Reframing the Republic: Images and Art in Post-Revolutionary America

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Reframing the Republic:
Images and Art in Post-Revolutionary America

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of History
University at Albany, State University of New York
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in History and
graduation from The Honors College.

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May, 2018.
Abstract

Following the American Revolution the United States had to prove they deserved to be a player on the European world stage. Images were one method the infant nation used to make this claim and gain recognition from European powers. By examining early American portraits, eighteenth and nineteenth century plays, and American and European propaganda this paper will argue that images were used to show the United States as a world power. This argument will be presented with a particular emphasis on classic motifs and Republican imagery. By evoking the Golden Age of both Rome and Greece the United States was declaring it would be a new republic worthy of regard and a role in an Atlantic World. Customarily this topic is examined through politics, diplomacy, or treaties, this paper takes a more cultural approach.
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Introduction

As the British soldiers were approaching the United States Capitol, the occupants of the White House were rushing to evacuate to safer territory. Before she would leave, Dolley Madison insisted on securing a copy of Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington. As tensions were rising and danger approaching the eight-foot-tall portrait would not be removed so easily. The canvas had to be hacked away from the frame still hanging on the wall before it was swiftly rolled up and taken away with other valuables from the White House that would soon be engulfed in flames.¹ Shortly thereafter, the British entered Washington and set the White House on fire. Dolley Madison recorded the events of this night in a letter she sent to her sister shortly after reaching safety beyond the capitol city and the flames that had destroyed her current home. She wrote that tensions were high and she was urged to “hasten [her] departure... [but she] insist[ed] on waiting until a large portrait of Gen. Washington [was] secured...”²

This dramatic event was occurring at a vulnerable time for the young United States of America. It was the War of 1812 and the newly independent country was still trying to find its foothold on the wider world stage. Wars were fought by soldiers and colonists to establish power and reputation, but art fought its own battles in the Atlantic World. Dolley Madison felt that the portrait of George Washington was worth saving, despite great personal risk. George

Washington’s portrait was a symbol of the young Republic and how America wished to be perceived by well-established and powerful European nations. The American Revolution was an unprecedented event and although it was a success, there were more difficulties to overcome once the battlefield cleared. The United States had to prove that they could survive as an independent nation and had to legitimize the outcome of the Revolution. This paper will present this search for legitimacy through culture and the arts, with a particular emphasis on classical images. Both the United States and Great Britain evoked the Roman Republic but adopted different facets of Ancient Rome. Portraiture, plays and other cultural creations were vehicles by which messages could be sent to a population and foreign governments. America had to prove to Europe they were justified in joining the powers of the world and art was one of the methods they used. The United States was endeavoring to create an identity separate from the British, but it can be observed in the portraiture and plays of the early Republic that some of the characteristics of these art forms were rather European in nature.

Using European techniques and traditions was a way for America to prove it was on equal footing with long standing European countries. In creating the image of an independent nation, the United States evoked the Ancient Roman Republic. Although the Roman Empire was gone, America’s independence proved that the Republic was back. Britain would also allude to Ancient Rome in their images and artwork.

Historians tend to agree that America was on uncertain footing immediately after the Revolutionary War, and that different paths were taken to ensure that the long-awaited independence was not lost. However, focus has been on the technological or political methods
used to legitimize the new nation. Gordon S. Wood’s *Empire of Liberty*³ and Eliga Gould’s *Among the Powers of the Earth*⁴ discuss these subjects. Wood also addresses the debate over what type of government should be formed and the question as to whether or not a Republic was a feasible reality.⁵ There is a greater emphasis on the economic and political aspects of America emerging as an influential entity that could be taken seriously. Gould’s book focuses on the roles of slavery and treaty making in the United States fighting for recognition from Europe. He pushes against the notion of the United States being a result of self-determination. He illustrates this idea by focusing on the legal aspects, that American freedoms were predicated on what Europe allowed.⁶

There has been a recent push in Early American and Revolutionary History to create a transnational history of the American Revolution. Historians including Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, Alan Taylor, David Armitage and Eliga Gould, have taken a transnational approach to writing about the American Revolution.⁷ In addition to Eliga Gould’s work, there have been other books on how the United States established themselves in the world. David Armitage has taken a similar approach to Gould. Armitage has also taken a legal approach to this topic.⁸ Martin Brückner chose a more geographic approach to dissect American legitimacy

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during this time. He looked at maps to explore how the United States and Europe saw themselves and each other after the American Revolution. 9

