

**MFA Boston**



# **Power of the People:**

**Art and Democracy**

# Contents

|                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| <b>Preface</b>       | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Promise</b>       | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Practice</b>      | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Preservation</b>  | <b>27</b> |
| <b>Crosscurrents</b> | <b>39</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>    | <b>49</b> |

# Power of the People:

## Art and Democracy

Phoebe Segal, Mary Bryce Comstock Senior Curator  
of Greek and Roman Art

### ► Preface

“Power of the People: Art and Democracy” (Foster and Rabb galleries, October 25, 2024–February 16, 2025) was a platform for artists’ visual arguments for and in relation to democracy. The exhibition was also a project demonstrating the importance of museums as places of civic learning in the 21st century. The goal of creating an educated citizenry was central to the original mission of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), and other American encyclopedic museums founded in the 19th century in the image of their European Enlightenment forebears. The MFA is a visual encyclopedia of American democracy due to both the breadth and depth of its collections and the significant role that Boston played in the American Revolution, abolitionism, and other progressive

movements. In fact, few, if any, other art museums in the United States could mount such a richly varied exhibition on this subject almost entirely from its own collections.

In the past two decades, museum educators have emphasized object-oriented learning as a path to developing a range of skills, including building civic awareness, and today there is a greater appreciation for those of us who are visual learners. It's nothing new to observe that sustained engagement with works of art can deepen our connection to the world beyond ourselves.

When it comes to teaching about democracy, art has the potential to build knowledge but also to elicit emotions, because each person's lived experience of democracy is different. Works of art remind us of our most celebrated citizen heroes and introduce us to those unrecognized or forgotten. They present vaunted narratives of how democracies came to be and, at the same time, call on us to question them. They demand that we confront the essential questions: Am I doing enough? Can I do better?

With this mission-driven history in mind, the MFA used the "Power of the People" exhibition to promote itself as a civic space. In the lead up to election day on November 5, 2024, the MFA made voter registration available at community celebrations, hosted an early voting polling location on the weekend of October 26–27, and, after the exhibition opened, it welcomed speakers, community discussions featuring Boston city and educational leaders, and performances by local theater students at Emerson College. All the programs took place in the space of the exhibition, in and among the art on display, and furthered the civic learning of those who participated by inviting the MFA to be present to the important role of art in a democracy.

"Power of the People" was the result of years-long conversations about democracy within the Museum and the larger community it serves. Many contributed to the process of making it a reality, beginning with the artists whose visual storytelling and arguments have quite literally shaped how we think about democracy, and who have brought about positive social change through their work.

The exhibition represents the fusion of ideas and interests percolating in at least two curatorial departments more or less simultaneously. Patrick Murphy, then the Lia and William Poorvu Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings, had been working on an exhibition about printmaking and social activism, and I was invested in mining connections between modern and ancient political systems after the MFA opened new Greek and Roman galleries in 2021.

In 2022, I applied to be a mentor for the MFA Teens Curatorial Study Hall (CSH) program, proposing that we explore the collection through the question "What does democracy look like?" Director of Teen Programs at the time Ron Carroll and CSH pilot curator Layla Bermeo, Kristin and Roger Servison Curator of Paintings, Art of the Americas, took a gamble on the enterprise.

During the 2022–23 academic year, Layla and I met weekly with a cohort of six high school students: Josh Alsaindor, Sophia Shatzky, Jalil Presley-Rogers, Iyla Lara, Hannah Nyugen, and Brianna Medrano. These wise, committed, intelligent young citizen/curators engaged with works of art, sharing their experiences of, aspirations for, and frustrations with democracy—at times, even debating whether "it's a thing."

The teens and I (often joined by Layla) met with curators from many different departments; all were generous with their time and expertise.<sup>1</sup> One of the first was Patrick, who spoiled us with a viewing of an incredible array of protest posters made in 1970, in response to the Kent State killings.

Over the course of the year, the students and I built a core object list ultimately drawn from seven curatorial departments. Patrick and I kept talking, and it became evident that, although we were approaching the relationship between art and democracy from very different perspectives (including our personal politics), much was to be gained by joining forces in a single exhibition.

Aligning our curatorial visions and goals was hard work and, if not for the support, insightfulness, and finesse of interpretive planner Jordan Cromwell, who had been in conversations about the exhibition since the beginning, the project might have fallen apart. But isn't that how it always is with democracy?

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge my partners in this project, co-curator Patrick Murphy and content collaborators Sanah Rao, Jordan Cromwell, and George Scharoun, and to thank the following colleagues for their support and generosity: Lucia Sanchez Abramovich, Ian Alteveer, Lawrence Berman, Kat Bossi, Marietta Cambareri, Danny Cashman, Anastasia Christophilopoulou, Mary-Evelyn Farrior, Michelle Millar Fisher, Nonie Gadsden, Kristen Gresh, Katie Hanson, Courtney Harris, Karen Haas, Anne Havinga, Erica Hirschler, Ethan Lasser, Rachel Nicholson, Edward Saywell, Jen Swope, theo tyson, Matthew Teitelbaum, and Pierre Terjanian.

# Introduction

Democracy is messy, and there's no singular way to explore it. Rather than organizing an exhibition whose material spans 2,500 years and three continents chronologically or geographically, we elected to group the objects conceptually into three chapters—the promise, the practice, and the preservation of democracy—unfolding over three rooms. The exhibition did not aim to be a visual history of democracy in all times and places; rather, it looked backward at 2,500 years of history in ancient Greece and Rome, Renaissance Florence, Revolutionary France, Britain, and colonial America, yet focused solely on the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries. It was not possible to explore democracy both diachronically and synchronically, given limitations of space and of the Museum's collection, despite its immeasurable strengths.<sup>1</sup>

The content team (Patrick Murphy, Jordan Cromwell, designer Sanah Rao, and I) defined democracy as a system of government in which a plurality of people rule. This definition restricted the parameters to democracies in which there is evidence that large percentages of the population had decision-making power through voting. I say a large percentage rather than a specific number because prior to universal suffrage and, for most of human history, the alternative to democracy was either a single figurehead (e.g., king, chief, or emperor) or an aristocracy (a small number of families). The first attested democracy is the one founded in ancient Athens in 508–507 BCE. An earlier instance may have existed. We just don't know. It is manifestly

evident that the American Founding Fathers were influenced by Athenian democracy, but perhaps even more so by the Roman Republic. It is also well known that they were aware of the democratic practices of several Native American tribes, including the Iroquois Confederacy.<sup>2</sup>

Generations of collectors and curators made this exhibition possible by enriching the Museum through acquisitions over the course of its 150-plus year history. More than half the works of art in the exhibition were acquired in the 21st century, and they attest to efforts to diversify the collection and include the voices of previously ignored or deliberately marginalized groups. Many of the

earliest works to enter the collection are ancient, including inscriptions excavated in the 1880s at the Greek city of Assos by the Archaeological Institute of America, an institution formed in the same cultural milieu as the MFA. (See Fragmentary inscription in honor of Telemachos, [84.45](#); Decree by the city Stratonikeia for judge Amynamēnos from Assos, [84.52](#); and Ring, [84.54](#).)

A porcelain statuette of English radical journalist John Wilkes ([06.2439](#), see below), who was so admired by the Founding Fathers, was gifted to the Museum in 1906 by none other than the widow of Martin Brimmer (1829–

1896), the first president of the MFA and an influential civic leader. It is tempting to imagine the statuette placed on Brimmer's desk or a nearby mantelpiece as he and fellow board members set about establishing the city's first dedicated art museum.

The Museum's acquisition in 1949 of the Sons of Liberty Bowl ([49.45](#))—which had been passed down through multiple generations of William Mackay's family and subsequently owned by the great-great-granddaughter of James Marston—was subsidized by Boston schoolchildren's allowance money, in one of the first examples of a crowd-funded acquisition.<sup>3</sup>



Figure of John Wilkes, made at Derby Manufactory, about 1765–75. Soft-paste porcelain, colored enamels, gilding. Bequest of Mrs. Martin Brimmer.

- <sup>1</sup> A subsequent exhibition could explore the relationship between art and democracy in the 20th and 21st centuries worldwide.
- <sup>2</sup> The Iroquois *Gayanashagowa* (Great Law of Peace) is said to have been composed in the 12th century and was ratified by the Six Nations in 1722. It was given physical form in symbols woven into wampum belts composed of quahog clam shells, which serve as memory devices for the storytellers who would communicate it orally. It details the origin story of the Confederacy; the establishment of laws, leaders, and sovereignty; and the appropriate rituals for the peaceful transfer of power from one chief to the next.
- <sup>3</sup> Read about the acquisition of the Liberty Bowl here:  
<https://www.mfa.org/article/2025/sons-of-liberty-bowl>

# Promise

Artists across times and places have mythologized narratives about democracy, creating depictions for complex lofty ideals and inventing easily recognizable symbols across media. Just as artists have supported and advanced utopian visions of democracy, we have seen how they have also undercut and complicated these stories. The first chapter of the exhibition addressed three primary vehicles for storytelling about democracies: visualizations of the citizenry through portraiture, symbols of liberty, and foundation narratives.

## ► The Ideal Citizen

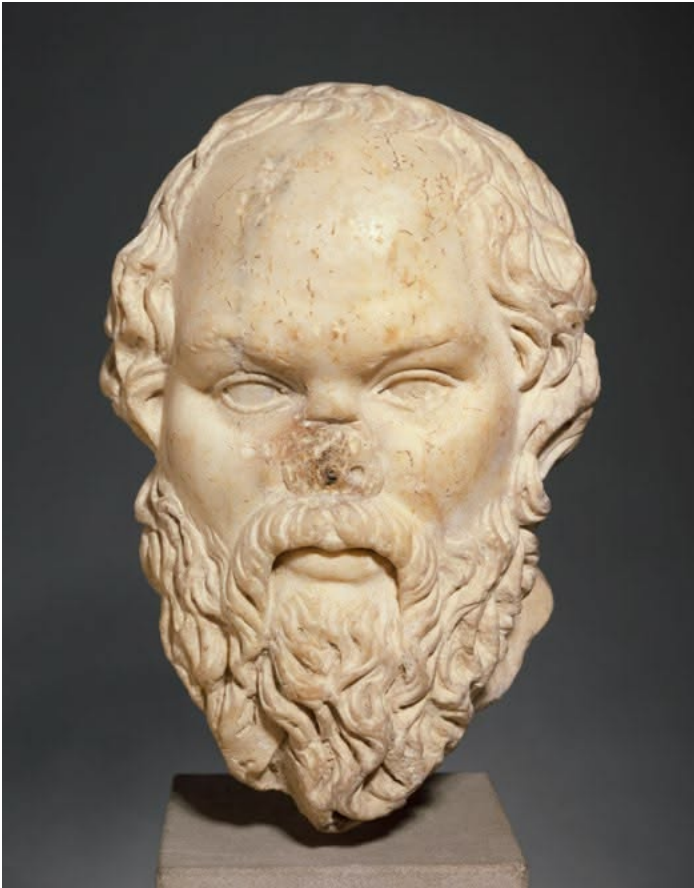
Since ancient Greek and Roman antiquity, artists, patrons, and audiences have visualized citizenship through portraiture. The earliest Greek portraits (between 430 and 380 BCE) were set up in public spaces to honor citizens of exceptional distinction: generals, statesmen, poets, and philosophers.<sup>1</sup> In Rome, the award of a public statue elevated a private citizen to a glorified status, yielding immense social and political benefits. Artists in the 1700s and 1800s looked back to those classical portraits to depict their definition of the ideal citizen, which, although limited to a specific class and race then, has evolved and expanded as artists continue this practice today. These portraits speak not only to artists' capacity to represent their times but also to their ability to highlight identities previously excluded from full citizenship and expand the repertoire of attributes and characteristics a good citizen should exhibit.

