

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.

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Sons of Liberty bowl (1768) to the masthead of the *Boston Gazette*.

Korshak attributes the symbol's eventual demise in America to "sensitivity" to the slavery issue, which threatened the union as early as the 1787 Constitutional Convention. The federal mint, established in 1792, for example, "may have preferred for its first coinage a generalized and inspirational goddess . . . over any depictions of the cap, [with its specific reference] to the freeing of slaves, even ancient Roman slaves."

French artists, however, who had used the liberty cap symbol to refer to the American Revolution, adopted it to serve the anti-Royalist cause during the French Revolution in 1789. The floppy-tipped Phrygian cap, which alluded to the kind worn by French workingmen, writes Korshak, became the "quintessential French liberty cap." During the Revolution the symbol proliferated—on plaques, furniture, tea sets, and atop the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Unlike the first American coins, which eliminated the cap, the French versions maintained it. Today it remains a powerful symbol for the state on French coins and postage stamps. In the United States, says Korshak, the cap's "radical meaning" faded simply by being forgotten. In France, by 1800, the goddess and the cap "shed their connotations of liberty and became instead symbolic of the republic."

Hugo the Politician

"Victor Hugo: On the Legacy of Myth" by Renee Winegarten, in *Encounter* (Sept.-Oct. 1987), 44 Great Windmill St., London W1V 7PA, United Kingdom.

Victor Hugo (1802–1885), the French novelist and dramatist, relished battling in the political arena. As early as 1829, Hugo began a lifelong campaign against the death penalty, which led him to condemn the executions of both American abolitionist John Brown and Emperor Maximilian, the French-installed ruler of Mexico (1864–1867). At various stages, Hugo supported Russian Jews, homeless children, and Irish Fenians.

Yet Hugo's "love for the People," argues Winegarten, a biographer and critic, was ambiguous. Even the title of his most famous novel, *Les Misérables* (1862), could refer either to persons living in poverty *or* people who were "vile and despicable." In an autobiographical work, Hugo wrote that his philosophy was to see "right on both sides, wrong on both sides."

Hugo began his career as an ultra-Royalist. But the banning and stringent censorship of his early plays—such as *Marion de Lorme* (1829) and *Hernani* (1830)—led Hugo to question his monarchist convictions. It took the Revolution of 1848 to complete the transformation of Hugo from a "vaguely liberal conservative" to a man who routinely "voted with the Left" as a *député* in the French Parliament.

After President Louis-Napoléon declared himself emperor in 1852, Hugo fled France for Brussels, where he stayed until Napoléon was deposed in 1870. *Les Misérables*, the major work of this period, both praised and denigrated the poor. Those underprivileged people who, by their own achievements, transcended their fate (such as hero Jean Valjean) were admirable; characters who stayed trapped in the mire of poverty were *la*