors, such as art. However, an in-depth study of artistic works produced during the American and French Revolutions reveals that art was as influential an ideological factor as either economics or politics. Revolutionary ideas not only influenced trends in art at the time, but artists also worked to influence the revolution through propagandistic methods. Hoping to spread revolutionary ideals, artists and politicians united during both the American Revolution, and the later French Revolution to influence the populace through artistic propaganda spanning a variety of genres from painting to pornography.

## American Art Before the Revolution

Art in America bordered on non-existent during the first decades of British colonization. Those who ventured to the New World thought firstly of survival and the development of a new country, not of cultural luxuries such as art, for which they had neither the money nor time. Though the colonies grew in a size and number in the following decades, simultaneously shaping a new unique and diverse society, little changed as concerned the arts. Social and economic factors, such as the scale of wealth, diffusion of population, and absence of schools all continued to discourage the development of the arts in early America.[1]

What little formal art did exist in colonial America almost exclusively fell under the genre of portraiture. Colonists belonging to the urban merchant classes and the southern planter aristocracy sought to mirror the grandiose lifestyle of the European elite by maintaining the English custom of lining walls in private homes with ancestral portraits. While many such patrons of the arts preferred to have their paintings executed by trained "masters" when they traveled to Europe, some purchased from local artists, thus fostering America's infant art industry. It is this domestic set of portraits that truly reflect the early colonists by physically illustrating the dominant strains of pragmatism, utilitarianism, materialism, egalitarianism, and moderation that ran throughout the colonies. These portraits exhibit "elegance, but seldom frivolity; materialistic indulgence, but seldom ostentation."[2] Coupled with self-confidence and straight-forwardness, these traits show a new kind of individual differing in ideology from his European brethren

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[1] J.H. Plumb, *America and England: 1720-1820 The Fusion of Cultures,* in *American Art: 1750-1800 Towards Independence,* ed. Charles F. Montgomery and Patricia E. Kane (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 27.

[2] Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture,* 2nd ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2003), 95.

who were engaged in the indulgent Baroque and Rococo artistic movements around the same period.[3]

This stark contrast appears in a comparison of the well-known New England portrait, *Mrs. Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary*, 1671-74, by an anonymous artist, and English painter Sir Peter Lely's *Portrait of Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*, from the same dates, 1671-74. The colonial artist portrays Mrs. Freake's wealth by painting her in a satin dress with red petticoat, black and red decorative ribbons at the sleeves, and a lace collar. Furthermore, she wears a pearl necklace, garnet bracelet, and gold ring, all indicative of the family's prosperity, yet not ostentatious in display. Most notable however is the stiffness of the style, particularly exhibited through the child's awkward position and lack of expression, as well as Mrs. Freake's stiff pose. Due to flat and linear form, and sparse shading, Mrs. Freake's rich dress is reduced to line, color, and pattern, deprived of their sensuous tactile qualities.[4] The artist also provides only a dark



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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 45.

neutral background, leaving the viewer without an idea of space.

Lely's portrait, however, provides an example of the baroque style prevalent in European countries of the day. A sensuality is present in this portrait, aside from the obvious difference in dress. Shapes are robust and curving, rather than linear, as in the colonial painting. While still posed, the sitter does not appear stiff or awkward, but rather natural and graceful. Also, shading, particularly in the folds of the dress, provide the viewer with a sense of texture, and makes the model's features and figure more realistic. Lastly, the background illustrates to the viewer a large room, with a picturesque landscape through the window, giving an idea of space. Though the two portraits were produced within the exact same time frame, the English painting exhibits an artistic skill not yet present in the colonies -- a disparity made even more striking by the colonial artist's clear preference for simplicity.

American colonists' more conservative personal attributes and lifestyles impacted formal art in the colonies more than simply dictating how they were portrayed in paintings; they also dictated how colonists viewed the practice of art itself. Influenced by the reason and logic-based Enlightenment, many colonists of the 18$^{th}$ century, particularly America's founders, harbored a deep distrust of the sensuous and emotional appeal of art, which could lead to irrationality."[5] In a letter to his wife Abigail on April 12, 1778, John Adams wrote in response to the art, architecture, music, and general splendor he observed in Paris, " I cannot help suspecting that the more elegance, the less virtue, in all times and

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[5] Plumb, *American Art,* 38.

countries."[6] A sign of luxury, many considered art intrinsically corrupting, and felt there was no place for it in America.

Others, however, believed that art possessed the potential to serve a higher purpose than mere aesthetics. As tensions continued to mount between Britain and her American colonies, those seeking to subvert English authority questioned whether or not art could be employed to garner support for the "patriot" cause. If it portrayed virtue, held up examples of moral behavior, and girded colonists with zeal, art could be useful as a powerful propaganda tool capable of swaying public opinion in favor of a very dangerous plan: open rebellion against one of the world's most powerful empires.


### Limited Propaganda Attempts With Formal Art

As previously observed, formal art had not yet established a strong tradition in America and therefore was not able to become a dominant form of propaganda, as it later did in revolutionary France. This, however, does not mean painting was entirely overlooked by revolutionary propagandists. Rather, it meant that the limited attempts made at creating professional quality prints in support of the rebel cause remained stylistically close to the most prominent genre of painting in the American colonies: portraits.

Famed colonial artist Charles Willson Peale's full-length portrait of British politician William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, serves as one of the earliest examples of an American propagandistic painting, appearing seven years before the beginning of the war. Completed in 1768, Pitt's portrait was meant to commemorate the man who had led

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[6] John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 12, 1778, *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams,* ed. L.H Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 210.

the House of Commons to repeal the Stamp Act of 1765, a direct tax widely despised by American businessmen. Though taxes such as the Stamp Act had stirred up resentment and protest against Britain in the colonies, the majority of colonists sought only representation in Parliament and a return to status quo, not a complete separation from Britain. Unlike their French counter-parts, Americans sought not to change the current social and economic condition, but rather to maintain it, by keeping local government in the hands of well-to-do colonists rather than English officials, and by avoiding taxes that would alter trade and commerce. Peale sought to exhibit these wishes through his painting, using symbolism to suggest that Britain had been lax in her duties to the colonists, and that Pitt alone had upheld the true ideas of liberty.

Peale's portrait is rife with symbolism of the tensions between America and her colonizer. The figure of Pitt, dressed in the attire of a traditional Roman consul and holding the Magna Carta in his left hand, is the embodiment of Enlightenment principles, and is identified with the Roman Brutus, presenting the theme of the "justifiable execution of regal tyrants".[7] With his right hand he gestures towards a statue of Britain carrying her liberty cap on a pole, yet trampling underfoot the petition of the Congress in New York against the Stamp Act.[8] Liberty stands on a pedestal engraved with a Native American accompanied by a dog and



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[7] Plumb, *American Art,* 38.
[8] Charles C. Sellers, "Virginia's Great Allegory of William Pitt," *The William and Mary Quarterly,* (January 1952), 58-66.

bow, representative of the "natural faithfulness and firmness of America."[9] Furthermore, America is depicted as the pedestal in order to illustrate that the colonies played a significant role in supporting the mother country financially. Finally, in the background menacingly dark clouds hover, symbolic of the troubled times between Britain and her colonies. Yet at a distance there is a calmer sky that, if not completely clear, illustrates a hope for better relations in the future.[10] Many of these images Peale describes in an accompanying broadside, "A Description of the Picture and Mezzotinto of Mr. Pitt," meant to serve as an advertisement for copy prints to those who had yet to see the painting.

Peale's heavy reliance on symbolism illustrates the mentality of propagandists during the early stages of the revolution. On the one hand, they sought to portray American colonists as faultless devotees to the British crown, while presenting the British as neglectful of her promises of liberty and protection. In this way, propaganda was meant to make Americans aware of the government's shortcomings, support them in their dissatisfaction with the current situation, and suggest that they had to be vigilant in monitoring government as not to be deprived of their "natural rights" as Britons. However, earlier propaganda before the war, such as Peale's portrait, was not so bold as to suggest open rebellion against the crown. Colonists continued to consider themselves Britons, and initially hoped for a return to status quo, not for revolution, as illustrated by the uncertain sky in the background. While acknowledging the severity of the circumstances, reconciliation remained the desired outcome. Consequently, early propagandists walked a fine line between constructive criticism and sedition.

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[9] Ibid., 64.
[10] Ibid.