In this paper, a similar approach will be taken. Rather than treaty making, the focus will be on art and culture. Treaty and map making have been shown to show the establishment of the United States, but far less work has been done in how art was involved in that process. In broad histories of the American Revolution and the era just after the revolution, there is very little focus on the influence of art in America’s creation. The arts might be mentioned in passing under the heading of culture in some books, Alan Taylor’s American Revolutions, for example, 10 but seldom is art the focus of America’s founding. Taylor does declare that although Americans were trying “to reject Old World ways, [they] still longed to impress Europeans.”11 Richard Bushman has delved into the material history surrounding the establishment of the United States12 and Susan E. Klepp dedicated one chapter of her book, Revolutionary Conceptions, to portraits during the era of the American Revolution. Her research, however, is focused on the evolution of portraits of women. She used art to describe the change in perceptions of women and what they were most valued for, child birth or childrearing. Some of the changes she observes are parallel to some of the shifts that will be discussed here later, in particular the depiction of women to reflect their responsibility in embracing republican virtues and passing

them on to their sons. Jane Kamensky also took a more cultural route to examining the American Revolution and its aftermath. Her book, *A Revolution in Color*, focuses on the life of John Singleton Copley, an American born painter who spent the majority of his life in Great Britain. Kamensky particularly looks at Copley’s desire for British patronage, and his influence on the British art world.

This paper will echo Kamensky’s argument, Copley was seeking British recognition, just as America more broadly was seeking European recognition. This paper will look at the portrait Dolley Madison saved from the White House in 1814, as well as other portraits of the time, also plays written in the years following the American Revolution, as vehicles used by the infant government to thrust America into the Atlantic world as an entity to be taken seriously by Europe, the “powers of the earth.”

Paintings, plays, propaganda, architecture and currency were methods carried out to justify how the early American Republic belonged on a European world stage. These cultural creations expressed what the United States wanted as a young nation and how they were responded to by European powers. The United States sought a place on the European stage and artistic expression as well as republican imagery allowed them to fight for equal standing.

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A Tale of Two Georges

American portraiture experienced a shift between the years before and after the American Revolution. Before the war, American portraits looked much like British portraits. Figures were painted in formal poses and if the subject of the portrait had military ties they would be depicted in full uniform with a sword at their side, or very near. Classicism was another eighteenth century development that can be observed in European paintings. This movement was a venture towards the Roman ideal, and classic images. For the British, these classic motifs were a method of reflecting their perceived superiority among European powers, they were the new Roman Empire. Backgrounds of paintings in particular were affected by this movement towards evoking Roman roots. People began to have their portraits painted outside or with columns within the frame.16

Portraits of women changed in particular. In Revolutionary Conceptions Susan Klepp devotes a chapter to female portraits changing to focus on republican motherhood. This was the idea that women were know responsible for centralizing republican virtues and passing them onto their sons, who would become the leaders of the United States in the future. 17

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17 Ibid.
Figure 1
Charles Willson Peale, George Washington as Colonel in the Virginia Regiment, 1772, Mount Vernon

Figure 2
Johann Zoffany, George III, 1771, The Royal Collection Trust
Early portraits of George Washington share some traits with portraits of Great Britain’s George III painted at the same time. Charles Willson Peale’s 1772 portrait of George Washington (Fig.1) and Johann Zoffany’s 1771 portrait of George III (Fig. 2) exemplify this observation. Both figures are painted in their military uniforms with their swords within the frame of the portrait. Washington is depicted outdoors, as many other British military leaders were depicted, such as Thomas Gage and John Burgoyne.\(^\text{18}\)

In the 1790’s we see a change in each figures’ depiction. In the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington (Fig. 3), there is a greater simplicity in the clothing. Washington is painted in a black suit, a common outfit for him while performing presidential duties,\(^\text{19}\) with no army regalia on his person. He is shown in an indoor setting, surrounded by papers and his quill and ink close at hand in place of the sword in earlier portraits. Also near his right hand is the figure of an eagle carved into the table. He is surrounded by symbols of the nation, but the background of the painting in general seems more indicative of a British portrait. The walls of the room are draped in red, and an elaborate chair placed behind him.\(^\text{20}\) There are many other portraits of George III where the canvas is saturated in the color red, a color frequently associated with royalty. Benjamin West, and Thomas Gainsborough frequently included a concentration of red in their depictions of the English King.\(^\text{21}\) This portrait is showing not just a military leader but the leader of a nation. The image evokes power, and influence, two things

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\(^\text{21}\) Benjamin West, *George III*, 1779, Royal Collection Trust.
that would be necessary to prove the United States could participate in the world that they were living in. Imitation is, after all, the greatest form of flattery, and the colors and composition of this painting are European in nature. Stuart trained for a time in Great Britain and so drew on his experiences there to portray Washington’s power in a European fashion.\textsuperscript{22} The Lansdowne Portrait was modeled after portraits like that of other European monarchs, like Louis XIV.\textsuperscript{23} The Lansdowne Portrait and the portrait of Louis XIV have similar postures. Both are standing erect with a slight pivot and the right hand elevated, loosely gesturing to symbols of their power. Washington’s posture is modeled after that of a Roman orator.\textsuperscript{24} Ancient Roman statues have the same stance. “The Orator” (also known as “L’ Arringatore”) for example, boast the same erect figure with one arm outstretched, and open hand.\textsuperscript{25}