Although the Greek philosopher Socrates left no writings of his own, we know his methods and

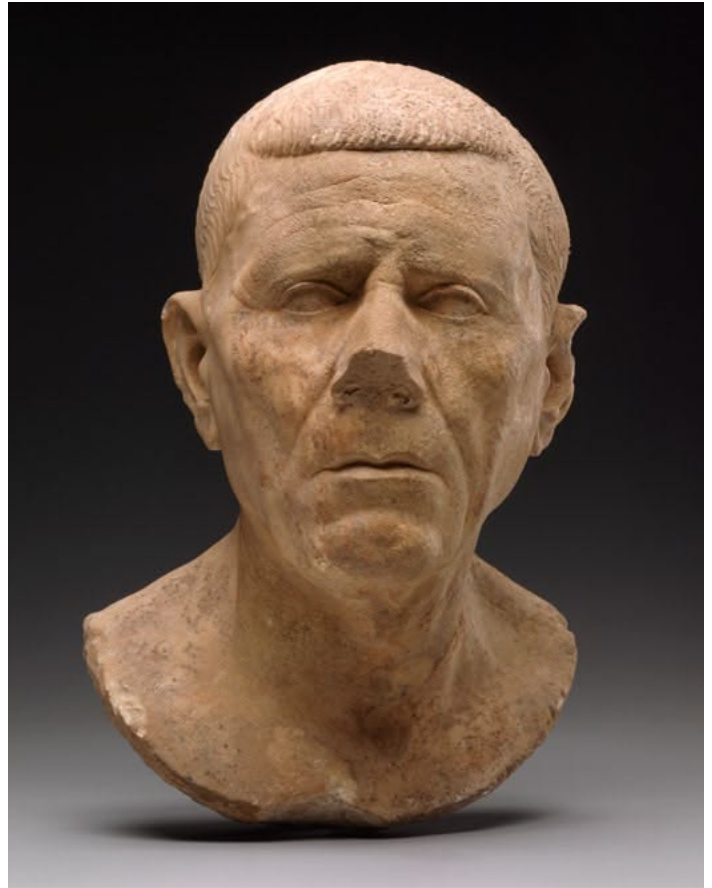
teachings through his students. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates expresses his concern that letting citizenry vote and make major societal decisions without the necessary knowledge would only lead to doom. Portraits of Socrates were ubiquitous from the 4th century BCE throughout Roman antiquity.<sup>2</sup>

The MFA's portrait head of Socrates (60.45, see page 8) was likely based on a celebrated bronze portrait of the philosopher sculpted in the 4th century BCE by Lysippos (390–300 BCE), Alexander the Great's court sculptor.<sup>3</sup> The nose is lost but, compared with other portraits of the same type, the visage recalls Alcibiades's likening of Socrates's appearance to that of the old satyr Silenos.<sup>4</sup> In the Roman Imperial period, these portraits functioned as both objects and evidence of a Roman citizen's Greek acculturation and civic learning.

Portraiture was accessible to a much wider swath of society in ancient Rome than it was in Greece.<sup>5</sup> Evidence for Roman portraits dates to the middle of the 2nd century BCE, and was deployed in multiple



Unknown artist, portrait head of Socrates, Roman, Imperial Period, about 170–195 CE. Marble from Mt. Pentelikon near Athens. Frederick Brown Fund.



Unknown artist, bust of an older man, Roman, Late Republican or Imperial period, about 30 BCE–50 CE. Marble. Bequest of Benjamin Rowland Jr., by exchange, and Frank B. Bemis Fund, John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, and Mary S. and Edward J. Holmes Fund.

contexts.<sup>6</sup> Inscriptions always accompanied Roman portraits and identified the person portrayed. The absence of a name and other clues about the original context of a bust of an older man (1991.534, see page 8) renders it impossible to know who it represented or if it was made for a domestic, funerary, or public setting. His advanced age and his wrinkles, sunken cheeks, and sagging jowls signify his achievements. Verism, or extreme naturalism, depicting the sitter “warts and all,” was a “truthful” artistic style intended to convey experience and maturity in representation, even if it was at times exaggerated.

During the late Republic, veristic portraits were often used in combination with bodies wearing togas, the garment denoting Roman citizenship. Romans of high status from established aristocratic families, self-made magistrates, and commercially successful *liberti* (formerly enslaved people who had recently gained citizenship) embraced portraiture as a means of civic self-actualization.

The American Founding Fathers recognized the symbolic importance of honoring their leading statesmen with portraits. Several of them had spent time in Paris, where many of the best sculptors could be found at the end of the 18th century.

In 1783, the US Congress voted to commission a bronze equestrian statue of George Washington, but the expense was too great for the infant state. Instead, the Virginia legislature hired the famed French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), who produced a full-length statue of Carrara marble weighing 18 tons for the Virginia State Capitol.<sup>7</sup>

Houdon was familiar with Roman and Renaissance portraits from his training in Rome. In addition to

the full body portrait, Houdon sculpted a series of busts of Washington that emphasized his role as a statesman. His toga-like garment in the MFA’s bust of George Washington (24.77) refers to Americans associating him with the Roman general Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus.

According to the Roman historian Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), Cincinnatus answered the call to defend Rome upon invasion—and then promptly returned to farming once the city was secure. Like Cincinnatus, Washington was perceived as a humble farmer with heroic traits.

When portraits were set up in public spaces in Rome, including tombs along the Via Appia (the major road leading south), they asserted and solidified political and social identities. Those of *liberti* and blended families communicated a family’s unity and rightful place among wealthy and powerful elites.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, American photographer Tyler Mitchell (b. 1995) achieved notoriety as the first Black artist to shoot a *Vogue* cover (of Beyoncé). He is known for his explorations of Black identity. In Mitchell’s *All American Family Portrait* (2022.1316, see page 10), a tattered American flag serves as the backdrop to a young family’s loving and joyous embrace.

Mitchell took this photograph of his best friend and her boyfriend with their twin daughters looking from below, positioning their status not just as an ideal American family but as everyday American heroes. Mitchell contrasts this celebratory family portrait with the racist history of the setting where the photograph was taken. Howard Beach, Queens, NY, was the site of the 1986 racially motivated fatal attack on Michael Griffith, a 23-year-old Black man.



Tyler Mitchell, *All American Family Portrait*, 2018. Archival pigment print. Gift of Reese Genser, Doug Gordon, Jeremy Sclar, and David Frieze. © Tyler Mitchell.

## ► Self-Fashioning and Political Symbols

What people wear has conveyed political messages and sympathies for centuries and the practice of self-fashioning and self-identification through symbolic attire continues. *Liberti* (formerly enslaved Romans) wore the felt, dome-shaped pileus (liberty cap) to show that they recently gained freedom. After murdering Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, Marcus Junius Brutus issued coinage that featured a liberty



Denarius with head of M. Junius Brutus, struck under L. Plaetorius Cestianus, Roman, Republican Period, 43–42 BCE. Silver. Theodora Willbour Fund in memory of Zoë Willbour.

cap between two daggers ([2002.129](#), see this page) to announce that he freed Rome from tyranny. The motif survived through Renaissance medals and was later adopted by American and then French revolutionaries as symbols of freedom. They conflated the liberty cap with a similar headpiece with a bent tip called the Phrygian cap, which was worn by mythological figures associated with ancient Phrygia (in modern-day Turkey). The liberty cap remains one of the most enduring symbols of freedom.

Its profound resonance is evident in the wide range of media and contexts in which it appears. Perhaps the most recognizable is the bonnet rouge worn in Revolutionary France and deployed at various times since, as recently as the adorable Paris 2024 Olympics mascots, the Phryges. A red woolen example with a red, white, and blue silk brocade ([45.297](#)) is now thought to have been made in the 1880s to commemorate the centennial of the storming of the Bastille in 1789. A 19th-century gilded copper weathervane ([2008.46](#)) features the Goddess of Liberty wearing a liberty cap as the US flag she waves flutters behind her in the wind. On an early 20th-century Argentine medal commemorating statesman José Uriburu's eightieth birthday ([2005.1170](#), see page 12), engraver Juan Gottuzzo places the Phrygian cap encircled by a wreath, amidst other motifs drawn from imagery on Roman coinage, including the clasped hands recalling the Roman gesture (*"dextrarum iunctio,"* or joining right hands), which signified political agreement.

## ► Foundation Stories: Peaceful and Violent Transfers of Power

Images of powerful leaders taming monsters and tyrants threatening to destroy society stretch back thousands of years to the Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Assyrian models that the Greeks themselves were looking back at. Those stories were often intended as political propaganda with protagonists associated with royal power. When told in the context of a democracy or a republic, images of monster slayers were repurposed to celebrate the people instead.

A fragmentary vessel tells the "official story" of the founding of Athenian democracy (Pitcher [oinochoe] with the Tyrannicides, [98.936](#)). The figures represent Harmodius and Aristigeiton, the



Juan Gottuzzo, *José Uriburu 80th Birthday*, 1911. Silver. Gift of Cornelius C. Vermeule III.

Athenians who assassinated Hipparchus, catalyzing a new form of government a few years later. Their deed was motivated by a personal vendetta rather than a political agenda, but that didn't stop the Athenians from mythologizing them as the heroes of the new democracy.<sup>9</sup> They commissioned one of their best sculptors to concretize the assassination in monumental form and erected the statue group in the Agora.<sup>10</sup> When he invaded Athens in 480 BCE, the Persian King Xerxes removed the original statue group to his capital at Susa as *spolia* (spoils). The Athenians responded by swiftly arranging for a replacement, which stood in the Agora for centuries and survives in Roman copies. Nearly a century after the "new" statue was erected, an Athenian vase painter drew the statue on a red-figure wine pitcher, which an Athenian family deposited beneath a monument dedicated to their beloved son Dexileos, an aristocrat who died in the Corinthian War in 394 BCE. After years of war and plague, Athens was suffering economically and politically divided, prompting many to recycle familiar narratives.

