

ARTS & LETTERS

The Cap of Freedom

"The Liberty Cap as a Revolutionary Symbol in America and France" by Yvonne Korshak, in *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* (Fall 1987), 16-00 Pollitt Dr., Fair Lawn, N.J. 07410.

On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress appointed a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson to design a seal for the new United States. The three men differed in their ideas. Franklin suggested a depiction of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Adams proposed Hercules poised between Vice and Virtue, and Jefferson argued for the Israelites in the wilderness. But one element was common to all their designs—a Liberty Goddess bearing a liberty cap.

On the seal finally adopted by Congress in 1782, however, the liberty cap had vanished, replaced by a "newer iconography of power," the eagle and rays. Thus the liberty cap, a potent symbol during the American Revolution, began to fade from the national consciousness.

Korshak, an art historian at Adelphi University, traces the roots of the liberty cap to ancient Rome, where the freeing of a slave was symbolized by the emancipated man's donning of a *pileus*, the round, brimless skullcap worn by citizens. Brutus used the liberty cap on a coin struck after the assassination of Julius Caesar, in an attempt to identify himself with the republican liberties restored following Caesar's death.

In 1552, France's Henry II used the cap on a medal to promote himself as a liberator after his victory over Charles V of Germany. During the American Revolution, the cap appeared everywhere, from Paul Revere's



English politician and journalist John Wilkes (1725-1797) fervently believed in freedom of speech and the press. His efforts prompted satirist William Hogarth (1697-1764) to bestow the "liberty cap" on Wilkes in this 1763 etching.