Despite efforts on both sides, Britain and her American colonies entered into armed conflict when the British sent a regiment to arrest revolutionaries on April 19, 1775, resulting in the Battle of Lexington and Concord. As the thirteen colonies readied themselves for war, they naturally gravitated away from British political figures as icons towards more domestic leaders. Artists and politicians alike quickly realized that the newly independent (or so declared) United States would need images of its newfound heroes and stories of its struggles, which is to say they saw an opening for cultural propaganda.[11]

Considered one of the most influential characters of the colonial scene, General George Washington soon became the most dominant figure of the revolution. Figuring prominently in portraiture from the period, he was as much a propaganda symbol to the revolution as the words "liberty" and "independence."[12] Washington presented the infant nation with both a successful military figure to rally behind, as well as an example for all good patriots to emulate and revere. Consequently, as a propaganda piece used to inspire both troops and citizens, he quickly became the most recognized face in the colonies.

Once again Peale, an ardent patriot, established himself as an active participant in the artistic propaganda movement by tackling the figure of one of America's most distinguished heroes. Peale painted a wide variety of Washington portraits – standing, sitting, half-length, head only – to help meet the nation's healthy demand for triumphant imagery. His most famous portrayal, *General George Washington Before Princeton,* appeared in 1779 as a result of a commission by the Executive Council of Pennsylvania.

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[11] Robert Hughes, *American Visions: the Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 97.

[12] Carl Berger, *Broadsides & Bayonets: The Propaganda War of the American Revolution* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1976), 189.

Though Peale's full-length portrait of Washington was only one of many likenesses made of the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the revolution, it figured more prominently than most as a display piece in the Philadelphia State House of the young nation's temporary capital. Furthermore, the painting not only appeared in a well-known location, but was also industriously circulated by Peale through copies, miniatures, and prints, so as to "fill America with his Washingtons," and make the image readily accessible to the masses.[13] Meant to glorify Washington and incite patriotic fervor in the breast of all who saw it, Peale infused the portrait with symbolism that would resonate with a specifically American audience.[14]
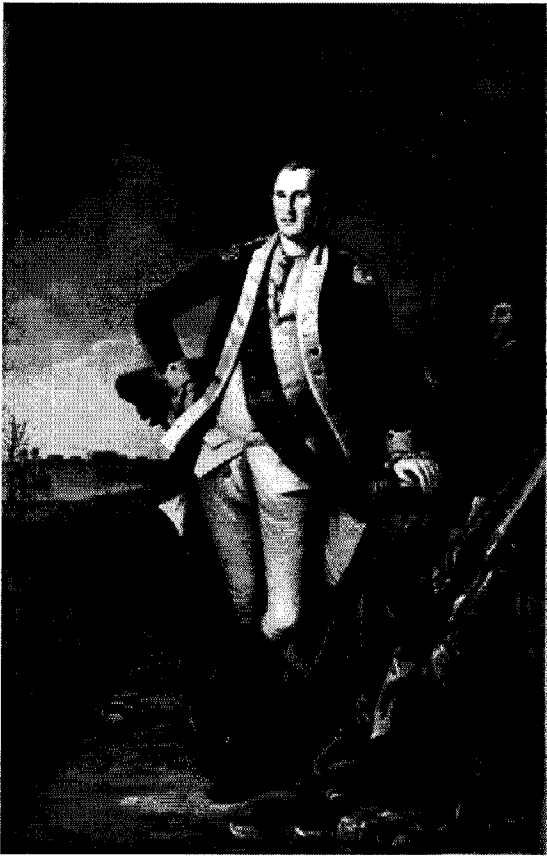
Peale began the process of reaching his colonial audience, which consisted predominantly of middle-class Protestants, by moving away from the grandiose, and overall European style previously exhibited in his portrait of Pitt. Pitt's portrait, while also designed for colonists, demonstrates a desire to reach out to a British audience, as well as to closely mimic British style. Thus, Pitt is painted in allegory of idealized Roman consulship in an impressive and ornate setting. Contrarily, Peale paints Washington in a considerably more reserved manner-- a stylistic break from England within the context of the much larger political break. Unlike traditional grand state-type portraits, Washington's figure is unremarkable in both stature and stance. Washington, a striking

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[13] Hughes, *American Visions,* 98.
[14] Plumb, *American Art,* 107.

figure in person at six feet two inches, appears more gangly than stately in Peale's

portrait, a fact accentuated by the casual, even awkward pose in which he is painted.[15]

Rather than making a sweeping, majestic gesture or standing boldly by the canon with

shoulders pulled back and chest out, Washington appears uncommonly relaxed given the

setting. One hand rests naturally on his hip, while the other balances on a canon. Even

Washington's face is unexceptional. Unlike European portraits, Peale does not paint

Washington gazing profoundly off canvas or staring regally and proudly at the audience,

but rather presents him with an expression of unassuming composure. Presenting the

viewer with a accurate representation of the colonies' first national hero, the artist makes

no effort to enhance the grandeur or dignity of the subject.

Such distinctions resulted from a conscious effort on Peale's part to portray

Washington as an approachable man, in tune with American values and worthy of

admiration and loyalty. Dominant strains of pragmatism, egalitarianism, and moderation

ran throughout the colonies, and thus figured prominently in American portraiture. Peale

presents Washington as a common man, admirable not as a demigod, but as the first

among equals. Because Washington is portrayed as great due to his actions, rather than

divine inspiration, the painting suggests that anyone has the potential to achieve that same

greatness. Indeed, this portrait was meant to inspire colonists to imitate the general by

assisting the revolutionary cause by whatever means available.

The collection of objects surrounding Washington also warrants mention as

means of inspiring the general public. As in portraits before the war, Washington's

possessions act as the primary means of conveying Washington's victory. In this case the

Hessian flags that figure prominently as trophies of war in the foreground, reference the

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[15] Plumb, *American Art*, 107.

capture of thousands of Hessians at the Battle of Princeton.[16] The newly designed

American flag appears in the top right corner. Such images helped create the ideal of a

strong, successful army, despite the reality of heavy losses of American troops prior to

this battle and sinking morale during a harsh winter. While in part designed to

commemorate the win, Peale's painting also fulfilled its propagandistic role by portraying

the army at a moment of rare triumph in the early days of the war, thereby boosting

public support and troop morale, while also hoping to encourage new recruits to enlist.

Portraits of Ben Franklin, another founder, also figured prominently as American

propaganda, though many designed for a different audience. Franklin traveled to France

in December of 1776, where as commissioner for the United States he was to secure

French support for the American cause of independence. Arriving dressed in a fur hat and

a plain brown suit, he epitomized the "ideal of the simple but dignified man of the New

World, standing in stark contrast to the ornate royal court and aristocracy."[17] Having

previously garnered fame in France for his *Poor Richard's Almanac* and harnessing

electricity, Franklin soon became a celebrity with his portrait appearing on French

medallions, rings, watches, snuffboxes, and a variety of other materials. Particularly

popular were images of Franklin wearing a fur cap, for though they did not reflect

Franklin's typical dress, they played to the rustic ideals many French had of Americans.

Franklin likely influenced the merchandizing of his image, and "used his reputation as a

man of the soil to create a quiet and effective web of revolutionaries' diplomacy as he

circulated amongst the salons."[18] By ensuring that his image appeared throughout France,

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[16] Plumb, *American Art*, 92.

[17] Claude Anne Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa, Franklin and the Ladies of Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 13.

[18] Ibid., 20.

he ensured his own popularity, and consequently the popularity of his own cause, securing the much-needed French aid in 1778.

Other forms of painting outside of portraiture appeared at this time as well, though not to the same extent. A majority of such pieces simply acted as historical snapshots of the particular events that occurred during the revolution, meant primarily to inform the audience, and inspire patriotism. One of the most prominent American artists of the time, John Trumbull, hoped to create an entire series of pictures commemorating the American Revolution, but was only able to create sketches before the war's end. In a letter later written to Thomas Jefferson in 1789, his belief in the importance of his mission and in the role painting might play in service to the state as propaganda is clearly heartfelt:

> The greatest motive I had or have for engaging in, or for continuing my pursuit of painting has been the wish of commemorating the great events of our country's revolution…to preserve and diffuse the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man; to give to the present and the future sons of oppression and misfortune, such glorious lessons of their rights and of the spirit with which they should assert and support them.[19]

Revolutionary artists also began at this time to use a mixture of domestic, military, and classical symbols to create a new iconography unique to the United States, eventually evolving into the style of the Federal Period (1785-1830). Eagles, stars and stripes, rattlesnakes, beavers, corncobs, tobacco, fasces, arrows, and the pantheon of American heroes (headed by Washington) all became prominent symbols of the

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[19] John Trumbull to Thomas Jefferson, June 11, 1789, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 15: March 1789 to November 1789*, ed. Julian P. Boyd ( Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 176-177.