The Tyrannicides (Harmodius and Aristogeiton) would not be the last statue group to celebrate a tyrant slayer who liberated the people through force. The Florentine Medici family commissioned a statue of the Biblical heroine Judith by the famed sculptor Donatello for the city's central square, the Piazza della Signoria.<sup>11</sup> In the Old Testament, Judith snuck into the Assyrian camp and decapitated its leader, Holofernes, saving Jerusalem from destruction. Unlike Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who were actual Athenians, the Florentines plucked Judith from the distant past to symbolize the city's independence and resistance to tyranny. By the time Giovanni della Robbia (1469–1529) made his terracotta statue of Judith (46.839), about a hundred years after Donatello's public statue, sculptures depicting Judith were a hotly desired item for wealthy Florentines who wanted to express that they were virtuous citizens.

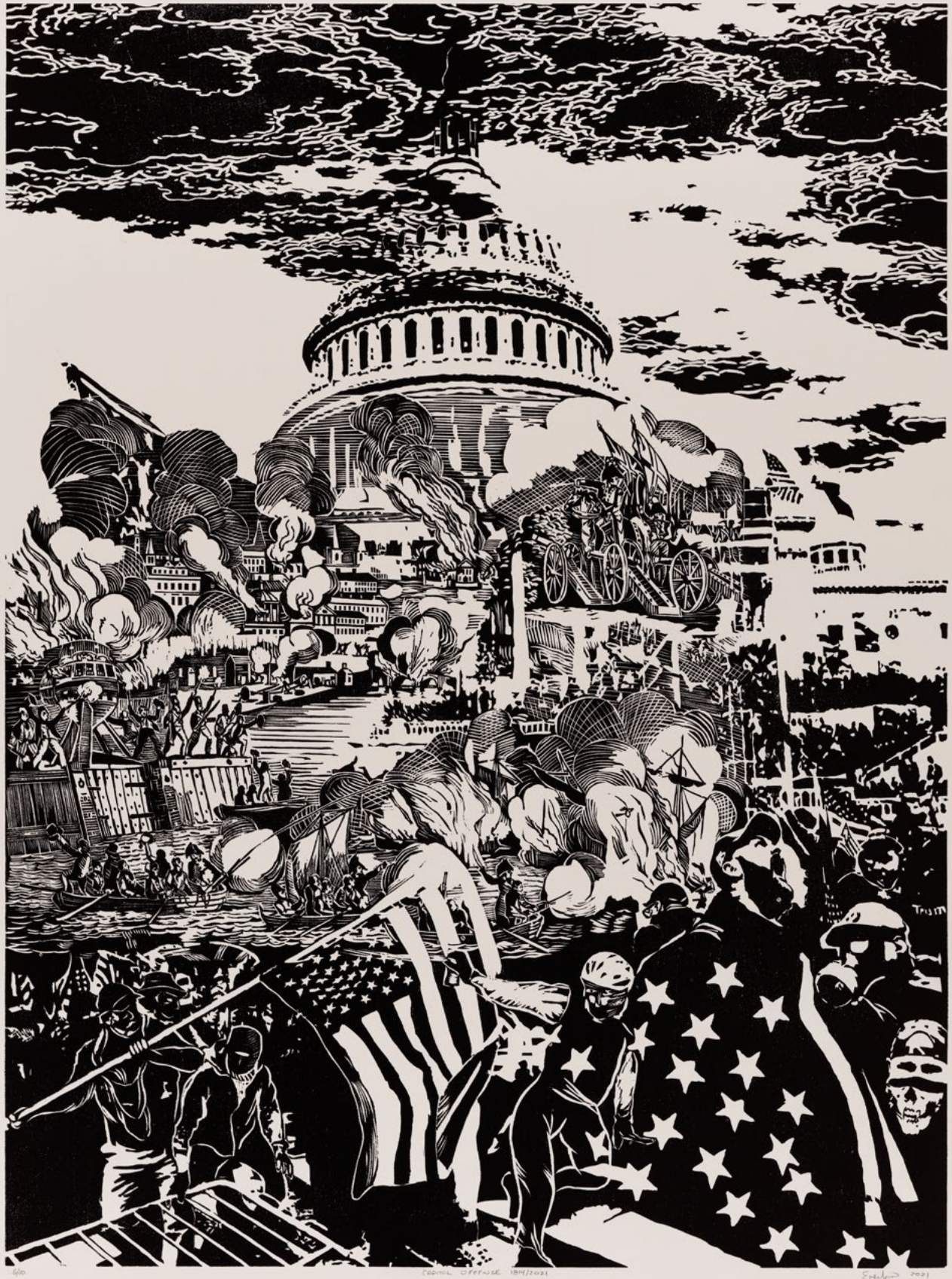
A political cartoon in the May 17, 1862, issue of the satirical magazine *Vanity Fair* inspired David Gilmour Blythe's (1815–1865) portrayal of Abraham Lincoln slaying a dragon representing the Confederacy (*Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion*, 48.413).<sup>12</sup> Blythe poses the sixteenth US president as a hero—

almost a prophetic figure—doing his best within the constraints of American democracy to resolve the crisis of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> A cracked Liberty Bell leans against a stump chaining Lincoln. The text "TamOny Hall," painted around a satanic face, references the political machine that dominated New York politics during the 19th century. With the text "The Rebellion Must be Crush'd! But Only Constitutionally: Fernando Wood & Co. Need We Saymour!!," Blythe puns on the New York City mayor and New York State governor, who opposed Lincoln's efforts to bring about the end of slavery. Like many other Midwesterners, Blythe's own political attitudes were more complex: he opposed slavery but was also uncomfortable with the radical cause of abolition.<sup>14</sup>

The gap between the modern democratic practice of the peaceful transfer of power and attempts to seize it through violence is captured in the juxtaposition of two works: Jean-Jaques François Le Barbier's 1791 *The Magnanimity of Lycurgus* (2022.101, see page 14) and William Evertson's 2021 *Capitol Offense 1814/2021* (2021.622, see page 15). In the Greek author Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (around 100 CE), Lycurgus assumed the throne of Sparta after the death of his older brother, learning afterward that his sister-in-law was pregnant. Le Barbier (1738–1826) depicts the moment when Lycurgus bestowed upon his infant nephew, Charilaus, his rightful kingship, assuming the role of regent. The painter may have chosen to highlight Lycurgus's peaceful transfer of power in the hopes that the French Revolution too would come to a peaceful end. Whereas Le Barbier paints an allegorical, hopeful vision at odds with the widespread violence in France during the Reign of Terror (1792–94), American printmaker William Evertson (b. 1952) presents the stark reality of January 6, 2021, in which rioters attempted to interfere with the certification of the presidential election, the mechanism that ensures the peaceful transfer of power in the United States. Evertson weaves scenes of violence together with the only other time the US Capitol was breached, mingling distant and recent pasts. The center left portion of the composition—from the base of the dome to the flags in the foreground—is based on an earlier print depicting the burning of Washington by British troops in 1814. Below, a January 6th rioter is wrapped in a flag, and another uses one as a weapon in an ironic act of "patriotism."



Jean-Jacques François Le Barbier, *The Magnanimity of Lycurgus*, 1791. Oil on canvas. Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund.



William Evertson, *Capitol Offense 1814/2021, 2021*. Woodcut. Fund in memory of Horatio Greenough Curtis. Reproduced with permission.

- <sup>1</sup> Catherine Keesling, *Early Greek Portraiture: Monuments and Histories* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 19–23.
- <sup>2</sup> Greek examples were always full length. This underlife size head was made in Athens in the Roman Imperial period, when it was customary for portrait heads to be presented in bust and pillar (herm) formats.
- <sup>3</sup> Lysippos's sculpture was set up in Athens decades after a jury of 500 Athenians voted to put Socrates to death for impiety and corrupting the youth in 399 BCE, suggesting that by the middle of the 4th century Socrates had come to be regarded as a model citizen. See Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (George Bell and Sons, 1909), 2.43; Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity* (University of California Press, 1996), 58–63; Catherine Keesling, *Early Greek Portraiture: Monuments and Histories* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 154.
- <sup>4</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*. Translation and introduction by Walter Hamilton. (Penguin Classics, 1951).
- <sup>5</sup> Jane Fejfer, "Roman Portraits," in *A Companion to Roman Art*, ed. Barbara Borg (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 233.
- <sup>6</sup> Fejfer, 239.
- <sup>7</sup> Anne Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon, Sculpture of the Enlightenment* (National Gallery of Art, 2013), 263. The Commonwealth pursued a statue "to be of the finest marble and the best workmanship." Houdon traveled from France to Mount Vernon, where he spent three weeks taking detailed measurements of Washington and making a plaster life mask of his face, a technique used in ancient Rome. See Peter Schertz, Pamela Hatchfield, et al., "Made from Life: A Roman Terracotta Portrait" in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*. Vol. 61, ed. Kimberly Bowes (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 22–39.
- <sup>8</sup> For example, the Tomb relief of the Publius Gessius family (37.100): Publius Gessius, his wife and former slave Faustia Gessia, and their son Publius Gessius Primus, who was born before his mother gained her freedom.
- <sup>9</sup> According to Greek historians (Herodotus 5.55–7 and Thucydides 5.53.3–59.2), Hipparchus had attempted to seduce Harmodius, who was in a relationship with Aristogeiton. Insulted by his refusal, Hipparchus retaliated against Harmodius by publicly humiliating his maiden sister. Harmodius was angry, and Thucydides says this was the motive behind the plot that he and Aristogeiton developed to assassinate Hipparchus and his older brother, Hippias, at a religious festival. The pair were only partially successful. They killed Hipparchus, but Hippias got away and ruled Athens from exile before ceding power. Athens was now tyrant-free.
- <sup>10</sup> See Catherine Keesling, *Early Greek Portraiture: Monuments and Histories* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23–28, on the political versus cultic functions of the statue group. Antenor sculpted the first statue and Kritios and Nesiotes collaborated on the second one. See Vincent Azoulay, *The Tyrant-Slayers of Ancient Athens: A Tale of Two Statues* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> It stood opposite Donatello's bronze *David*.
- <sup>12</sup> Bruce Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 87.
- <sup>13</sup> On Lincoln as an apocalyptic prophet, Christlike figure, and modern-day Moses, see Terrie Dopp Aamodt, *Righteous Armies, Holy Causes: Apocalyptic Imagery and the Civil War* (Mercer University Press, 2002), 111, and Francis Grierson, *The Valley of Shadows* (University of Illinois Press, 1990), 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Chambers, 78.

# Practice

The central right of democracy is the vote, yet democracies as political systems in which the people govern rely on the civic participation and public service of their citizens to function. The practice of democracy explores the citizen body (who is, isn't, and formerly wasn't included), the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and the various ways they have been called upon and volunteered to serve their communities and countries.

## ► The Vote

Voting is the fundamental—some might say sacred—instrument of democracy. From the smallest local election to the presidential ballot, every vote counts. That's why access to the vote and its integrity are so important. Yet the history of restricting voting to a select few—and the use of voter suppression even after previously disenfranchised groups attained voting rights—is long and well-documented.