Although George Washington is being depicted in more civilian clothing than George III is, the fact he was a military leader is not forgotten. He is shown to be grasping a sword in his left hand, just as King George is doing, which alludes to Washington’s military history. However, the sword is a ceremonial one, rather than militaristic one. Also on the table are two books titled, \textit{Federalist} and \textit{Journal of Congress}. He has decided to place books that will evoke his political role in the creation of the United States and his role as leader of the young nation.\textsuperscript{26} An inkwell is also sitting on the table. The inkwell could perhaps be a symbol of the legislation created by and supported by Washington as president, Jay’s Treaty in particular. Jay’s Treaty

\textsuperscript{22} Gilbert Stuart, \textit{George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)}, 1796, National Portrait Gallery.
was signed in 1795 and led to the United States and Great Britain entering into a peaceful trade agreement for a time. Great Britain’s ratification of the treaty could be interpreted as recognition of the United States’ standing as an independent nation, which was gaining power and autonomy.

Figure 3

Another portrait of George Washington with more European traits is John Trumbull’s 1790 portrait (Fig. 4). This portrait shows Washington looking upwards, this pose is a popular stance commonly seen in royal portraiture.\textsuperscript{27} The pose is used in Thomas Lawrence’s portrait of George III created in 1818 (Fig. 5). By using these postures, the painters and their subjects, in this case George Washington, are declaring that they deserve to be considered on the same level as European leaders. In addition to Thomas Lawrence’s portrait of George III, Benjamin West\textsuperscript{28} and Thomas Gainsborough\textsuperscript{29} used the same pose with George III gazing upwards.

The Lansdowne Portrait and Thomas Lawrence’s portrait are also similar in setting. Both show interiors with red curtains drapes behind the figure in the forefront and more red fabric drapes over the tables next to George Washington and/or George III. The table is being gestured to or touched by the subject of the portrait, and has items on it, that reflect their values or status. George III is wearing the regalia from the Order of the Garter, the hat on the table next to him is a part of that regalia.\textsuperscript{30} The Order of the Garter was, and still is today, a prestigious order of chivalry dating back to the fourteenth century, with the sovereign of England always being a member. It’s a role steeped in monarchical tradition and one integral to George III’s identity as the King of England. George Washington was attempting to reflect a similar gravity to his own country, and its importance in the wider world.

Both the United States and Britain used the structure to evoke Roman tradition and declare themselves as the next Rome. The column is also permanent, stable physical structure.

\textsuperscript{27} Sir Thomas Lawrence, \textit{George III}, 1818, Royal Collection Trust.
\textsuperscript{28} Benjamin West, \textit{George III}, 1779, Royal Collection Trust.
\textsuperscript{29} Thomas Gainsborough, \textit{George III}, 1780, Royal Collection Trust.
\textsuperscript{30} Thomas Lawrence, \textit{George III}, 1818, Royal Collection Trust
By adding a column to the background of the portrait Stuart is affirming that the United States is going to survive its infancy and establish itself as a concrete power.

Figure 4

Figure 5
Thomas Lawrence, *George III*, c. 1818, The Royal Collection Trust
George Washington was also frequently compared to specific historical figures of Ancient Rome. The most notable being Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus was a statesman and military leader in the Roman Republic in the fifth century B.C. He has retired to his farm when Rome found itself in peril and needed his military leadership. He put down his plow and returned to power. When all was well again, he resigned his reinstated power and returned once again to his farm and plow.\textsuperscript{31} Cincinnatus became a paragon of roman virtues, especially those of masculinity, humility and civic virtue.

In 1785 the French sculptor, Jean-Antoine Houdon, was commissioned by the Virginia General Assembly to create a statue of George Washington as Cincinnatus (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{32} Houdon traditionally created statues wearing Roman fashions, but George Washington expressed concerns that he would look more like Caesar than the modest Cincinnatus and insisted the statue have contemporary clothing. Houdon acquiesced, and the statue was created with George Washington in military uniform.\textsuperscript{33} Washington a plow is also carved into the statue. This addition is meant to be a more explicit reference to the story of Cincinnatus. By creating this statue, Washington was being celebrated for holding the same values Cincinnatus was celebrated for. Less than a decade later the comparison to Cincinnatus would be further cemented when George Washington left the presidency and retired to the country and his own

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
quiet life. The statue is now housed in the Virginia State Capitol Rotunda, which was designed by Thomas Jefferson, and modeled after a Roman temple in France called the Maison Carée. 34

Figure 6

Figure 7

George III was also depicted in stone with Roman motifs. In 1789 John Bacon created a monument to George III. Titled *George III and the River Thames* (Fig. 7), the creation consists of Neptune, or the Thames, across the bottom of the structure, and George III in a Roman toga flanked by a lion and the stern of a Roman ship, characterized by the ram attached to the ship. The ram would have been used to hit an enemy ship and create a hole in its hull. This evocation of Rome once leans towards military prowess and defense. 35 The lion is also a Roman symbol, one that will be examined more closely in a later section of this paper.