American colonies.[20] A shift from curves to straight lines and geometric shapes also began at this time.[21]

While revolutionaries did take measures to influence the war through the more permanent medium of formal art, such attempts remained limited. Formal painting simply did not have the stronghold in the American colonies to make it a prolific means of rallying support for the revolutionary cause. Without either the artists to create such works or the money to fund them, coupled with the sheer expanse of time each project required, painting remained a very minor means of spreading revolutionary propaganda. Consequently, Americans depended largely upon the less formal artistic methods of sketching and political cartooning to influence the masses.

## Revolutionary Propaganda Through Informal Art:

The appearance of topical sketches, caricatures, and political cartoons in America directly coincide with the development of American journalism, which began to blossom in the early 18th century and grew exponentially as tensions grew with Britain.[22] Unlike paintings, artists could create political cartoons and engravings quicker and cheaper, with the additional dividend of relatively easy reproduction and dissemination. Consequently, pictorial prints became the major "visual medium of revolutionary propaganda."[23] This is not to suggest, however, that cartoons were easy to come by. Each cartoon, requiring

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[20] Plumb, *American Art,* 29.
[21] Ibid., 38.
[22]Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (Cambridge, Ma: Public Affairs, 2006), 91.
[23] Plumb, *American Art,* 134.

laborious engraving into copper or cutting into wood, could be fairly expensive-- a luxury many printers could not afford. Thus, while certainly more prolific than paintings, cartoons and illustrations in American newspapers remained a considerable rarity.

Consequently, cartoons typically illustrated major events and tended to examine general principles. Drawings from this period embody both a need to provide an immediate record of events, as well as to persuade other Americans to join the cause. Though pregnant with propagandistic tones and hasty inaccuracies, they also reflect to the viewer feelings of vital immediacy and provide a rare glimpse at how men saw the Revolution as it was happening.[24] However, as war loomed ever closer, and British censorship became more severe, such expressions became increasingly risky, leaving even fewer existing prints today than were likely originally created.

Furthermore, due to chronic supply shortages caused by the economic and commercial strains America experienced, printing necessities such as type, steel, lead, paper, presses, and skilled manpower frequently made printing impossible to all but the bravest printers. Consequently, a majority of revolutionary prints first appeared in the heated political climate immediately preceding the war from 1765-1775, and other printers simply recycled the material as they saw fit. Ignoring British copyright law, reprinting was frequently done without consent of, or attribution to the original artist.[25] Printers often considered such "borrowing" as an homage to the original artist for their creative genius rather than theft.

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[24] Donald Cresswell, ed., *The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints: A Checklist of 1765-1790 Graphics in the Library of Congress* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1975), x.
[25] Burns, *Infamous Scribblers*, 79.

No better example exists of recycling revolutionary material than the famed

illustration of the severed snake, attributed to Benjamin Franklin. The first known

political cartoon in American history, the snake first appeared in Franklin's *Pennsylvania*

*Gazette* on May 9, 1754, as a plea to unite the defenses of the colonies during the French

and Indian War.[26] Basing the cartoon on a popular

superstition of the time that a severed serpent could

come back to life if the pieces were put together

before sunset, Franklin drew the snake in eight

distinct sections representing the individual colonies,

the states of New England represented collectively as

the head, labeled N.E.[27] The ominous words "JOIN, or DIE," appeared printed below the

snake. Virtually every newspaper in the colonies had reprinted the cartoon within a

month, occasionally changing the details slightly, but always with the same idea of the

severed snake.

The serpent device enjoyed multiple lives, as printers dusted it off for both the

Stamp Act Crisis of 1765 and the ensuing war for independence in 1775. Many

publishers simply printed an exact replica of Franklin's original snake, while others

creatively entwined the snake with the masthead of their papers, such as Isaiah Thomas

who inserted it into the *Massachusetts Spy* with the addition of a ninth piece for Georgia,

and showed it fighting a British dragon.[28] Still others created new cartoons using the

snake to symbolize America, as the snake had rapidly become part of the nation's

[26] Stephen Hess and Milton Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art: A History of American Political Cartoons* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968), 52.
[27] Ibid., 52.
[28] Cresswell, *The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints,* 230.

growing iconography. By the end of the war the serpent's association with America was so pervasive that even London cartoonists employed it to illustrate the colonies' triumph over Britain.[29] More than simply a cartoon, the serpent, particularly Franklin's version, factored as a piece of propaganda meant to propel the colonists into a united war against the British.

Franklin's original cartoon is rife with symbolism meant to inspire the thirteen colonies to act jointly against a common foe, whether French or British, in later times. During the revolutionary war, the superstition regarding snakes perhaps rung loudest, suggesting to the audience that sunset, or the end of their liberty, quickly approached. Yet the colonies could breathe new life again if they united and made a stand. The separation of the pieces also demonstrates the belief that while no single colony could defeat the British alone, together they might present a formidable force. The words, "JOIN, or DIE," present a blatant directive to the American people to unite. The imagery of the snake fell under further examination in the *Pennsylvania Journal* by "An American Guesser" in 1775, noting that the snake has sharp eyes and, "may therefore be esteemed an emblem of vigilance."[30] Furthermore, the anonymous author offered:

> She never begins an attack, nor, when once engaged, ever surrenders: She is therefore an emblem of magnanimity and true courage. ... she never wounds 'till she has generously given notice, even to her enemy, and cautioned him against the danger of treading on her.[31]

The snake clearly presents a metaphor in this instance of the Americans in favor of rebellion. Ever vigilant, they have witnessed a trespass against their liberties, and have warned the British crown of both their displeasure and the potential of violent reaction if

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[29] Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art,* 158.

[30] Benjamin Franklin, "The Rattlesnake as a Symbol for America," *The Franklin Institute,* December 27, 1775, www.fi.edu/qa99/musing3/index.html (accessed April 2, 2008).

[31] Ibid.

the problem should remain unresolved. Furthermore, while Americans did not plan on initiating armed conflict, they would fight relentlessly if matters came to war. Many American scholars now agree that this "American Guesser" was Benjamin Franklin, author of the highly circulated original sketch.

Franklin's designs however were not the only highly imitated bits of cartoon artistry, as the oft-employed image of skull and crossbones illustrates. While the skull and crossbones motif certainly did not originate in America, it was quickly adopted by newspapers throughout the colonies to demonstrate, "the effects of the stamp," as stated by the Pennsylvania Journal in 1765; clearly in reference to the despised Stamp Act.[32] The skull and crossbones, appeared first with biting humor in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on October 24, 1765. Seven days later, editor William Bradford completely transformed
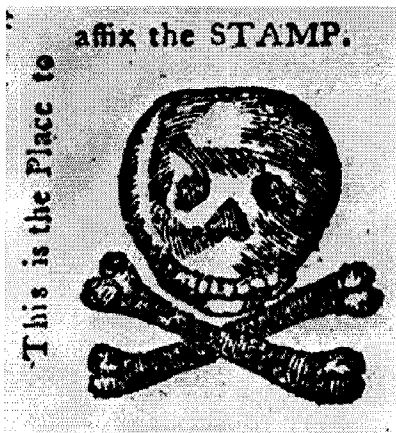


the masthead to resemble bearing the motif, and added a black border around the page; the designated stamp cartoon also remained in the lower right corner. To accompany the imagery, Bradford included articles and letters expressing outrage against the Stamp Act, and informed readers in bold letters that the paper was "expiring: in hopes of resurrection."[33] The paper could not afford to stay in business under the Stamp Act.

The message behind Bradford's morbid illustration requires very little examination into symbolism. Principally, the skull suggests both that the British are effectively taxing the colonists to death, and signals the death of the ideal that British liberty and equality extended fully to English colonists in America. Enraged by the Stamp

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[32] Cresswell, *The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints,* 239, Plate 619.
[33] Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art,* 58, Plate II-10.

Act, printers used the skull motif to demonstrate their displeasure, and to stir an equal hatred within their customers who would have been all too familiar with the stamp given that the Stamp Act required its placement upon all paper items, including newspapers. The imagery seems even more blatant in the case of the *Pennsylvania Journal*, where the skull and crossbones motif and gravestone combine to literally illustrate the death of the newspaper as a result of the tax.