Jean-François Millet (1814–1875) painted *The Sower* ([17.1485](#), see page [18](#)) in 1850, the year the French government passed a conservative law restricting voting access to men who could demonstrate three years of continuous residence at their current address through tax records, even though the 1848 French Revolution granted universal male suffrage. This meant that laborers who moved around, like the sower Millet monumentalized in his painting, were effectively, though not formally, disenfranchised. We don't know if Millet was responding directly to the new law, but the historical context is difficult to ignore.

When the United States was founded, the only citizens who could vote were free, property-owning males. The Abolitionist, Suffrage, and Civil Rights movements

of the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States endeavored to free the enslaved, enfranchise all adult citizens, and ensure access to the vote for all. Several works in the exhibition attest to these efforts: The Emancipation Proclamation in the form of a calligraphic portrait of Abraham Lincoln, an anti-slavery badge commissioned and worn by abolitionists, and a relief portrait memorializing suffragette and abolitionist Julia Ward Howe.

Perhaps no other work in the exhibition integrates text and image more fully than the calligraphic portrait of Abraham Lincoln drawn by William Henry Pratt (1822–1893) and printed by Augustus Hageboeck (*The Emancipation Proclamation, with calligraphic portrait of Abraham Lincoln*, [2017.49](#), see page [19](#)). On January 1, 1863, two years into the Civil War, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order declaring all enslaved individuals in Confederate states free and laying out the moral and political arguments for the abolishment of slavery. The original five-page document was first held in the Department of State and, since 1936, has been preserved in the National Archives. In 1867, when much of the United States was still mourning Lincoln's assassination, Pratt



Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850. Oil on canvas. Gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw Jr. and Mrs. Marian Shaw Houghton.



William H. Pratt, *The Emancipation Proclamation*, with calligraphic portrait of Abraham Lincoln, 1867. Lithograph. Ellen Kellerman Gardner Fund.

skillfully and seamlessly wove together the man and his deeds, protecting his image with a bald eagle and surrounding him with episodes from the Civil War.

The same year Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton cofounded the Women's Loyal National League and drew up a petition demanding that Congress (not just the executive branch) abolish slavery and collected 400,000 signatures. To raise money for their campaign, they commissioned a silversmith to make silver pins (Anti-slavery badge, [2017.280](#), see below) and sold them to supporters for three dollars. The league's motto, "In Emancipation Is National Unity," encircles the oval-shaped badge. A chained figure, nude save for a cloth draped across his loins, looks skyward. Anthony herself described him as a "slave breaking his last chain." The pin recalls the ceramic medallions crafted in the late 18th century by British ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795), which depict an enslaved man on a bended knee with the motto, "Am I not a Man and a Brother?"

In the "promise," we saw how the liberty cap communicated social status in ancient Rome and partisan affiliations in revolutionary America and

France; the anti-slavery badge supported a political cause not just symbolically but in actuality, by raising money to effect a political outcome.

The anti-slavery badge is a rare object, but the phenomenon of 19th-century activist women forcefully making the case against slavery and in favor of women's suffrage was quite significant. Julia Ward Howe was one of the most devoted, inspired, and influential of these women. She is most widely remembered as the lyricist of the popular Union song "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which she was inspired to compose in 1861, after meeting Abraham Lincoln. The words are set to the tune of the marching song "John Brown's Body," about the abolitionist who sacrificed his life for the cause. An energetic writer and lecturer and revered civic leader, Howe cofounded the New England Women's Club, which she regarded as her greatest accomplishment. After her death in 1910, the Club commissioned Cyrus Dallin (1861–1944) to sculpt a bas-relief (*Julia Ward Howe*, [13.556](#), see page [21](#)) in her memory and gifted it to the Museum. A plaster cast of the relief was installed in the Club, suggesting that the members sought to prioritize honoring their esteemed leader in a public, civic setting over their personal enjoyment of Dallin's moving portrait.<sup>1</sup>



Unidentified artist, anti-slavery badge, American, about 1863. Silver. Samuel Putnam Avery Fund.



Cyrus E. Dallin, *Julia Ward Howe*, 1912. Marble. Gift of the New England Women's Club.

## ► Public Service

Since Greek antiquity, works of art have documented the many forms of public service citizens have performed in democracies—from obligatory jury duty to serving on small town councils to defending the nation through military service and noncombat support of national security. They speak to the long hours and the sacrifice of individuals on behalf of their communities and country.

The Greeks set up stone inscriptions in public spaces as a form of mass communication. Among other purposes, they documented alliances, announced new laws, and praised people for their public service. A group unearthed at the Greek city of Assos (present-day Behramkale, Turkey), excavated in the 1880s by the then-fledgling Archaeological Institute of America, attest to various roles played by citizens as judges, military officers, scribes, public magistrates, and tax collectors. (See Fragmentary inscription in honor of Telemachos, [84.45](#); Decree by the city Stratonikeia for judge Amynamenos from Assos, [84.52](#); and Ring, [84.54](#)). In some cases, neighboring city-states erected duplicate inscriptions at home and in Assos as a way of bestowing honor on its citizens. The city of Kebrene recognized military officer Telemachos and his troops

for their efforts, and Stratonikeia praised the judge Amynamenos for his neutrality in settling disputes.

American photographer Paul Shambroom (b. 1956) lends gravitas to the everyday work of people serving in small-town government. Between 1999 and 2003, Shambroom photographed more than 150 meetings in towns across the United States with populations of fewer than 2,000 in the hopes of documenting what he described as “the body that represented the smallest increment of local government.” Printing his digital image on a large canvas suggests an association with the long tradition of history painting—the very type of images that usually adorn government buildings. His photograph of a village council meeting in *Maurice, Louisiana (Population: 642) Village Council, May 15, 2002* ([2005.130](#), see below) dignifies the hard work of its members: Paul Catalon (alderman), Lee Wood (alderman), Barbara Picard (mayor), Mary Herbert (clerk), and Marlene Theriot (alderman). Minutes for the 50-minute meeting record the business conducted, including the approval of a bid for road construction, proposal of annual town budgets, and concerns about bridge erosion and wastewater management.<sup>2</sup>

The entitlement to a jury of one’s peers is a fundamental American democratic value. The



Paul Shambroom, *Maurice, Louisiana (Population 642) Village Council, May 15, 2002*, 2002. Archival pigmented inkjet print on varnished canvas. Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund for Photography. Photograph © 2002 Paul Shambroom.



James Dow, *Grady County Courthouse, Jury Box, Cairo, Georgia*, 1976 (printed 1983). Gelatin silver print. Gift of Jeanne L. and Richard S. Press in honor of Stephen D. Paine. Reproduced with permission.

shared responsibility for justice, as opposed to concentrating it in the hands of a powerful few, is supposed to result in fairer outcomes for the accused, even if it doesn't always work out that way. Jim Dow's 1976 enigmatic photograph of an empty jury box inside in a Georgia courthouse (*Grady County Courthouse, Jury Box, Cairo, Georgia*, [1998.657](#), see page [23](#)) begs important questions: Who will fill the seats? Will they be objective? Will the decision be fair? Viewers are left to come to their own conclusions, and every person's outlook will be different, usually informed by their own interaction with the justice system. Some will assume an instinct for bias, whereas others will romanticize justice as impartial, an image explored in the European personification of blind justice as represented in an 18th-century English porcelain (Figure of Justice, [1988.601](#), see this page).

Military service, which carries with it the risk of the "ultimate sacrifice," is hardly unique to democracies; however, the verbal and visual rhetorics of war depend heavily on the higher purpose of protecting democratic ideals. In Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Athenian statesman Perikles eulogized the war dead, according to custom. He extolled the virtues of democratic Athens at great length precisely, he says, to demonstrate how many more advantages they had at stake than their peers.

The value of democracy as a way of life and concern that it was under threat by the Germans motivated President Woodrow Wilson to enter World War I. "The world must be safe for democracy," he declared in his address to the US Congress on April 2, 1917, days before the nation joined the greatest war effort the world had ever seen. Almost immediately, his administration established the Committee on Public Information's Division of Pictorial Publicity, which, along with other organizations, commissioned posters that played to American patriotism, communicating to citizens the many ways to support the war effort, such as through manufacturing and agricultural work, the preservation of foodstuffs needed for the troops,



Figure of Justice, made at Bow Manufactory, about 1750. Porcelain, colored enamels. Jessie and Sigmund Katz Collection.

and the purchase of liberty bonds (*Sow the Seeds of Victory!—Plant & Raise Your Own Vegetables/ Every Garden a Munition Plant*, [RES.37.396](#), see page [25](#); *Food Will Win the War—You came here seeking freedom/You must now help to preserve it—Wheat is needed for the allies/Waste nothing—United States Food Administration*, 1917, [RES.37.1032](#), see page [25](#); *For Victory, Buy More Bonds—Fourth Liberty Loan*, [RES.37.396](#), see page [25](#)).

These posters, as well as postcards and newspapers, were addressed to all Americans: men, women, children, and newly arrived immigrants.



James Montgomery Flagg, *Sow the Seeds of Victory!—Plant & Raise Your Own Vegetables/Every Garden a Munition Plant*, 1918. Color lithograph. Gift of John T. Spaulding.



Charles Edward Chambers, *Food Will Win the War—You came here seeking freedom/You must now help to preserve it—Wheat is needed for the allies/Waste nothing—United States Food Administration*, 1917. Color lithograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA.



J. Scott Williams, *For Victory, Buy More Bonds—Fourth Liberty Loan*, 1918. Color lithograph. Gift of John T. Spaulding.

<sup>1</sup> The Club formed a committee that initially sought to display a painted portrait of Howe in Faneuil Hall, but that proposal was rejected by the Art Commission of the City of Boston due to overcrowding and atmospheric conditions unfriendly to paintings, suggesting instead that the Club commission a marble bust for display in the Boston Public Library. Per December 1913 letters between Rev. Charles W. Wendte, Secretary, Julia Ward Howe Memorial Committee, and Mr. Thomas Allen, President, Arts Commission of the City of Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Shambroom, *Meetings* (Chris Boot, 2004).

# Preservation

In a democracy, it is important to see and be seen, and to listen and be heard. Freedoms of speech and of assembly preserve and strengthen democracy by bringing different voices and perspectives into dialogue. Access to information enables citizens to make informed decisions and promotes transparency, providing a way to check the power of those in office. Protests, strikes, and boycotts are principal means of challenging power. Throughout history, artists working in a range of media (visual, literary, and performing) have raised their voices to protest the status quo and demand change through their work.

## ► Free Speech

The right to speech was so highly valued by the Greeks that the words meaning “everyone gets to speak” (*isegoria*) and “speaking freely” (*parrhesia*) were synonymous with *demokratia*, but that did not mean Athenians could say whatever they wanted. Socrates himself was sentenced to death for what today we would call freedom of expression.

The main artistic venue for social critique in Athens was the theater. Comedy was inherently political and originated in “abuse” or “blame” poetry, with poets mercilessly ribbing their fellow citizens. Of the estimated 500 to 600 comedies assumed to have been created, only nine survive—all by Aristophanes. They attest to the fact that ancient Athenians were not only free to criticize their leaders but also encouraged to do so through public performances paid for and attended by the citizenry.