**Lions, Snakes and Roosters… Oh My**

Propaganda’s role in justifying the United States’ role in a European world was perhaps more obvious than that of the art and theatre world. Political cartoons could have more direct messages. These cartoons were created after the Revolutionary War and up to the War of 1812, and elaborated on how the United States was perceived by European powers and how the United States viewed itself relative to the rest of Europe. To properly interpret these pieces of propaganda, one must know the different representations of countries that were popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The United States might be represented by an eagle, a rattlesnake, a Native American person, or Columbia. The rattlesnake was taken from Benjamin Franklin’s *Join or Die* poster created before the start of the American Revolution in 1754, depicting the 13 Colonies as a

rattlesnake.\textsuperscript{36} The eagle became an American symbol in 1782, and became the national emblem in 1789. The eagle was chosen because it represented freedom, courage, the eagle was indigenous to North America, the eagle was also a popular Roman symbol. Roman symbols appear a great deal in the propaganda of the time, including Columbia, a female personification of the United States whose name is derived from Christopher Columbus. In the tradition of other European countries having pseudo Roman goddesses representing them, another example of major powers using classic motifs, Colombia was created for the English colonies and kept after the Revolution. \textsuperscript{37} One last personification of the United States in political cartoons is Brother Jonathon. Brother Jonathon is a predecessor of Uncle Sam, and is drawn wearing knee britches, and a somber coat. The character was born during the American Revolution, and named after Jonathon Trumbull, the governor of Connecticut and a friend of George Washington.\textsuperscript{38}

The British had their own symbols. Frequently the Lion would be used to depict Great Britain. The Lion was prominently displayed on the British Royal Coat of Arms.\textsuperscript{39} The lion (another classic symbol) is thought to embody courage and nobility and could have been selected as national symbol due to Richard II’s (the Lionhearted) use of the lion in his personal banner. Norman lions were used on banners, and the barbary lions kept in the Tower of London menagerie. \textsuperscript{40} The British also had their equivalent of Columbia, which was Britannia.

\textsuperscript{36} Donald H. Cresswell, \textit{The Revolution in Drawings and Prints} (Library of Congress, 1975).
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
had been used to represent Great Britain for centuries before the American Revolution started and is frequently depicted with a trident and a shield (alluding to Britain’s naval prowess later on). 41 John Bull is another character that is used to symbolize Great Britain. John Bull was created in the early eighteenth century, by a Scottish doctor, John Arbuthnot, who created political cartoons as well. John Bull is normally represented as an overweight man, dressed in the clothes of the early Regency Period. His plump figure is meant to signify prosperity and good health, but sometimes his image was used by other countries as a sign of greed and gluttony. 42

Other European nations also had stereotypical symbols in these political cartoons. France and Spain were sometimes depicted as a Rooster and Spaniel respectively, and the Dutch were pugs. The image of the rooster dates from the middle ages. The region of modern day France was called Gaul, and the inhabitants were the Gallus. Gallus was also the Latin for rooster, leading to France adopting the creature as an unofficial symbol. 43 Spain is often represented as a spaniel, from the French term espaigneul, which translates to Spanish dog. 44 Holland made the pug its national animal in 1572, after the Prince of Orange was alerted to the presence of an assassin, by his pet pug named Pompey. 45

There are many political cartoons, that date from the 1780’s to the War of 1812, that depict the United States with other European countries. The earlier pieces were made by

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
European artists, and the cartoons from the War of 1812 are American. These cartoons show the United States on the same side as other European countries and on equal footing with some of them.

Two political cartoons printed in 1781 and 1782 are *The British Lion Engaging the Four Powers* (Fig. 8) and *The Balance of Power* (Fig. 9). Both pieces were printed in London by British printers but even though the cartoons are meant to celebrate British superiority and strength against other European powers, they also show that the British see American as being equal to countries like Spain, France and Holland. The first cartoon shows a spaniel (Spain), rooster (France), rattlesnake (America), and pug (Holland) lined up on one side facing a lion (Britain). The lion is on the opposite side of the picture as the other countries, but rather than having American behind or below the other European symbols, the snake is lined up with the other animals. America is shown to be just as powerful as Spain, France, and Holland, not as a weaker country being taken care of by the others.  