Rather than die with the *Pennsylvania Journal*, however, the motif went on to make the front pages of other papers such the *Boston Gazette*. Paul Revere took the popular skull and crossbones motif and made it his own, as he had with Franklin's *JOIN, or DIE* cartoon, applying it in the March 12, 1770 issue of the *Boston Gazette* in an illustration of coffins representative of four men killed in the Boston Massacre.[34] While no longer simply a symbol of the Stamp Act's tyranny, the skull and crossbones image remained prominent in American journalism throughout the war.

Thus far only cartoons most pervasive throughout the colonies have been examined for their role as propaganda during the American Revolution. Political cartooning, while rare, appeared in newspapers throughout all thirteen colonies, resulting in a sizable body of works that exhibit a variety of styles and themes, similar to political cartoons today. To examine each individual cartoon for its contribution to American artistic propaganda would present an overwhelming task. One might, however, extract a few generalities from the diverse spectrum of pictorial commentary.

Uniquely, colonial American cartooning often features the character of the devil in conjunction to the actions or people they criticize. The colonies' strong Protestant, even Puritan, background might explain why Satan appears as such a prominent and

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[34] Cresswell, *The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints*, 263, Plate 654-I.

influential figure. Often the figure lurks ominously in the background, or whispers into the ear of an influential politician who has supported legislation against the colonies' wishes. Naturally, such allusions suggested that the illustrated persons were corrupt, and most likely injuring the interests of colonists. In Revere's engraving, *A Warm Place— Hell,* published in 1768, the devil is portrayed as ushering members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives into the mouth of hell who had voted to rescind a letter criticizing Parliament for levying taxes against the colonies.[35]

The Native American presents another common figure found throughout colonial cartooning during the revolution. Interesting to note are the colonists' evident divisive feelings towards Native Americans, as illustrated by their depictions of them. At times America herself appears as a native, bear-breasted and wearing a simple cloth with feathered headdress, as in Paul Revere's *The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught.* In Revere's cartoon, printed in 1774, three prominent British politicians force tea down the throat of a half-clad native woman, while she vomits it back up. In the foreground a



*The able Doctor, or, America swallowing the Bitter Draught.*

"Boston Petition" lies torn on the ground, and in the background a British fleet bombards Boston with canon fire.[36] Unmistakably this cartoon acted as propaganda against the Intolerable Acts, passed by parliament in 1773. In illustrations such as these, the native is innocent and helpless, unable to defend herself against her British overlords. It is possible

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[35] Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art,* 56, Plate II-8.
[36] Cresswell, *The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints,* 270, Plate 664.

that some colonists considered actual natives in this light, reflecting recognition of some degree of guilt for the oppressions they themselves had inflicted.

This is unlikely however, given that colonists almost simultaneously depicted natives as dark and menacing savages, often in association with the devil, as in I. Almon Piccadilly's *The Allies*, printed in 1780. Here George III of Britain feasts on human flesh with a savage, while "two other natives wring blood from the corpse of a white baby and drink from its skull."[37] This print supports Jefferson's charge that the King incited natives to attack colonists, and thus simultaneously provides propaganda against both the crown and Native Americans.[38] Given the dual presentation of natives, it is most likely that colonists simply recognized Native Americans as unique to their country, and used them to portray whatever position they took. Also interesting to note is the fact that natives appear as generally female when presented as friends to the colonies, and are depicted as male when representative of a foe, providing a additional glimpse into the colonists' sexual biases.

Apart from political cartoons, newspapers also provided viewers with etchings of actual events that occurred during the revolution, the most famous of which, Revere's *Bloody Massacre*, appeared on March 28, 1770 following the "Boston Massacre" which had occurred previously that month. Revere's engraving, pictured left, is a sensational portrayal of the skirmish, showing seven British soldiers firing on a crowd of unarmed Boston citizens.[39] Three casualties lie sprawled on the ground, while another two are lifted into the crowd. Behind the British soldiers stands a building aptly designated the

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[37] Ibid., 270, Plate 764.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art*, 54, Plate II-6.

"Butcher's Hall."[40] While a portrayal of an actual event, this sketch was unquestionably meant to serve as a propagandistic method of kindling resentment against British troops.

The print is packed with biases, from the loaded language of the store's name and the word massacre in the title, to the dichotomy between the innocent bystanders and the malicious troops. Upon close examination, one may witness a man in the crowd praying, while another holds up his hands to signal the British to cease-fire. It appears Revere went to extremes to impress upon his viewer that the soldiers fired upon the crowd unprovoked. While the actual event likely involved more initiation on the part of the crowd than illustrated, the print nevertheless performs its duty of shaping public opinion as concerned the event, largely in favor of the Bostonians.

Similarly, Amos Dolittle's series of four prints on the Battle of Lexington sought to shape revolutionary opinion by appealing to colonists' emotions. The first of the series, *The Battle of Lexington, April 19', 1775,* illustrates the colonial militia's initial encounter with the British army. The viewer readily notices a great distinction between the organized British regiment and the floundering American forces. Though not so blatant as the shooting in Boston, the artist still presents the event as a slaughter, pitting the amateur rebel militia against the well-armed and trained redcoats.[41] The print invoked intense feelings of outrage and sorrow throughout the colonies when published, and this more than anything helped propel others towards war. Political cartoons, though effective

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[41] Daniel M. Mendelowitz, *A History of American Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc, 1970), 124.

as propaganda, depended largely on innuendo, symbolism, and interpretation. Prints of the actual events, on the other hand, provided readers with powerful evidence concerning national events. No matter how biased the print, it effectively inspired readers to act through emotion rather than logic.

## Colonial Propagandistic Results

Due to its late founding in comparison to other Western nations, American art entered the revolutionary period of its history significantly trailing other European states in artistic achievement. Not surprising then, colonial art during the revolution, as a whole, was neither conceived nor executed on a distinguished level. Indeed, had American artists possessed the skills to produce refined levels of illustration, they likely would have refrained given the context of their moderate culture. Yet, revolutionary artists entered the war not only lacking formal training in their field, but also without many necessities to their trade. Printers lacked materials such as paper, lead, and steel. They met further setbacks in the fact that many newspaper printers, such as Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, doubled as ardent patriots and consequently abandoned their positions to enlist in or assist the revolutionary army. Painters faired slightly better in regards to materials as makeshift brushes and paints could be created in the United States. However, such materials suffered in quality, further hampering the already low achievements in painting.

Most damaging to the cause of art as propaganda though was America's fragile financial state. The rarity of art materials after 1775 presented only one of the colonies' difficulties as a result of financial strain. Lack of patronage offered the most prominent hindrance to artistic propaganda's growth. Primarily middle-class citizens, the majority of

Americans could hardly afford paintings before the war, thus making it inconceivable that they could spare the necessary funding to commission great artistic works during the bleak revolutionary period. Furthermore, the national government, only in its infancy, though eager to promote itself and the war could not afford to divert funds from the military in order to promote widespread propaganda. Thus, the artistic propaganda movement in America depended solely, for the most part, on the endeavors of patriotically inspired independent artists, engravers, and printers. Hence, visual and pictorial appeals were overall less important in disseminating revolutionary propaganda than written appeals.[42]

## Artistic Propaganda As Approached in France

Separated by distance, time, and culture, it seems natural that propaganda in revolutionary France would differ vastly from pieces found in the colonies, despite sharing similar aims and ideology. While the impact of the American Revolution was felt mainly in North America, the French Revolution, occurring from 1789-1799, has often been examined for its significance in shaping not only the history of France but also the history of continental Europe. One might also imagine that artistic propaganda in revolutionary France held an equally more extensive reach in a country with more resources.