A drinking cup featuring flute players opposite dolphin and ostrich riders (Drinking cup [*skyphos*] depicting

chorus scenes, [20.18](#)) suggests that they are animal choruses in theatrical comedies. Representations like this one created lasting memories of ephemeral performances and functioned as visual prompts in *symposia* (all-male drinking parties), in which politics was a focus of conversation.

In the Roman forum, a statue of the over-confident satyr Marsyas, who foolishly challenged Apollo to a musical contest, symbolized liberty and free speech. The lost statue, erected in the 3rd or 2nd century BCE, is known from literary sources, coinage, and works of art in bronze and marble. As seen in the denarius struck under L. Marcus Censorinus (Denarius with head of Apollo, [01.1916.2](#), see page [28](#)), Marsyas raises his right arm high above his head. The original statue was located in the Comitium, the open area where all major political activities of the Roman Republic took place. It became a place where Romans expressed their political disagreements.



Attributed to the Heron Group, drinking cup (*skyphos*) depicting chorus scenes, Greek, Archaic period, about 520–510 BCE. Ceramic, black figure. Gift of the heirs of Henry Adams.



Denarius with head of Apollo, struck under L. Marcius Censorinus, Roman, Republican period, about 82 BCE. Silver. Augustine Shurtleff Collection of Coins.

A free press is crucial to democracy because transparency protects against tyranny. Conversely, it is perceived as a threat to monarchs and authoritarians. With the advent of the printing press, newspapers and prints offered a means of quickly and effectively communicating with the people, providing a platform to convey information (and also critiques) of government.

In their formulation of First Amendment rights, the American Founders were inspired by the radical English journalist John Wilkes (1725–1797).<sup>1</sup> His resistance to the charge of seditious libel after criticizing King George III earned him great respect in the American colonies. In a porcelain statuette made in the Derby Manufactory (Figure of John Wilkes, [06.2439](#), see page [5](#)), he leans on foundational texts of the English Enlightenment: The Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, and John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*.

In 1832, French printmaker Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) was imprisoned for an inflammatory caricature of King Louis Philippe. Two years later, in an act of daring defiance, he drew a buff young printer who personified the freedom of the press defeating the monarch and Charles X (*Ne vous y frottez pas!! Liberté de la Presse* [Do not meddle with it! Freedom of the Press], [00.1982](#), see page [30](#)).

That same year, Daumier recounted the massacre of innocent civilians following a workers’ uprising in Rue Transnonain (*Rue Transnonain, le 15 Avril, 1834*, [00.1983](#), see page [30](#)). The French government considered the image so dangerous that they confiscated the stone used to produce it and destroyed every impression of it they could find.

But even freedom of the press doesn’t always yield balanced coverage. American artist Alexandra Bell (b. 1983) urges her fellow citizens to question journalistic biases and to hold the media to account. In *Charlottesville*, Bell critiques both sides’ reporting that treats racial terror and violence on par with self-defense and protest (*Charlottesville* [1], [2023.75.1](#), see page [31](#); *Charlottesville* [2], [2023.75.2](#), see page [31](#)).<sup>2</sup>

Bell reproduces the front page of *The New York Times* on August 13, 2017, enlarging it to the scale of a history painting, and leaves her comments visible. A “clean” new version, paired beside the marked up original, puts front and center the racial violence that occurred at the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, making it impossible to ignore.

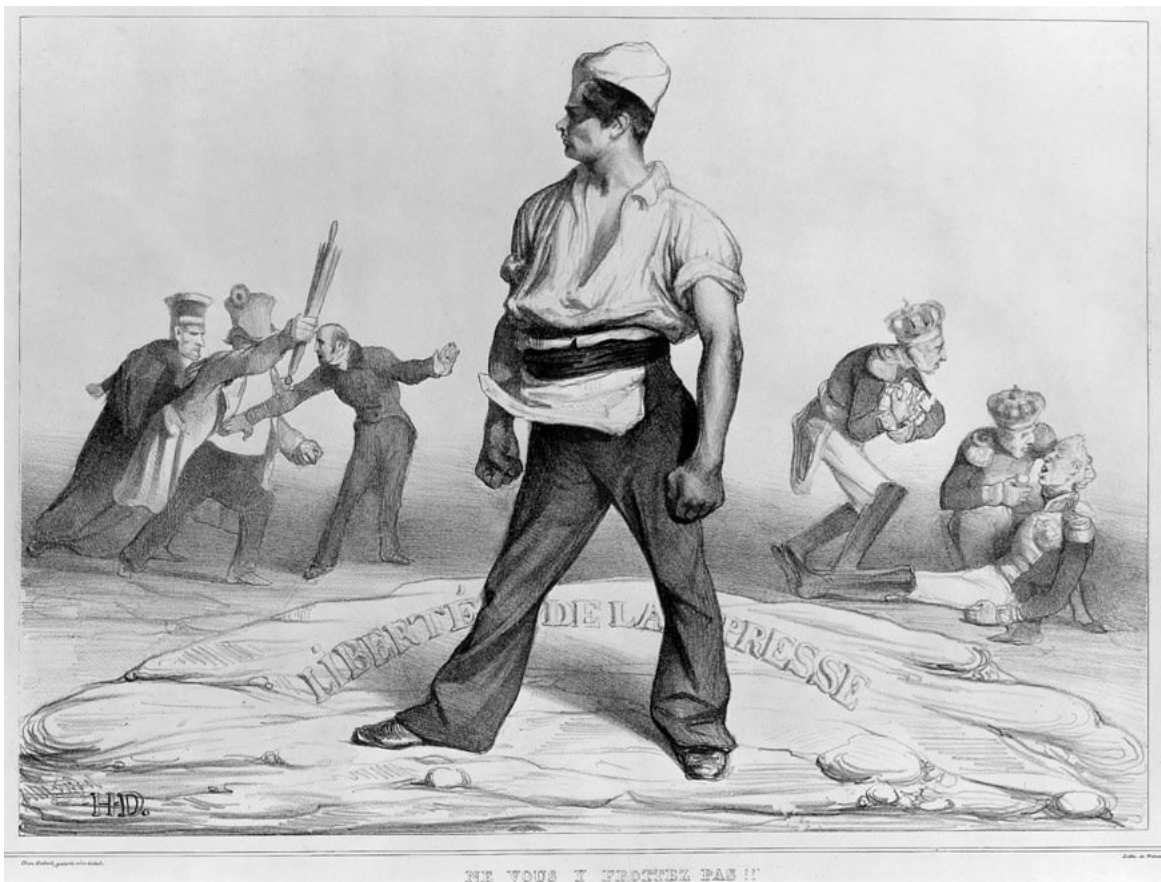
## ► Right to Protest

The right to protest peacefully is enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The first act of protest in American history occurred in 1768, when 92 Massachusetts representatives voted not to rescind a letter protesting against Britain’s Townshend Acts, which levied tea, paper, glass, and other commodities from England. Their daring refusal to pay and insistence on disobeying King George III’s orders paved the way for the Revolutionary War.

The Sons of Liberty, a rebel group, commissioned the Liberty Bowl ([49.45](#) see page [32](#)) from its fellow member, Paul Revere. The Liberty Bowl is the most important artifact of the American Revolution. One side honors the “Glorious Ninety-Two”; the other side features an engraved inscription, “No. 45/Wilkes @ Liberty” over a torn page labelled “Generall/ Warrants,” referring to John Wilkes’s influence on Revere and other American patriots. It is easy to forget that despite its beauty, this bowl was an act of treason. Everyone associated with it risked imprisonment under English law.

Perhaps no other protest movement in US history was more coordinated and consequential than the Civil Rights Movement, which employed protests, strikes, and boycotts to bring about equal rights and an end to racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. Black and white photographers documented the people who made the movement—from the widely recognized Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X to unknown, everyday people whose actions contributed to greater, albeit not total, equality by participating in events such as the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott (*Rosa Parks Being Fingerprinted, Montgomery, Alabama*, [2018.2251](#)), the 1963 march on Washington (*March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*, [2018.2234](#)), and the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery (*Pray Before Going to Jail*, [2018.2241](#)).

In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that it was unlawful to segregate students based on race; however, the decision was not enforced in Boston until the Garrity ruling in 1974, which required the use of busing to integrate the schools and resulted in protests and



Honoré Daumier, *Ne vous y frottez pas!! Liberté de la Presse* (Do not meddle with it! Freedom of the Press), 1834. Lithograph. Bequest of William Perkins Babcock.



Honoré Daumier, *Rue Transnonain, le 15 Avril, 1834*, 1834. Crayon lithograph with scraping. Bequest of William Perkins Babcock.



Alexandra Bell, Charlottesville (1) and Charlottesville (2), 2020. Screenprint, chine colle and archival pigment print on paper. Lee M. Friedman Fund. Reproduced with permission.



Paul Revere Jr., Sons of Liberty bowl, 1768. Silver. Museum purchase with funds donated by contribution the Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912.

violence against Black students. A searing image taken in 1976 by *Boston Herald* photographer Stanley Forman (b. 1945) captures a split-second assault by a young man wielding an American flag attacking attorney and political activist Theodore Landsmark (*The Soiling of Old Glory*, [2024.2717](#)).

French photographer Marc Riboud's (1923–2016) 1967 image of high school student Jan Rose Kasmir holding a chrysanthemum opposite a row of bayonet-brandishing soldiers (*Peace March, Washington, D.C.*, [2018.3517](#)) visually crystalizes the confrontations that would take place between anti-war activists and law enforcement during the Vietnam Era.

Mass demonstrations deeply frustrated President Richard Nixon and, in 1970, when he announced that the war would expand into Cambodia, college students throughout the country protested. The killing of four Kent State students by the Ohio National Guard on May 4 of that year shocked the nation. The horror of the murders was captured and spread through photography and video.

In response, professors and students (most still unidentified) at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts urgently embarked on a weeks-long campaign to create imagery for anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and strikes. Posters were printed for specific political events in and around Boston in response to Kent State, including an anti-war demonstration at Harvard Stadium and a day care center at MIT for the children of striking protestors. The urgency of the moment is evident in the visible signs of haste with which they were made; many of the images are printed askew. These printmakers had no time to waste on perfection.

The posters employ a wide range of visual strategies and communicate multiple messages. Some refer directly to the Kent State murders by reproducing photographs of the slain students that appeared in the newspapers and yearbook portraits (*Unite Now*, [2016.208](#), see page [34](#); *Your Children Are Protesting the War: Many Are Beaten, Some Will Die—If You Are Not Part of the Solution, You May Be Part of the Problem*, [2023.1284](#), see page [34](#); *When Dissent Turns to Violence It Invites Tragedy*, [2016.198](#), see page [35](#)).