The second cartoon does the same thing. The same countries are shown on a scale. Britannia is by herself on one side of the scale and America, France, Spain, and Holland are packed together on the other side of the scale. Despite four countries being on the right side of the scale, the scale is farther down on Britain’s side. Great Britain is declaring its superiority, but has put America at Spain, France, and Holland’s level.

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46 Ibid.
Figure 8

*The British Lion engaging the Four Powers, 1782, The Revolution in Drawings and Prints, 361.*

Figure 9

*The Balance of Power, 1781. The Revolution in Drawings and Prints, 338.*
In 1782, the cartoon *America Triumphant and Britannia in Distress* (Fig. 10) was published by an American cartoonist. The scene shows “American sitting... with the Flag of the United States displayed over her head... inviting the ships of all nations to partaker of her commerce.” Britannia on the other hand, is “weeping at the loss of the trade of America” and her ultimate defeat in the long war that has finally ended. America is the victorious, and powerful figure, with the upper hand and controlling something the rest of Europe wants to join in on; her prosperous trade. The cartoon is bolstering America’s economic potential and how that potential will put America on equal footing with the other nations whose ships are shown in the background sailing toward America.

![Figure 10](image_url)

*Figure 10

*America Triumphant and Britannia in Distress, 1782. The Library of Congress.*

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.
The differences between the figures of Britannia in *The Balance of Power* and of America in *America Triumphant and Britannia in Distress* are also indicative of the different ways in which the United States and Great Britain evoked Ancient Rome. In *The Balance of Power* Britannia is shown with a helmet and sword. Military prowess is emphasized and Britannia looks ready to go to battle with the countries across from her. In contrast, America in the latter image is shown with a Romanesque personification but without the military accessories. America is holding a liberty cap, and holding an olive branch in her hand. In the distance ships from Europe are approaching the shores of the United States to pursue commercial interests. The America flag is flying proudly and an angel is drawn across the scene blessing the venture.\(^{50}\)

Political cartoons from the War of 1812 also dealt with the position of America in relation to other European powers. The War of 1812 was the final stage for America to prove its mettle and determine that they belonged on a European dominated world stage. During the years preceding the war, the British began to treat the United States like their colony in some ways. The British had established a blockade against the French (as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe), and in order to sustain the blockade the British Navy turned to impressment. This involved the British taking American men and forcing them into the Royal Navy. It was a practice the British also took advantage of during the era of the American Revolution. But with the eventual victory for the United States at the conclusion of the War of

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1812, the Era of Good Feelings followed and America affirmed its place alongside the rest of Europe.

Figure 11

*A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull, 1813.* The Library of Congress.

The cartoon *A Boxing Match, or Another Bloody Nose for John Bull,* (Fig. 11) is one such cartoon. This was created in Philadelphia in 1813 by William Charles, a Scottish born printer who had moved to the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century. This cartoon features John Bull with blood pouring from his nose and Brother Jonathon, still standing tall, no worse for wear. John Bull says, “Stop, Stop Stop Brother Johnathan, or I shall fall with the loss of blood - I thought to have been too heavy for you - But I must acknowledge your superior skill - Two blows to my one! - And so well directed too! Mercy mercy on me, how does this
happen!!" to which Brother Jonathon responds, “Ha - Ah Johnny! you thought yourself a Boxer did you! - I'll let you know we are an Enterprizing Nation, and ready to meet you with equal force any day.” The cartoon is celebrating the American naval victory against the British ship the Boxer against the American ship the Enterprise, both ships are depicted in the background of the cartoon, just behind Brother Jonathon. America is declaring its worthiness as a naval power, against a historically formidable naval force.

There are a few other pieces of propaganda that depict the United States on a similar plane as other parts of Europe and the world. These selections have a European/ British bias to them and are less accepting of the United States being independent and equal to Europe. The first, The Continents Surround the Goddess of Geography (Fig. 12), printed as the title page in The European Magazine, features five figures standing around a platform with a throne on it. Sitting on the throne is the Goddess of Geography and surrounding her are four personifications of the continents; Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. The most prominent of these four figures is Europe. She is standing on the right side of the Goddess of Geography and placed slightly in front of Geography. She is standing in the light, with her head held high. Asia is the second most prominent representation. She also placed the slightest bit in front of Geography, but on her left side, and sitting near her feet, as a child would. She does not have the same stature or pride that is displayed on Europe.

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
The figures of Africa and America are both placed closer to the background than the foreground. Africa is behind Asia and the lower half of her body is in shadow. America is represented by a Native American and is completely in shadow. America is also placed behind all the others, and even behind the throne Geography is sitting on. This picture was created in 1785 in Europe, and while it may recognize America as a continent like Europe, America is not prominently displayed, despite having defeated a European super power two years before.  