The idea of employing art as propaganda in France did not originate with the revolutionaries in 1789. A century earlier, during Louis XIV's reign (1648-1715), the state had employed artists to create masterpieces capable of arousing loyalty towards the monarchy, demonstrating both its greatness and power. Louis himself spent hours posing

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[42] Berger, *Broadsides & Bayonets*, 385.

for painters commissioned to glorify the throne. Aside from portraits of the king,

generated in large quantities so as to give the appearance that Louis was "everywhere,"

royal propaganda fell under two other significant categories: historic and mythological

portrayals. The first category sought to commemorate achievements throughout Louis

XIV's reign, while the latter intended to cultivate Louis' divine image by painting him as

a mythological figure.[43]

However, during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, state supported art as

propaganda was much less significant. Under the rule of Louis XV, art turned from more

serious themes, such as history, to the more amorous and decadent themes typical of the

emerging Rococo period.[44] The flamboyance and frivolity of royal art during this period

soon subjected it to the censure of both artists and the growing middle-class, who

increasingly viewed art as an aristocratic luxury lacking utility.[45] Though Louis XVI

made a concerted effort to bring back historical painting, echoing enlightened ideas that

the true function of art was to combat vice and encourage virtue, his reign was too

fraught with turmoil for much focus to be placed upon the project.[46]

How then, did the theory of art as propaganda re-emerge during the late

eighteenth century? The revival of the propaganda concept grew out of artists' need to

"refute the accusation that art contributed to the degeneration of society."[47] For years art

had pandered to the morally corrupt preferences of the aristocracy, which focused

predominately on erotic play and nude women. Such pieces contrasted sharply with the

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[43] Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 154.
[44] James A. Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France 1750-1799* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 5.
[45] Ibid., 7.
[46] Ibid., 77.
[47] Ibid., 10.

virtues of hard work and moral discipline cherished by the middle-classes.[48]

Consequently, it is easy to understand how many revolutionaries condemned art, specifically painting, as degenerative to the morals of society. Furthermore, due to both its decadence during the Rococo period and the general affluence of its patrons, art was often associated with luxury, which Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau considered a catalyst for moral decline.

To combat such accusations, philosophes and artists had to defend art's ability to serve as an influential tool in social reform rather than social degeneration. In 1689, English philosopher John Locke had argued in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the human mind was a blank slate at birth that only accumulated knowledge through observations made with the five senses.[49] Thus, rather than ingrained with a set of innate ideas and principles, as philosophers such as Rene Descartes had proposed, Locke argued that men's minds were flexible. Considering utility as the benchmark to measure art's value, enlightened thinkers suggested that art could be used to educate and inspire the masses through depictions of ideas such as equality, justice and virtue. If Locke's theory proved correct, French Enlightenment thinkers believed they would be able to shape men's minds through the sense of sight.

Also, they demanded that artists use their works to inspire feelings of patriotism amongst the French people. Artists hoped to achieve major goals of education and inspiration by using the emotional appeal of visual images. In both America and France, images tended to be more influential with the masses than either the spoken or written

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[48] Ibid., 8.
[49] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publisher Co., 1996), 21.

word, particularly at a time of considerably low literacy levels. Consequently, images provided a means of communicating with all levels of society, not simply the educated.

The call for virtuous art led to a rebirth, specifically in the genre of "historical" art, long neglected since the days when Louis XIV used it to glorify the monarchy. By illustrating stories from history, artists were able to highlight specific moments classified as "deciding points," when it was believed various figures demonstrated virtues compatible with enlightened thought.[50] In turn, enlightened thinkers anticipated that the masses would observe the virtue and patriotism of famous figures, and strive to emulate them in their everyday lives. Most frequently employed were widely known events from classical history, thereby making the artist's intended messages very clear to his or her audience.

## French Revolutionary Propaganda Through Informal Art

As social unrest swept the nation in the 1780s, artistic propaganda began to transition from a simple tool used mostly for moral reform to a tool used by artists to tear down the Old Regime of France. Prints and pamphlets criticizing the monarchy, ranging from anti-Mazarin campaigns to prints attacking Louis XV over the Jansenist controversy, had long appeared in France. However, dissatisfaction with the social stratification dictated by the French Estate system, along with the severe economic struggles of the state, led to a sizable influx in the use of art to speak out against the government of France, paired with an increased indignation. Targeting the monarchy, the nobility, and the clergy, discontented artists aimed to make their political views known

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[50] Noel Parker, *Portrayals of Revolution: Images, Debates and Patterns of Thought on the French Revolution* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1990), 86.

through more informal art forms more accessible to the people: pornography and caricature.

In her article "Pornographic Pamphlets of the French Revolution," Santa Clara University student Cara Payne claims that, "historically, it has been speculated that the breakdown of social order and political power can be identified through the surfacing of pornographic materials..."[51] No better historical example occurs than the use of politically motivated pornography published during the political and social upheaval prior to and during the French Revolution. During the early revolution, politically motivated pornography accounted for over half of obscene literature produced in France.[52] Artists produced sexually sensationalist prints as a means of attacking the monarchy, nobility, and clergy in an effort to undermine the legitimacy of the reigning social and political systems.[53] By exposing the first two estates to the ridicule, distrust, and contempt of the people, artists knocked the privileged orders from their pedestals, thus making it easier for the commoner to support the idea of removing individuals who abused their power.

Pornography had a long-standing relationship with politics in France, dating back to the sixteenth century. Before the revolution, pornography of the ancien regime was written almost exclusively by and for men, particularly those of the upper-classes, and often targeted priests, nuns, the French court, and aristocrats.[54] The monarchy also became a popular target as nobles became increasingly disgruntled with the French government. As pornography proliferated during the early revolution, its audience began

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[51] Cara Payne, *Pornographic Pamphlets of the French Revolution,* 2004, http://www.slais.ubc.ca/PEOPLE/students/resumes/C_Payne/media_pdf/SummaryPorn.pdf1, (accessed April 2, 2008).
[52] Lynn Hunt, ed, *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 307.
[53] Ibid., 301.
[54] Ibid., 305.

extending down to the popular classes, who employed pornography as propaganda to lower the image of the monarchy to one of mockery and ridicule; a monarchy which the people felt they could easily overthrow.[55]

Marie Antoinette figured prominently as a favorite target of pornographers. Numerous rumors concerning the queen's sexual practices had arisen during the first seven years in which her marriage remained unconsummated. Such rumors consequently became fodder for pornographers aiming to damage both her reputation and that of her husband. Artists often depicted Antoinette participating in sexually subversive acts such as incest, bestiality, and bi-sexuality. Pornographers also delighted in showcasing the rumored sexual inadequacies of Antoinette's husband, Louis XVI.

Other popular themes in pornography included portraits of aristocrats made up of genitalia, impotent judges, homosexual scenes amongst the nobility, and a general over-indulgence in sex by the upper classes. An interesting example, the caricature to the left, his face formed by a combination of nude people and phalli, served as a double insult as the man pictured was both a politician and a clergyman. Both the artist and politician's names have been lost. Homosexual displays also provided particularly powerful images for artists as they implied that noble men were not "manly" at all, but rather weak and penetrable. An example of this appears in the pornographic cartoon to the right, in which the famed general of both the American and French



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[55] Ibid.

Revolutions, Marquis de Lafayette, appears astride a phallus. Above his head flies a cherub holding a flame and laurel wreaths, both symbols of liberty. The artist also depicts Marie Antoinette in the left-hand corner handling the phallus in both hands. This of course served to criticize the queen for her illustrious sexuality, but primarily showed that Lafayette sat between support for the revolutionary cause and the monarchy. Criticized and suspected by many during the revolution, due largely in part to his position as a noble and his limited-monarchist views, Lafayette is clearly meant to look too weak to firmly choose a side.

Pornographic depictions continued to reflect working class sentiments against the moral decay of the upper classes. However, it is interesting to note that rather than turning away from sexually charged scenes, as artists had previously done to condemn aristocrats, artists began, rather, to over exaggerate the sexual practices of high society. By portraying such shockingly perverse scenes, artists hoped to demonstrate to the people of France that the "ruling class" was not fit to rule, and convince them to take the necessary measures to remove corrupt individuals from power.

Pornography worked effectively not only due to the overwhelming clarity of their messages, but also as a result of the very medium used to convey those messages. Not of the highest quality, pornography typically appeared as etchings or engravings produced on simple paper with black ink. Thus, manufactures could produce pornographies both easily and cheaply, two qualities that drastically impacted their circulation. Due to the inexpensive nature of such pieces, the working-class masses easily afforded them. Furthermore, their inexpensive nature made proliferation easy and quick,

thus making it nearly impossible for authorities to eradicate these illegal works before they had been distributed to interested buyers.

Pornographers relied not only upon the medium to assist them in proliferating pornography, but also upon lax censorship laws during the revolution. Having freed the presses in 1789, the National Assembly held little control over the upsurge in pornography. Furthermore, obscenity ranked much lower on the revolutionary government's list of concerns than other objectionable material, such as counterrevolutionary pamphlets.[56] Still, the identity of those who produced these pornographic works remains largely unknown, as most artists chose anonymity to avoid prosecution in the event that their work offended local authorities.