Several interweave anti-war imagery with quotations from famous writers and poets: Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" ([2023.1335](#), see page [34](#)); Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* ([2023.1327](#), see page [34](#)), Carl Sandburg's "Grass" ([2023.1283](#)), and Allen Ginsberg's "America" ([2016.207](#), see page [36](#)). A particularly poignant and art historically informed example reproduces Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1820–23), replacing the title with *America Eats Her Young* ([2023.1287](#)).

Many call attention to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, with portraits of Malcolm X ([2023.1317](#)) and Bobby Seale ([2023.1314](#)), and lament police violence against Black activists (*Six More Brothers Killed in Augusta Georgia—Rally, May 14, 4 PM/Commonwealth Armory*, [2023.1320](#)).

Finally, they serve as announcements and advertisements for upcoming protests (*Rally, Friday 4:30/Harvard Stadium/For All Strikers/Protest Nixon's War*, [2023.1295](#); *Peace Through Politics/Canvassing, Telegrams/Harvard's Winthrop House*, [2023.1301](#)), much in the way social media functions today.

"Never think that war, no matter how necessary nor how justified, is not a crime. Ask the infantry and ask the dead."

ernest hemingway



"Never think that war, no matter how necessary nor how justified, is not a crime. Ask the infantry and ask the dead." [Ernest Hemingway], American, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.

UNITE



NOW

Unite Now, American, 1970. Photoscreenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund



Your children are protesting the war.  
Many are beaten, some will die.

if you are not part of the solution,  
you may be part of the problem

Your Children Are Protesting the War: Many Are Beaten, Some Will Die—If You Are Not Part of the Solution, You May Be Part of the Problem, American, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.

ill fares the land,  
to hastening ills a prey,  
when wealth accumulates  
and men decay.

FEDERAL RESERVE  
THE UNITED STATES

THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER  
FOR ALL DEBTS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE



71388867A

Anthony Jackson Clinton



Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey/When wealth accumulates and men decay [Oliver Goldsmith], American, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.



"WHEN DISSENT TURNS TO VIOLENCE  
IT INVITES TRAGEDY."

"BUMS..."

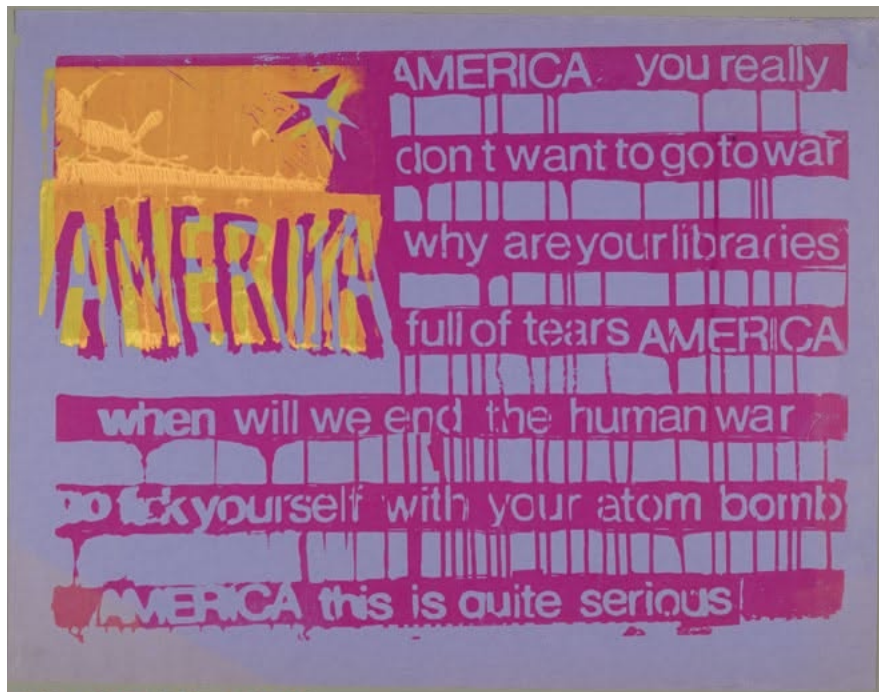


"PREDICTABLE AND AVOIDABLE."

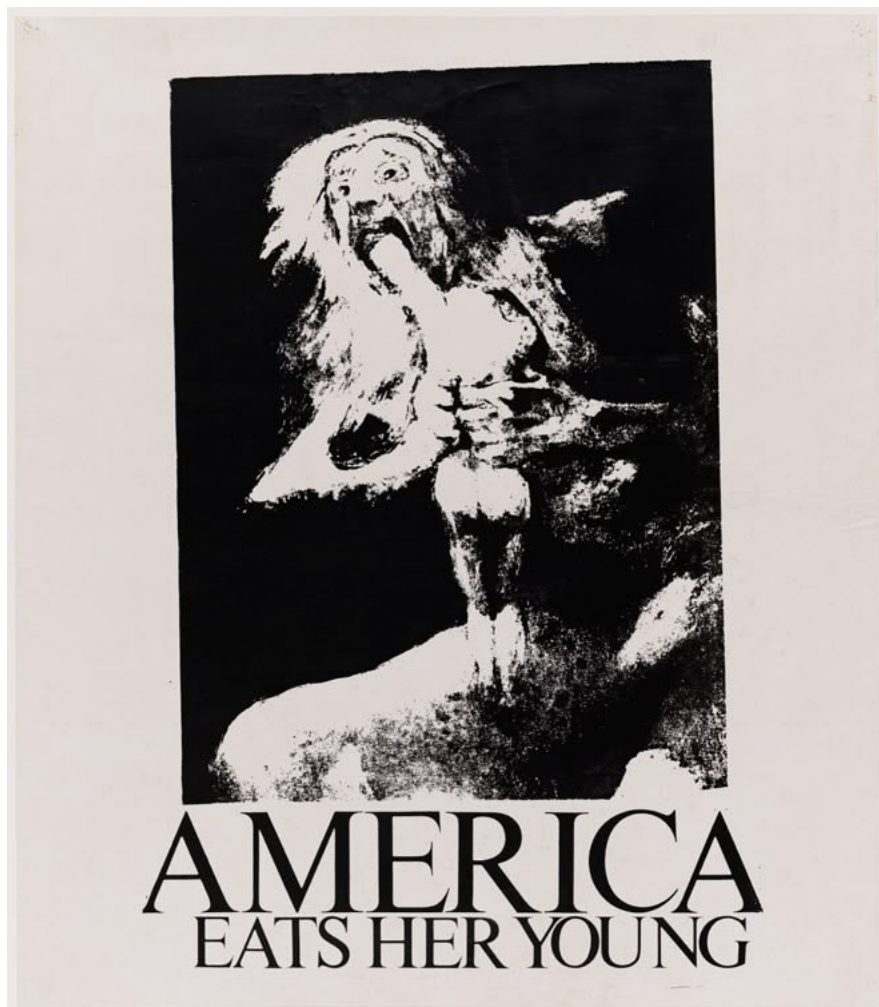
"EFFETE, IMPUDENT SNOBS."

"COLLEGES ARE CIRCUS TENTS OR  
PSYCHIATRIC CENTERS FOR OVERPRIVILEGED,  
UNDERDISCIPLINED, IRRESPONSIBLE CHILDREN  
OF THE WELL-TO-DO BLASÉ PERMISSIVISTS."

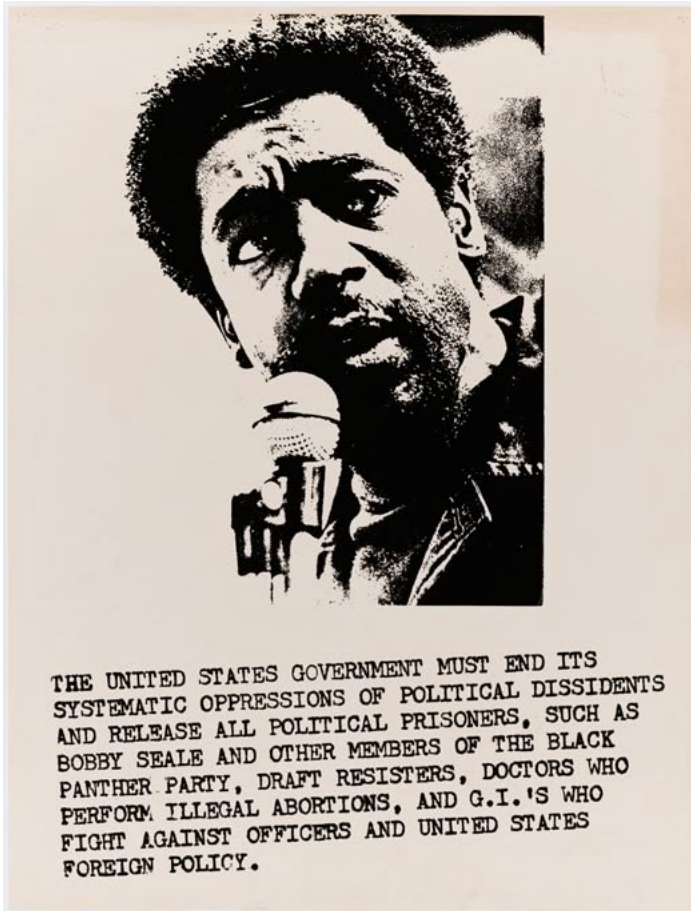




Lorraine Dudley Hipe, *America*, 1970. Photosteenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.



Kevin Hipe, *America Eats Her Young*, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund. Reproduced with permission.



Unidentified artist, *The United States Government Must End Its Systematic Oppressions of Political Dissidents and Release All Political Prisoners* [Bobby Seale], American, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.



Unidentified artist, *Peace Through Politics/Canvassing, Telegrams/ Harvard's Winthrop House*, 1970. Screenprint. Lee M. Friedman Fund.

- <sup>1</sup> The First Amendment of the The Constitution of the United States says,  
“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,  
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of  
speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble;  
and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

- <sup>2</sup> Email to author on September 24, 2024.

# Crosscurrents

The exhibition's structure of promise, practice, and preservation of democracy was designed to organize the exhibition into a coherent experience for visitors, yet there are many themes and crosscurrents that connect throughout. Three of these are especially salient: the function of art as a mirror to a society's values and its capacity, in turn, to shape them; the ways that works of art highlight the gap between a society's aspirations for democracy and the realities of how they operate and often fall short; and the activist role of artists who advocate for more just, inclusive democracies through their work.

One way in which works of art reflect a society's values and perpetuate them is in its visual messaging around children. This is particularly true of art pertaining to the role of children as future citizens. An example is a group of miniature wine pitchers (*choes*) made in Athens exclusively during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). These ritual objects (Miniature oinochoe with a girl, two boys, and dogs, [95.51](#); Miniature wine jug depicting two boys boxing, [95.53](#), see page [40](#); Miniature wine pitcher with a toddler crawling towards a pitcher, [01.8087](#), see page [40](#); Pitcher, [02.39](#), see page [40](#); Oinochoe, [02.40](#), see page [40](#)), mostly found in tombs, were used by children during the Anthesteria festival in honor of the wine god Dionysos, in which participants tasted the first wine harvested that year. Made in a range of sizes appropriate to the age of the intended user, they depict scenes of children behaving like children (playing with toys, pets, and each other; wearing protective amulets; and competing in athletic contests). They also frequently and self-

referentially depict the wine pitcher itself—usually with a small child crawling toward or holding them.