The next drawing was the image on the title page of the European Magazine, a London based magazine founded by James Perry, from 1782 to 1789 (Fig. 13). In the center of the image a woman the Goddess Europe is stationed. She has her arms outstretched so she can shine her light on the three smaller infant like figures below her. These three infants represent

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55 Ibid, 370.
America, Africa and Asia. All three are seated at Europe’s feet, just as Asia was in *The Continents Surround the Goddess of Geography*. Drawn above the figure of Europe is an awning of sorts, with a lion and unicorn featured on the top.\(^{56}\) The lion and the unicorn are both prominent components of the British coat of arms. The lion coming from the English coat of arms and the unicorn from the Scottish coat of arms before the union of England and Scotland.\(^{57}\) This picture infantilizes the other continents and separates them as being other to Europe.

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\(^{56}\) Ibid.

The Silver Standard

There were more Roman symbols used in places Americans would see every day; currency and the Great Seal of the United States of America. The United States and Great Britain both used Roman symbols but selected different ones to represent their governments. Today American currency has the portraits of notable presidents on it. This change was an update created in the nineteenth century. ⁵⁸ In Post-Revolutionary America currency had Romanesque personifications of Liberty as well as eagles. The personification of Liberty was the American equivalent to the figure of Britannia. Britannia was a personification of Great Britain, often depicted in a Roman toga. ⁵⁹ The version of Liberty used on early American coins was based off of a sketch by Gilbert Stuart, the same Gilbert Stuart who painted the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington. The bust of Liberty was pressed into coins, she has a liberty cap on. The liberty cap itself was a symbol adopted from Roman history. The shape of the cap was taken from the headwear worn by freed slaves in Ancient Rome. At the end of a manumission ceremony the cap would be adopted by the newly freed individual as a sign of their newly acquired liberty. ⁶⁰ The reverse of these coins would show eagles, either in flight or similar to the Great Seal. ⁶¹

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Congress adopted the Great Seal in 1782 and the chosen design featured an eagle with an olive branch in one talon and a bundle of 13 arrows in the other talon. The eagle was an important symbol in Ancient Rome. Also called an aquila, the eagle was frequently used as a military image for legions. The animal was used in ancient mythology, as the bird that carried Jupiter’s thunderbolts. The eagle on the Great Seal is an eagle displayed, that is its wings and talons are outstretched. Royal heraldry using eagles usually use this specific form, which is meant to denote the role of protector. The eagle was not depicted as an explicit military aggressor, the lion was an altogether different story.

Ancient Rome also adopted the lion as a symbol of their strength and military prowess. As Rome was expanding and conquering neighboring territory, it used the statue “Lion

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62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Attacking a Horse” (Fig. 15) as a symbol of its achievements. The statue shows a lion devouring a horse, its teeth are bared and its body is posed over the equestrienne figure, dominating the weaker animal. The British Coat of Arms has included a lion since the Middle Ages. It is a symbol of courage, valor, and strength. 65

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Setting the Stage for a Republic

In Philadelphia, across the street from Congress Hall was one of the first theatres built in the United States, the Chestnut Street Theatre. The Chestnut Street Theatre was created in 1793 and based on British theatres.\(^6^6\) In addition to being physically built according to British theatres, specifically the Theatre Royal in Bath (both buildings had the same arches and columns indicative of Georgian architecture), many of the techniques used in producing plays were European. French lighting techniques were popular within the theatre.\(^6^7\) While there was an effort to create an American theatre, the majority of the plays performed on American soil were European in origin. In the early 1790’s only two plays, out of 160, performed in Philadelphia were written by Americans.\(^6^8\)

Before the American Revolution, the theatre in the New World was very European. Just as American portraits of the time were rather European in nature, so was the theatre. The plays, the actors, and the designers for the most part came from Europe to perform in American cities. The Britishness of the theatre was a contributing factor in the prohibition of theatre during the Revolutionary War. It was declared to be a pursuit of “Extravagance and Dissipation”\(^6^9\) that distracted from the “defence of [the] country, and the preservation of...


liberties...” During and after the Revolution, plays in pamphlet form were a valuable method of spreading propaganda to a wider audience. The depiction of Americans after the Revolution were meant to be consumed by Americans more than Europeans. Plays became a way to spread Republican virtues and ideas.  

The Contrast was a play written in 1787, by Royall Tyler, who served in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. One of the main characters is a Revolutionary War veteran, Colonel Manly. Manly is shown to have countless Republican virtues. He is honorable, loyal to his country, and as a result of his numerous virtues, he wins the affections of the main female character, Maria. This success is much to the chagrin of his rival, Dimple. Dimple is a connoisseur of all things European, and so he does not find love and his nefarious plans are thwarted. Dimple wastes his time and money on frivolous pursuits and pointless fashion, whereas Manly still wears his regimental coat despite it being woefully out of vogue. Manly exhibits values popularly identified with George Washington and Roman figures like Cincinnatus. Many of the virtues Manly exhibits can be found in British plays at the time. One play in particular has a similar protagonist, The Coup de Main: or The American Adventurers. In this play the main character is Captain Lovewell. The heroic Captain Lovewell is a British officer.