As in America, political cartoons also served as a means to undermine governmental authority, appealing more to humor and irony than to the sensationalism employed against the upper-classes via pornography. However, such pieces were far from above using crude humor to get their point across. By disfiguring and exaggerating their subjects, the artists' use of caricature demonstrated the "violent disregard for authority" that came to characterize the French Revolution.[57] This is particularly true when the subject chosen was the king, Louis XVI, whose body was considered sacred prior to the revolution. Caricatures employed both visual and verbal puns, and a short sentence emphasizing the point of the cartoon often accompanied the illustration.

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[56] Ibid., 302.
[57] James A.W. Heffeman, *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Histiography, and Art* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 192.

Caricatures appear to have been among the most popular and successful examples of national propaganda, though neither the most tasteful nor the most artistic.[58]

Central to both pornography and caricature drawing was the independence of the artists who employed these techniques. Such independence contrasted greatly with the condition of artists in the field of painting, who relied mostly on government commissions to produce their works. Consequently, a study of paintings during the revolution provides a better glimpse of how the revolutionary government of France attempted to shape the French people's perceptions of the revolution.

## French Propaganda Through Formal Art

Paintings present the most widely recognized body of propaganda produced during the French Revolution. This is perhaps not only because production of such works occurred on a grander scale but also because they were better preserved after the revolution. Also, sponsorship by the new French government gave paintings an air of legitimacy lacking in both pornography and caricatures-- a luxury absent in the artistic world of the newly liberated American colonies.

Hoping to destroy many of the traditional bonds between king and subjects, revolutionaries had to consider the how to re-establish the psychological unity of France once this was accomplished.[59] In order to do so, the National Assembly, and later the Committee of Public Safety during the Terror, would cultivate the growing sense of patriotism as a means of re-organizing loyalty around the state. To assist them in this task, the National Assembly issued an invitation to all artists to devote their talents to the

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[58] David Dowd, "Art as National Propaganda in the French Revolution," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, no. 3 (1951): 532-546.
[59] Ibid., 540.

revolution, promising support to those who chose to reflect revolutionary themes.[60] Such

commissions were sure to appeal to classically trained artists who had only recently lost

their usual patrons: the monarchy and nobility. However, revolutionary artists were not

motivated by money alone, but seem to have had a genuine interest in serving the nation

in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the new regime.


## Reappearance of historic art used for propagandist paintings

The genre of "historical art," resurrected during the Enlightenment, appeared a

natural choice for artists in their efforts to influence the people through painting. By

allowing artists to focus on one moment of extraordinary virtue, the historic art form lent

itself to bolstering the image of both events and key individuals throughout the

revolution. Depicting events and people in so glorious a fashion was intended to impress

upon the populace just how great the revolution was for France, giving the events a sort

of "larger than life" appearance. More than impressing the people of France, such

paintings also intended to inspire within the average citizen a desire to emulate the

"heroes" of the revolution, and consequently lead them to both adhere to revolutionary

principles and fight those who planned to further the injustices of the Old Regime.

Historical pieces during the revolution also had a more practical purpose aside

from supporting the revolution. In a period prior to photography, only art could capture

the fleeting scenes of the revolution. Both politicians and artists were well aware of the

historical significance of events surrounding them, and in an effort to leave a lasting

legacy of the French Revolution, many paintings were commissioned to pay tribute to

what some considered the most important events of the times. Critical points such as the

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[60] Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France 1750-1799*, 162.

fall of the Bastille and the Tennis Court Oath offer two examples of events later immortalized by artists.

Historical paintings during the revolution broke down into two categories, contemporary and allegory. As suggested by the name, contemporary historical paintings portrayed events that had occurred recently during the revolution. Artists used contemporary painting to record historically significant turning points during the revolution, thereby allowing viewers to witness the scenes as though they had physically been present. Allegorical painting, on the other hand, employed abstractions and symbolism to express the universal truths of the revolution. Generally, artists chose to depict classical tales, infusing them with a variety of patriotic symbols left open to the audience's interpretation.

### Contemporary Painting

The category of contemporary historical paintings broke down even further into the subgroups of history-as-reportage and history-as-literature. The first was a style used primarily to report events that had actually occurred and that the artist had possibly witnessed or had read about in a local paper. Thus, by illustrating events, the painter served the function of a journalist. The second sub-group, history-as-literature, was typically inspired by rumored events transpiring outside of Paris in the countryside, but consisted of characters and scenes entirely imagined by the artist.[61] While artists weakly based these images upon reality, very little actual historic value may be placed upon pieces described as history-as-literature, as they portrayed no definite event.

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[61] Alan Wintermute, ed., *1789: French Art During the Revolution* (Colnaghi, New York: Colnaghi USA Ltd, 1989), 34.

No better example exists of history-as-reportage than Jacque Louis David's

sketches of *The Tennis Court Oath*. The oath itself was taken on June 20, 1789 by the

Third Estate delegates of the newly declared National Assembly, along with a few

members of the clergy, all
of whom pledged to
continue meeting until they
had successfully
constructed a new
constitution for France. The
oath soon became a
symbolic event among
revolutionaries, and many
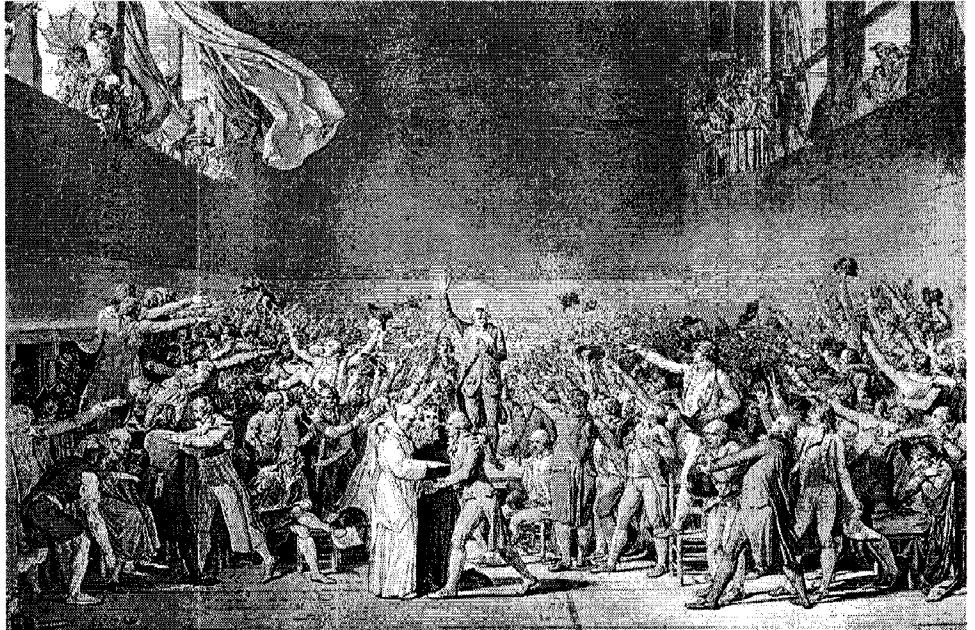
felt inclined to record the event on canvas. David declared on February 5, 1792, three

years after the event, "No history of no people offers me anything so grand, so sublime,

as this oath of the Tennis Court, which I must paint."[62] Resolving to immortalize the

event, David immediately fell upon the task of sketching out the scene and finding

commissions for his work. Initially supported privately by the Jacobin group, who

intended to subsidize the painting through subscriptions, the commission was later picked

up by the national government through the Legislative Assembly.[63] Despite the

commission, David never finished the painting.