One of the many significant differences between American and Athenian democracies is the role of religion. In Athens, religion and the state were completely intertwined. The philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death for the crime of impiety (*asebeia*), specifically failing to recognize the gods of the city and introducing new gods (whether or not he did is another matter).

Participation in religion was a defining mark of good citizenship, and the presence of Athenian children at religious festivals alongside their elders instilled in them a sense of belonging in the *polis* (society).<sup>1</sup> The scenes represented on miniature *choes*, drawn from the daily lives of children, must have appealed to their audience. After all, it is natural to delight in seeing oneself represented. But they also cemented their understanding of themselves as the inheritors of Athenian democracy by affirming their place in the social and political order.



Unknown artist, miniature wine jug (*chous*) depicting two boys boxing, Greek, Classical period, about 425 BCE. Ceramic, red figure. Catharine Page Perkins Fund.



Unknown artist, pitcher (*oinochoe*), Greek, Classical period, about 410 BCE. Ceramic, red figure. Anonymous gift.



Unknown artist, miniature wine pitcher (*chous*) with a toddler crawling toward a pitcher, Greek, Classical period, 440–420 BCE. Ceramic, red figure. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.



Unknown artist, *oinochoe*, Greek, Classical period, about 400 BCE. Ceramic, red figure. Anonymous gift.

In her 2020 multimedia work *Contradiction (1948 Head of Voter Registration Line) (1965 Clarence Mitchell, Patricia Roberts Harris, and others watch the Signing of the Act)* (see page [42](#)), American artist Tomashi Jackson (b. 1980) layers photographs and voting pamphlets that attest to restricted voting access in Ohio's Black communities before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and after its passage. In the center of the canvas, stenciled in green paint, a small girl waits in line, presumably with her family. Anyone who has ever waited in line with a small child can hear her ask, "Why do we have to wait in this line? Why is this taking so long? Why is it so hard to vote? Why it is important?" These questions and more lie at the heart of Jackson's critique of ongoing voter suppression in the United States.

The image of a young girl in a long voter registration line reminds us that children often learn about democracy before they are taught civics in school. Their lived experience and that of their parents inform their expectations of who they can be in society and how they will be treated. Works of art play an important role in reminding us how impressionable children are and how powerful images are in their learning.

A society's aspirations for democracy—expressed in the US Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal and have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—are expressed in works of art that idealize it in visual terms. Such images are persuasive because, for the most part, people want to believe the stories they tell, and they acquire more power each time they are repeated.

In most contexts, idealizing images are heavily constructed and, as such, usually partial and incomplete. They omit facts, people, and alternate perspectives in service of the dominant narratives they seek to perpetuate—sometimes intentionally, often unselfconsciously.

*The Four Freedoms*, painted by Norman Rockwell (1894–1978) in 1943 and then serialized in print media, is a prime example of works of art that romanticize and simplify a vision of American democracy for political ends.

In 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his State of the Union address warning Americans of World War II's threat to democracy in the country

and throughout the world. People "everywhere in the world," he said, should have a right to each of the essential "four freedoms": of speech, of worship, from want, and from fear.

The images Rockwell constructed two years later, which draw on his own life in a rural town in Vermont with a predominantly white population, are patriotic responses resulting from his desire to support the war effort. Originally paintings, these images were reproduced in *The Saturday Evening Post* and in posters (*Save Freedom of Speech—Buy War Bonds*, [2024.2831](#); *Ours to Fight For—Freedom from Want*, [2024.2832](#); *Ours to Fight For—Freedom from Fear*, [2024.2833](#); *Save Freedom of Worship—Buy War Bonds*, [2024.2834](#), see page [43](#)) to promote the purchase of war bonds. They were everywhere—like a viral meme on social media today. The frequency with which they were reproduced rendered them defining, representative images of American democracy—whether it was Rockwell's intention or not.

*The Four Freedoms* did not aim to tell the story of America and yet, as vignettes illustrating societal values, in a sense, they do. The images of a family joyously gathered around a well-provisioned Thanksgiving table, a couple tucking their children safely into bed, people of diverse faiths gathered in tolerance of each other's religious beliefs and practices, and a laborer who has risen to speak before an audience of his peers are all deeply emotionally affecting; however, many people in America in 1943 had little or no access to these freedoms.

Questions around who is represented and who gets to speak and for whom are being asked across a range of media with more frequency than ever before. American artist Sandow Birk (b. 1962) posits an alternative history of the United States in *White Out: A Monumental Arch to American History* ([2024.2731](#), see page [44](#)). He models his monumental, virtuosic work on German printmaker Albrecht Dürer's even more monumental 1515–17 *Triumph of Maximilian (Triumphal Arch)*, a work of imperial propaganda created to broadcast the origins, achievements, and interests of the emperor in courts across Europe. Birk co-opts the form of the triumphal arch, rooted in Imperial Rome, and puts it to use in service of telling the stories of underrepresented, underappreciated non-white Americans, spanning from the year 800 CE to the present.



Tomashi Jackson, *Contradiction* (1948 Head of Voter Registration Line) (1965 Clarence Mitchell, Patricia Roberts Harris, and others watch the Signing of the Act), 2020. Acrylic, Pentelic marble, Ohio Underground Railroad site soil, American electoral ephemera, and paper bags on canvas and fabric mounted to projecting wooden support. Pizzuti Collection.



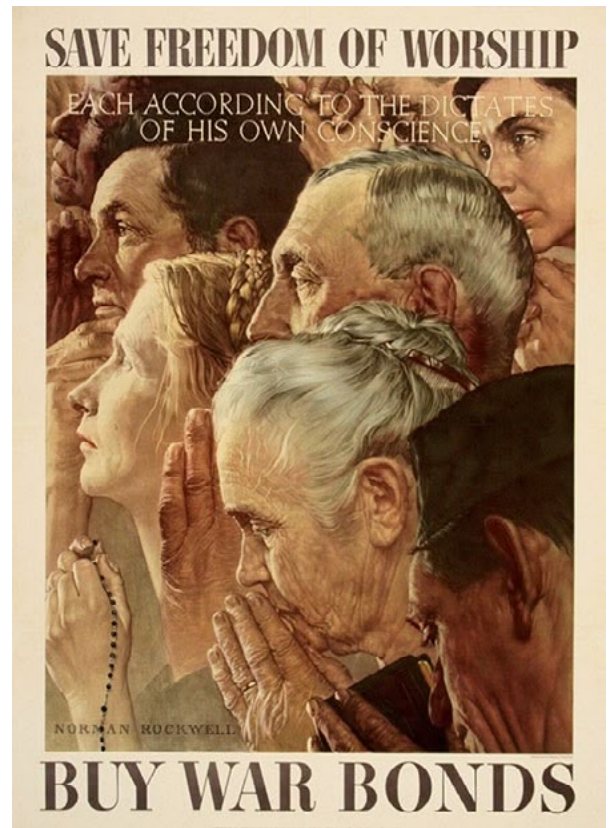
Norman Rockwell, *Save Freedom of Speech—Buy War Bonds*, 1943. Color lithograph. Source unidentified.



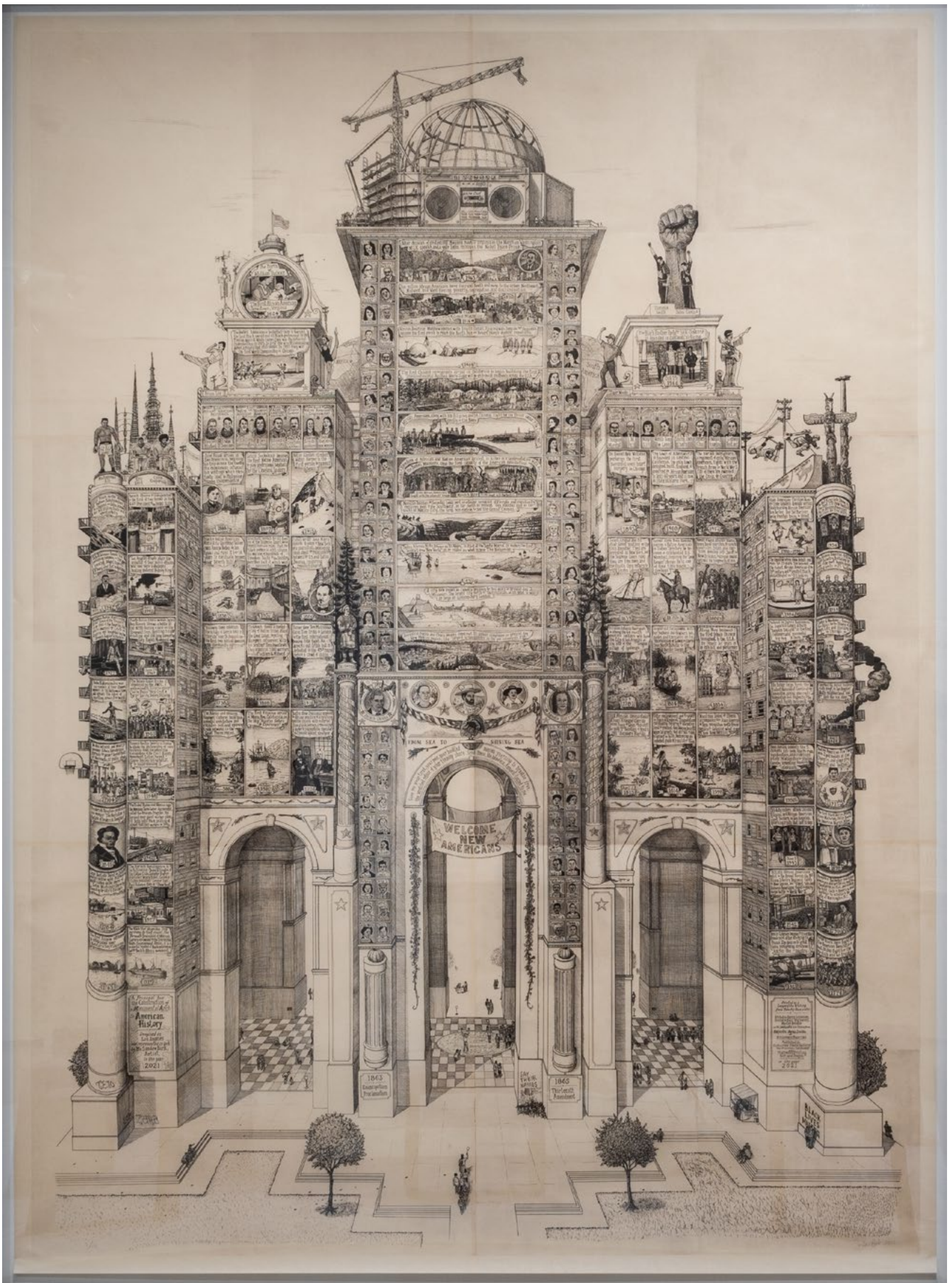
Norman Rockwell, *Ours to Fight For—Freedom from Want*, 1943. Color lithograph. Source unidentified.