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73 Ibid, 23.
who fights for the love of the lovely Phoebe. Lovewell is heroic and honorable, while his enemy, the American Captain Convict, is a cowardly lying disgrace.  

*The Contrast* is one example of an American born play, but after the Revolution much of the theatrical world was just as European as it was before the Revolution. According to Heather Nathans, “[Playwrights] hastened to ape British styles of architecture and design in their playhouses, importing scenery, curtains, even chandeliers from England.” The Federal Street Theatre in Boston for example, was built in the style of the architecture of Bath, England, and the Chestnut Street Theatre interior is reminiscent of the Globe Theatre in Stratford upon Avon. The inside of the building was more of a circular shape with balconies around the entire perimeter, separated by decorative columns, and more seating in front of and slightly below the stage. The theatre was one area in which the United States could prove themselves. The United States “felt a keen sense of competition... with European theatres... they wanted to ensure that they would match or surpass the best that London had to offer.” Great Britain in particular had a long theatrical history, with a number of established theatres and plays. In consequence American theatre “managers relied heavily on a repertoire of old English

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74 Archibald McClaren, *The Coup de Main; Or, the American Adventurers; A Musical Entertainment*, (Perth, 1784) American Antiquarian Society.


76 Ibid.

77 Ibid, 67.

78 Ibid, 8.
favorites, including *The School for Scandal, The Rivals, She Stoops to Conquer, The Padlock...*”  

There was a popular demand for these English favorites.  

Royall Tyler was born in Boston and enlisted in the army directly after he completed his studies at Harvard. He was a member of the Massachusetts’s Militia during the American Revolution, and then pursued a career in law. His play, *The Contrast*, became the first written by an American to be professionally staged in the new United States of America. He managed to break into a very European concentrated field and received recognition from George Washington himself. *The Contrast* opened in New York City with George Washington in the audience. As a veteran of the Revolutionary War his plays involve characters and events from the time period and in the case of *The Contrast* exemplify virtues important to the new Republic.

When the Federal Street Theatre in Boston opened in 1794 the first show performed was *Gustavus Vasa*, written by Henry Brooke. The play was originally a British piece, Brooke having been born in Ireland in 1703. The play’s protagonist was the title character, a Swedish King fighting to overthrow the tyrannical Danes. The similarities between Gustavus Vasa and George Washington were not lost among the theatrically inclined in the United States and the play became synonymous with Washington. Washington regularly compared to a European leader lent credence to the United States’ attempt to gain the recognition they wanted from Europe. The play was banned in London under the Licensing Act of 1737, due to its

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79 Ibid, 45.
revolutionary nature, which made the show more popular in the United States. Americans took the opportunity to make something British their own and involve the play in their competition with European theatre.

The theatre was also seen as an institution that would prove the gentility of the United States. Having an established theatre would mirror the societies of “the cultured cities of Europe” 81 where the upper crust of society could meet and show off their wealth and abundant leisure time. There was “anticipa[tion] that [the] theatres would transform the cultural shape of the new nation.” 82

While some aspects of the post Revolution theatre aimed to compete with the existing European theatre, there were others who saw the theatre as turning into something distinctly American. There was a movement to create a theatre of virtue, that would spread the values of the Revolution to everyone who attended the shows staged within it. This was a particular focus in Boston, with pamphlets and petitions being published throughout the city in support of repealing the prewar anti-theatre legislation. William Haliburton created one of these pamphlets after the war ended. In it he outlined everything that would have to be done to create a virtuous theatre. His central focus was on the government’s role in creating this proposed institution. If the government had a large role they could control what was performed and ensure only plays celebrating morality, liberty, and justice would be performed. These traits would become integral to the American identity and prove that the United States was stable and virtuous enough to survive and prosper, and show that the United States was just as

81 Ibid, 57.
82 Ibid, 62.
good as Europe. The theatre wouldn’t be a purveyor of sin and loose morals, like the British theatre had a tendency to do, it would be a center of education, and teach Americans how to be American.

This American form of theatre would be superior to British theatre, where opulence, “gaming, drinking and profanity... dishonesty, hypocrisy, meanness...”83 and tyrannical ideas were celebrated and embraced.84 Haliburton argued that the, “stage and music [have] the greatest effect on mankind, [and] are capable of doing the most hurt and the most good...[so] the stage would become to America... the nurse of wisdom...”85 instead of the immoral disaster European stages offered.