David's sketch for the *Tennis Court Oath* on the most basic level is simply one

among many attempts to capture on canvas the actual moment in which the oath was

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[62] Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution*, 249.
[63] Ibid., 250.

sworn. However, David is renowned as one of the period's most brilliant artists for both his use of symbolism and realism in painting. For instance the blowing curtains in the upper left corner symbolize a "new wind" blowing in, bringing with it the new national government. Also essential to the painting is the focal point of the man in the center with upraised hand, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, soon to be mayor of Paris. David created motion towards the center by depicting all the assembly members raising their hands in Bailly's direction. Such focus creates a sense of unity in the audience, which is consistent with David's propagandistic goals of creating a sense of unity and patriotism throughout France. The only thing set in relief to the enthusiasm of these patriots is the figure of the one representative to the Estates-General who refused to take the oath, Martin Dauch, who cringes in the bottom right corner.[64]

Furthermore, themes of reconciliation persist throughout the painting, which also emphasize unity, most vividly illustrated through the clergymen and Third Estate members greeting in the forefront of the painting. Prior to the swearing of the Tennis Court Oath, the three Estates of France had continued to meet individually rather than together as the Third Estate called for. To do so was to maintain the traditional distinctions between the Estates-- distinctions which the Third Estate wished to tear down through the Estates General. The greeting exchanged between the clergymen and Third Estate member depicts the historically significant moment during the Tennis Court Oath when some clergy joined the "Natural Assembly," thus reuniting and reconciling members of all three Estates. By placing these men in the center, David sends a direct message to his audience that everyone should strive for reconciliation. While the Estates

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[64] Jonathon P. Ribner, *Broken Tablets: The Cult of the Law in French Art from David to Delacroix* .(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6.

no longer existed by the time David sketched his ideas, there continued to be political division, particularly between the Girondin and Jacobin groups. Thus, the reconciliation of the Estates symbolizes the reconciliation of the divided Republicans, allowing David's painting to operate as propaganda.

Another famed piece by David that followed the ideas of contemporary history is his *Death of Marat*, finished in 1793 shortly following the brutal assassination of the radical politician and "friend of the people," Jean-Paul Marat. Marat's death, occurring so suddenly after his triumph over the Girondin faction who had sought to impeach him from the Convention, sent shock waves throughout Paris, and led to a movement to portray Marat as a martyr for the revolution. David's decision to immortalize Marat as a republican martyr not only bolstered the popular movement in France, but also served as propaganda for the more radical factions in the convention, providing a means of stirring up feelings of revenge aimed at counter-revolutionaries. Furthermore, by specifically depicting Marat, a man who had dedicated his life to the revolution despite his failing health, David sent a clear image of the values and virtues cherished most by the new national government. More than a man, Marat became a symbol after his death of both commitment to the people and the patriot government.[65]

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[65] Parker, *Portrayals of Revolution,* 89.
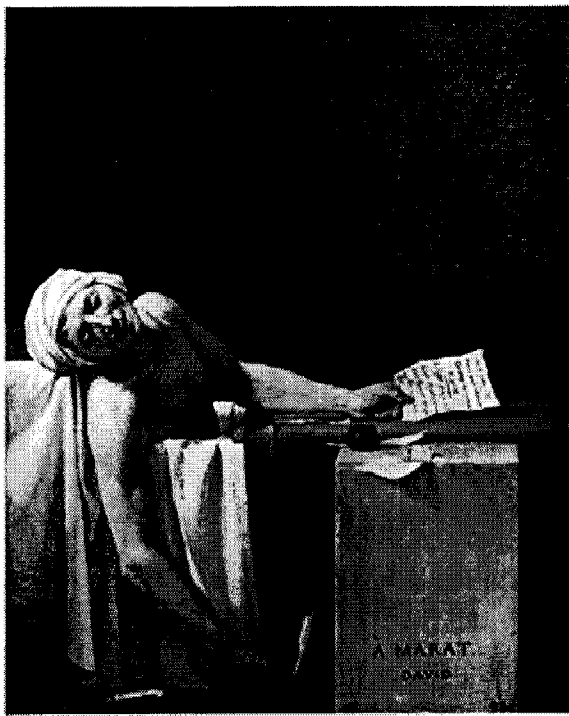
David's *Death of Marat* renders Marat soaking in the famed medicinal bath in which Charlotte Corday stabbed him. Despite the disfiguring skin condition that forced Marat to use these baths, David chose rather to portray Marat as a healthy young man, thereby adding to the idealized image of the man. Furthermore, in this painting David allows Marat's position, head upon shoulder and left arm sliding to the ground, to bear a striking resemblance to the traditional images of Christ just removed from the cross.[66] The expression on his face shows suffering yet remains softened, similar to Christ's. Such similarities to the divine figure conjure up thoughts of his compassionate and intimate love for the people, allowing David to achieve a moral purpose within his painting.[67] The comparison also gives Marat an air of profound greatness, idolizing him as someone worth being emulated by the public.

The greatness of Marat is also alluded to by David's use of space. Rather than paint Marat in a traditional space such as the room in which he died, David chose to place the scene in a "supernaturally darkened space," void of any detail except that in the forefront.[68] By removing Marat from any classically defined space, David suggests a sort of greatness that cannot be confined to any tangible setting, but rather transcends both space and time. The supreme greatness of Marat imparted by this painting is meant to create reverence within David's audience, not only for Marat, but also for other fallen martyrs of the revolution, as well as for the ideals of the revolution itself.

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[66] Ibid., 88.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

Placed beside the bath is a writing desk that Marat had used just prior to his death to work on state business. In his hand Marat holds a letter from Corday, his murderer, begging for assistance and supposedly indicting numerous enemies of the republic. While Marat no doubt worked on patriot business up until the time of death, David goes out of his way to emphasize this point, by illustrating Marat with pen and paper in hand. By doing so, David depicts Marat as a man dedicated to the state literally up to his death, and suggests that all good patriots should be willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the republic.

Ironically, David's *Death of Marat* might have unintentionally worked as propaganda to influence the very government that commissioned the piece. Hung in the meeting hall of the Convention next to its companion piece *Death of Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau,* depicting the death of another martyred hero of the French Revolution, David's *Death of Marat* sent out an inescapable message to the remaining Convention members: kill or be killed. Each Convention member faced the very real possibility of meeting his death through an assassin or the guillotine should his political views fall out of favor with the revolutionary crowd.[69] The painting *Death of Marat,* staring down from directly behind the speaker's desk, served as a very real reminder that no individual was safe from suspicion, and inspired Convention members to deal ruthlessly with their enemies, lest someone target them first.

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[69] Dowd, "Art as National Propaganda in the French Revolution," 532-546.

## Allegorical Painting

Out of all paintings created during the revolution, approximately one third fit under the category of allegory.[70] Such a relatively high percentage is significant given that just prior to the revolution enlightened thinkers had urged painters to shift away from the abstraction employed heavily in allegory, arguing that one should not have to struggle to discern the meaning of a painting, but rather a painting should express ideas clearly through pictures. Artists defended their work, claiming that allegorical painting, by allowing for interpretation, united people whose interests, concerns, and values might otherwise conflict.[71] Rather than present the audience with a concrete event, allegorical paintings allowed individuals to adapt the situations they observed to their own lives, thus making the principles of the revolution their own, rather than merely mimicking the heroics of people with whom they perhaps had little in common. Yet, it remained undeniable that the open-ended nature of allegories also increased the likelihood that the broad, uneducated populace of France would misinterpret or altogether overlook artists' ideas encoded within their works.[72]

Such risks would theoretically make allegory an unlikely choice for governmental propaganda, considering propaganda's sole purpose during the French Revolution was to mold the ideas of the French citizenry so as to create one homogenous body of thought. Allegory allowed for multiple interpretations, which posed a potential threat to the French government's desire to promote patriotic ideals. Thus the ambiguity of allegorical

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[70] Wintermute, *1789: French Art During the Revolution*, 31.
[71] Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 39.
[72]Ibid., 38.

paintings, one of the art form's strengths in promoting it as a means of propaganda, also acted as its most prominent weakness.

Despite the risk of misinterpretation artists continued producing allegorical paintings, combining both classical Greco-Roman symbols and newly developed patriotic symbols to illustrate both the ideals and events of the revolution. The conservative politics of older artists more closely associated with the Old Regime offers one possible explanation for the continued use of allegory in historical painting. Considerable correlation exists between older, more conservative artists and the choice of allegory. Similar parallels appear between the progressive politics of a younger generation of artists and their portrayal of the revolution through "eye-witness" renderings of events.[73]

Undoubtedly, some artists chose allegories to illustrate their views of the revolution rather than straightforward depiction so as to protect themselves from the increasingly radical politics of the revolution. The ambiguity of symbolism combined with the neutral mantle of classicism allowed more conservative artists to convey the appearance of supporting the revolution without too deeply investing themselves in any particular political philosophy. [74] Ambiguity and neutrality also ensured that their works would not quickly fall out of favor once regimes changed, a very serious fear given the violent nature of politics under the Terror. Younger artists, on the other hand, eager to commemorate the heroic deeds of fellow patriots through contemporary history pieces, often ran the risk of death for their works as revolutionary factions quickly replaced one another, making the heroes of yesterday the enemies of today.