Haliburton also sought to lessen the drama that was frequently found around the theatre. Haliburton proposed that one large theatre should be built, and only one. Keeping the competition low would prevent an American version of “the history of the squabbles and contest of the Theatres in London, and their improper attempts to injure each other.”86 His goal in establishing a theatre in Boston included surpassing Britain, not just proving equal footing. He included a plan of what his proposed theatre should look like (Fig. 16), and it resembled theatres of ancient Rome. Both were round in structure, with a Proscenium, stage (or scaena)

83 William Haliburton, Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a people: and the propriety of encourageing and establishing a virtuous theatre. By a Bostonian, (Gale ECCO, 2010), 20.
84 William Haliburton, Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a people: and the propriety of encourageing and establishing a virtuous theatre. By a Bostonian, (Gale ECCO, 2010).
85 Ibid, 8,11.
86 Ibid, 46.
and a semi-circle shaped section for the audience, also known as the cavea. Roman theatres followed a similar structure (Fig. 17).\textsuperscript{87}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure16.png}
\caption{William Haliburton, \textit{Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a people}, 1792. The American Antiquarian Society}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure17.png}
\caption{Harold Whetstone Johnston, \textit{The Private Life of the Romans}, 1903. 226}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{87} Harold Whetstone Johnston, The Private Life of the Romans. 1903
https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Private_Life_of_the_Romans.html?id=yYpABgVd1ToC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=snippet&q=theatre&f=false
The exteriors of theatres used characteristics indicative of Roman architecture. The Chestnut Street Theatre (Fig. 18) in Philadelphia was built in 1791 and used the columns usually associated with Roman design. The Covent Garden Theatre (Fig. 19) in Central London (built in 1732) was built with a number of columns at the front of the building as well, but the architectural details of this theatre were more extravagant and ornate compared to its American counterpart. 88 The façade of American theatres reflected the more virtuous and respectable version of theatre Americans sought to establish. The United States used the Roman Architecture for theatres to show that Roman virtues would be espoused on the stages housed by regal columns. British theatres used Roman architecture to show their extravagance and greatness. 89

Other buildings in the United States used similar architectural elements. Among the most notable is Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello. Monticello boasted numerous columns and a large dome atop the structure that is also a familiar visage of Roman building.90 When Jefferson was making his plans for Monticello, he referred to the sixteenth century architect, Andrea Palladio, who was largely influenced by the Roman architect, Vitruvius.91

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91 Ibid.
Figure 18

Figure 19
J. Chapman *View of Covent Garden Theatre, from Bow Street*, 1814. The Victoria and Albert Museum
Conclusion

As the British were approaching capitol city, Dolley Madison made a decision about what items would count amongst the small number of objects ferried out of the soon to be destroyed city. The Lansdowne Portrait and government records made that list. Some of the young country’s most important documents survived as well as a copy of a portrait whose original was safe. Dolley Madison determined, at her own peril, that this artistic representation of the United States couldn’t be desecrated by the British.  It was a symbol of all the United States had and was still fighting to become. The canvas was rich with Roman symbolism, and the hopes that the United States would emerge as a powerful Republic, reminiscent of Rome itself.

The smoke eventually cleared, and rebuilding had to begin. When the rebuilding of the White House was completed, the Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne Portrait was returned to the building. The oil painting depiction of George Washington returned to the seat of the United States government in time to celebrate the final American victory against the British. After the conclusion of the War of 1812, the United States had proven their prowess; they had defeated one of the greatest European powers a second time in living memory.

After the American Revolution, the United States had to justify that they deserved to be a player on a largely European stage. The cultural creations the United States created during


this time had a impact on this endeavor. Paintings adopted some monarchical characteristics that were more European than American and the American theatre became just as European as it was before the Revolutionary War began. Both of these disciplines utilized Roman motifs to reflect that the United States was a new republic worthy of respect. After the war ended, the United States didn’t completely eradicate the European and British traits that remained. It used the lingering Britishness to add credence to their attempts to legitimize their presence on a world stage.

The United States was depicted by its own artists and the artists of European countries as being on par with European powers. They are all together, standing in solidarity against Britain, they share the same side of the scale, and they will all venture together in a post-Revolutionary world of economy and opportunity. European countries and America also entered agreements with one another that led to artifacts and specimens being exchanged among one another. Statues became a powerful method to communicate the desirability of Roman virtues, especially comparisons between George Washington and Cincinnatus.

Art and images, in a variety of forms, were methods for the early United States to prove they had the wherewithal to participate with European countries. The victorious conclusion to the War of 1812 was the final achievement necessary to solidify the United States’ validation as an equal to the “powers of the Earth.”94 Today the arts and humanities in general are not encouraged as much as they once were. Technology and science are tools for the future, both disciplines played their part in fostering the infant United States as well. But art’s contribution

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should not be forgotten and cast off as nothing more than a pretty picture. The United States is predicated on the values and ideals that shine through the paintings, statues and architecture of its founding.