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[73] Wintermute, *1789: French Art During the Revolution*, 31.
[74] Ibid.

Another possible explanation for allegory's continued presence, and one more likely to be endorsed by the new national government, was allegory's ability to invent tradition out of scratch. The government during the French Revolution, having already displaced many of the traditions of France with roots in either the monarchy or Catholic church, looked to allegorical painting as a means of creating new social practices, ceremonies, and rituals reflective of revolutionary thought.[75] By taking classical symbols and infusing them with new meaning, the revolutionary government thus began using art as propaganda to manufacture a new history for France, as well as to fashion new traditions compatible with revolutionary principles, which would appear to be founded in French "history."

Classical symbols gave allegorical works an air of historical legitimacy by tying the French Republic with the Greco-Roman period. Similar to the neo-classical movement in American art, connecting to such democratic time periods was particularly appealing to revolutionaries recently released from the tyranny of monarchy and entering into a new government based upon representation. Heavily used classical symbols included the laurel wreath, sign of civic virtue; the hydra, symbol of a many-headed problem; the club, sign of liberty; the broken yolk, sign of freedom; the ax, ender of slavery; and various other images closely tied to freedom and liberty.[76]
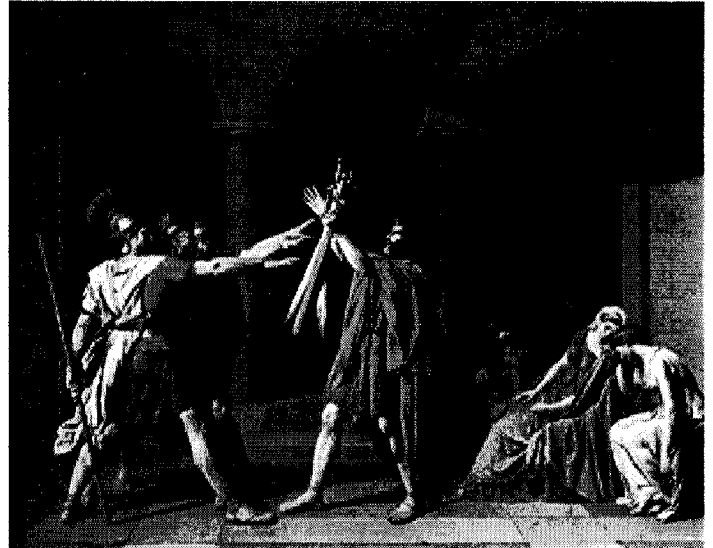
The Phrygian cap, or liberty cap, a symbol of freedom worn by revolutionaries, also had its origination in Greco-Roman tradition, where former slaves had donned it as a sign of emancipation. The key principles of the revolution, personified as goddesses from Greco-Roman tradition, also became prominent symbolism for artists. Liberty, the

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[75] Ibid.
[76] Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution*, 41.

Republic, Virtue, Equality, and other esteemed ideals of the revolution all appear in allegorical works as women. However, it is important to note that female allegories aimed only to personify abstract virtues not to depict living subjects. Ironically, the principles of the revolution, expressed so clearly through the female metaphor, enfranchised only French men.

Some artists, rather than depending heavily upon symbols themselves, chose to depict classical stories that held some sort of symbolic connection with contemporary history. David's *Oath of the Horatii* remains one of the most recognizable examples of allegorical painting to date. Created in 1784, five years before the revolution began, *Oath of the Horatii* was later praised by patriots as being a premonition of events to come. On the surface, the painting depicts the three Romans, the Horatii brothers, swearing an oath to their father to fight against the Curiatii, a family in the enemy camp. However, on a deeper level the scene demonstrates a fierce loyalty to the state, as well as unity. David used lighting and color to draw the audience's attention to the action in the forefront, thus focusing on the men. Thus the painting emphasizes the importance of patriotic zeal, even if that requires the sacrifice of one's life for the good of the state. Understandably, the revolutionary government wanted to adopt David's painting as a propagandistic tool to inspire patriotism among the French.

Furthermore, the painting took on even more symbolic meaning following the

Tennis Court Oath in 1789. *Oath of the Horatii* was quickly adopted as an allegory to the

Tennis Court Oath, and David was heralded for his ability to symbolize both the patriotic

zeal of the French, as well as the dedication of national representatives to forming a more

democratic government. Striking similarities exist between the both the *Oath of Horatii*

and the *Tennis Court Oath,* particularly in the upward thrust of motion in both paintings,

suggesting unity.


## Artistic Propaganda's Yields in France

Surprising to note is the fact that, despite the requests of the National Assembly to

produce revolutionary themed art and the willingness of artists to join the revolutionary

movement, few revolutionary paintings actually ever made it to completion. Indeed,

revolutionary themed art made up only 5.1 percent of art produced between 1789 and

1799.[77] Such a low yield, in part, may be traced back to a lack of patronage. The national

government, already severely in debt after inheriting the finances of the previous regime,

could ill afford to commission a large number of works itself. Capable of commissioning

only a few large works of particular significance, the government often chose artists

already well respected for their talents, such as Jacques Louis David, to fulfill such a

momentous task as portraying the revolution. Though a few contests were held in which

artists were encouraged to enter patriotic works in exchange for the prize of government

sponsorship, the awards were too few to provide much assistance to the large numbers of

artists.

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[77] Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution,* 237.

Consequently, it was left to private individuals and clubs to support the work of revolutionary artists. While such private sponsorship occasionally occurred, as with the Jacobin Club of Paris' original intent to commission David to illustrate the Tennis Court Oath, such individual interest remained far from mainstream. The general preference for art among both the upper and middle classes continued to lean toward themes outside the revolution, such as portraits and landscapes, forcing most artists to adhere to non-patriotic topics in order to sustain an adequate living. Not until the revolution entered the Terror was real pressure applied by the government to conscript the fine arts in support of revolutionary ideals.[78]

While monetary realities contributed to the low proliferation of patriotic paintings, the quick-changing nature of French politics during the revolution unquestionably contributed also to the less than desirable numbers. The risks of getting too closely involved in politics or idealizing some revolutionary hero whose popularity might prove fleeting were very high.[79] Political figures waxed and waned rapidly as revolutionary ideas evolved in radicalism. The quick transitions between regimes often endangered artists caught painting subjects previously dictated by the deposed factions. One such example of artists' precarious situation during the revolution occurred when several artists commissioned by the Committee of Public Safety fell under suspicion following the end of the Reign of Terror. Many artists were arrested for their connection with the fallen bloc, including the nationally celebrated David, and at least seven lesser known artists were even so unfortunate as to be executed, including mayor of Paris Jean

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[78] Leith, *The Idea of Art as Propaganda in France 1750-1799,* 104.
[79] Ibid., 145.

Baptiste Fleuriot-Lescot.[80] Naturally, artists would be hesitant to complete works glorifying historical events and deeds during a time of political instability. Even those who had won commissions from the French government for their patriotic sketches often turned to less politically charged subjects for their final projects.

## Overall Conclusions

Just as the American and French Revolutions differed vastly between themselves in execution and intensity, so too did artistic propaganda on either side. Aside from overarching themes such as liberty, equality, and justice, as well as general tendency to mimic Greco-Roman imagery to symbolize those ideas, such as the Phrygian hat and laurel wreath, propagandist art in both countries share little in common. This is largely due to the disparity between the two countries in both artistic and printing ability. America lacked the strong artistic tradition that made powerful revolutionary painting in France possible, and possessed little of the technical skill found in the works of professional artists in France. Furthermore, while French revolutionaries churned out an overwhelming number of political cartoons and pornographies prior to and during the war, political images were a rarity in America due to their expense, particularly as supplies dwindled during the war. Yet, regardless of the differences in technique and skill, revolutionaries from both sides successfully used art as a means of influencing the populace in their respective countries.

Despite the low numbers of propagandistic paintings ultimately completed in revolutionary France, and the low numbers of politically driven art altogether in revolutionary America, art nonetheless factored as an important and influential

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[80] Dowd, "The French Revolution and the Painters," 127-148.

contributor to revolutionary thought. Acting as propaganda, the artistic styles of caricature, painting, and pornography in France, each served as tools through which artists desiring to impact the world around them could make known their political views, while catering to the individual tastes of various social classes in both countries. The study of art as propaganda during the American and French Revolutions demonstrates clearly the impact of the political events upon art and vice versa, testifying that the study of cultural factors is just as essential to fully understanding either revolution as a thorough examination of political and economic factors.

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