Norman Rockwell, *Ours to Fight For—Freedom from Fear*, 1943. Color lithograph. Source unidentified.



Norman Rockwell, *Save Freedom of Worship—Buy War Bonds*, 1943. Color lithograph. Source unidentified.



Sandow Birk, *White Out: A Monumental Arch to American History*, 2021. Photogravure etching on twenty-four copper plates, printed on six sheets of gampi paper, joined and lined with sekishu kozo paper. Lee M. Friedman Fund. © Sandow Birk.

Guided by his own experience as the father of multiracial children and inspired by the history paintings that hang on the walls of the US Capitol rotunda, Birk presents a more expansive vision of who counts as a historically significant American—one that includes people of color.

Famous leaders, thinkers, and activists such as Frederick Douglass, Muhammad Ali, and Barack Obama are depicted alongside those less known or simply unknown, inviting viewers to engage with the fuller history of the United States and the origins, achievements, and interests of those whose access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was restricted.

In the 21st century, we are quite accustomed to the role visual artists play in openly advocating for positive social change, but this is a relatively new phenomenon. For most of history, artists responded to the tastes of their wealthy patrons and consumers in the marketplace. They were celebrated for their ingenuity, skill, and craftsmanship. The notion of the artist as a social critic who possesses a platform for political speech developed over time, gaining strength in 18th-century Europe.

Artists such as Francisco Goya (1746–1828) began to hint at and then openly critique power structures, predominantly through the medium of printmaking, which was both inexpensive and widely circulated.

It is worth pausing on the work of two powerful feminist artists, educators, and activists who tirelessly and positively influenced discourse around representation and belonging in America. Both artists force viewers to reckon with injustices, past and present.

Born in Harlem into a family of powerful female makers and storytellers, Faith Ringgold (1930–2024) was a leader among Black and feminist artists for decades. From her 1960s paintings, in which she critiqued the violence of racism in America, to her story quilts of the 1980s, in which she elevated an art often dismissed as mere craft, she was determined to insert Black narratives into mainstream discourses and art institutions.

Ringgold manifests these ambitions in *Dream 2: King and the Sisterhood* (1991.625, see page 46), cocreated in 1987 with her daughter, cultural critic Michele Wallace. Influenced by Tibetan *thangkas* (Buddhist paintings on fabric that can be rolled and

unrolled with ease), she integrates the knowledge of sewing that she learned from her mother, Harlem fashion designer Willi Posey, with her talent for painting.

In the center panel, she paints a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr., based on a photograph taken during his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. By including female leaders of the Civil Rights Movement—Coretta Scott King, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks—Ringgold shines a light on the women who labored to bring about King’s dream and acknowledges that the Civil Rights Movement was precisely that: a movement, not a man. She does not identify them by name; rather, it is up to the viewer to do the work to learn their stories.

Text panels arranged in a T-pattern around the group portrait contain a transcription of a speech Wallace gave on MLK Jr. Day in 1987, only the second year that it was observed. In one of the most poignant passages, she writes,

When you’re a child, if your parents love you, or somebody loves you on a regular basis, you expect that everyone will. Nobody ever recovers from the disappointment of finding out otherwise. When you’re Black, this shock is triple because not only are you unloved, you are hated by people you don’t even know and who don’t know you. Even as one reduces the legislative, political, and economic burden of hate, the personal experience continues unabated. King’s message was that as long as hate continues, it will find a way to disrupt the national equilibrium and to poison the economic, political, and social lives of Black citizens, starting with those who can least afford the disadvantage: the poor.<sup>2</sup>

The multigenerational family collaboration presents multiple perspectives: Ringgold celebrates the heroes of the movement that (officially) brought Jim Crow laws to an end; Wallace gives voice to the pain of anti-Black racism that remains.

Throughout her distinguished career as a self-proclaimed “culture worker,” American artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (1940–2025), of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, strategically and consistently helped create opportunities for fellow indigenous artists, leaving behind not only a body of work but also communities of artists and makers.



Faith Ringgold, *Dream 2: King & The Sisterhood*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, pieced, died, and printed fabric. The Hayden Collection—Charles Henry Hayden Fund and funds donated anonymously. Faith Ringgold © 1988.

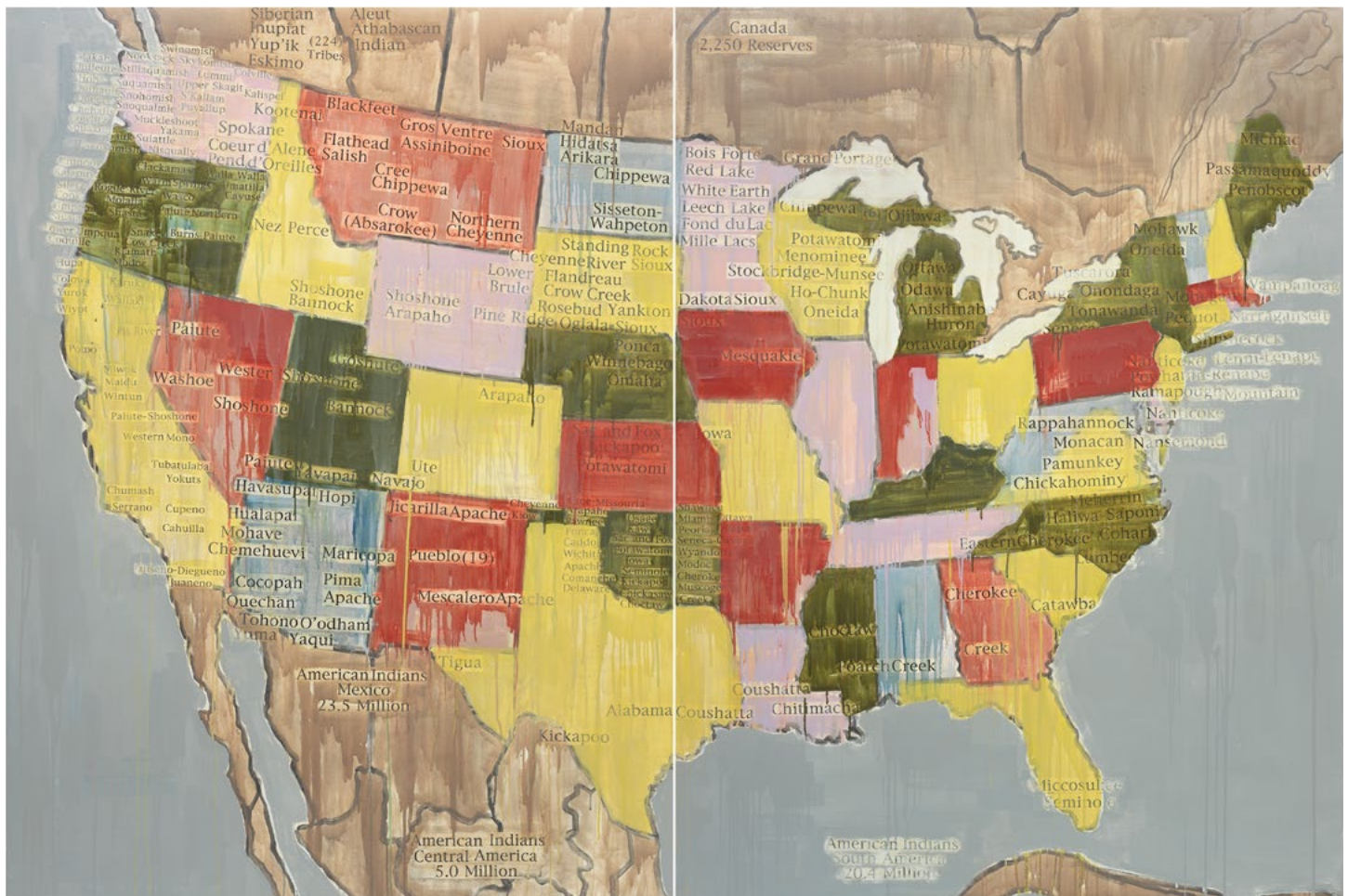
Among Smith's artistic achievements is the expansion of the vocabulary of modernist landscape paintings.<sup>3</sup> In *Tribal Map* (2018.2112.1-2, see below), she explores the appropriation of indigenous land through an easily recognizable image: the map of the United States.

Maps are political statements; they exert control over the land. American painter Jasper Johns (b. 1930), whose paintings influenced Smith, claimed that the map is "seen and not looked at, not examined."<sup>4</sup>

In *Tribal Map*, Smith blends text and image to make a point about who is counted in American democracy. Applied labels name 562 federally recognized and 63 state-recognized tribes, highlighting the power of the the US government to define indigenous communities rather than the members of the communities to identify themselves. Smith remarked, "Native Americans still live under a colonial system."<sup>5</sup>

The technique of drip painting over a base layer of paint appears to wash away the indigenous communities that once lived in the land. The states in the East have fewer tribes than in the West, and the Ohio Valley, where tribes were pushed out in the late 18th and early 19th centuries through a series of treaties, is vacant of them.<sup>6</sup>

In this exhibition, we explored how works of art that engage with democracy both mirror deeply held societal values and catalyze new thinking; how they shape the impressionable young and push the old with fixed mindsets; how they repeat old, convenient tropes, while also giving rise to new visual shorthands; and how artists reinvent old traditions as platforms for new stories that advance the cause of a truly representative democracy.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Tribal Map*, 2000. Mixed media on canvas. Museum purchase with funds donated by Barbara L. and Theodore B. Alford through the Acorn Foundation, Drs. Bruce K. and Shelly Eckman, The Hayden Collection—Charles Henry Hayden Fund, The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, and Gallery Instructor 50th Anniversary Fund to support The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection. © Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

- <sup>1</sup> Josine Blok, *Citizenship in Classical Athens* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1, 203.
- <sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan signed MLK Day into law in 1983, making it a federal holiday, but it was not observed until 1986 and, in some states, not until 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> Carolyn Kastner, *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: An American Modernist* (University of New Mexico Press, 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> *Map* (1961) by Jasper Johns:  
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79372>
- <sup>5</sup> Per artist statement in MFA database.
- <sup>6</sup> Treaties of Fort Stanwix (1768), Fort McIntosh (1785), Fort Finney/Mouth of the Great Miami (1786), Fort Harmar (1789), and Fort Greenville (1795).

# Conclusion

At the outset of this publication, I shared the definition of “democracy” that underpinned the exhibition’s object selection and interpretation; however, the word is not ours alone to define. Early in the planning process, we considered how we might create an engaging invitation to visitors to share their definitions and, by extension, experiences of democracy. We agreed that it should be active, and we coalesced around the idea of a vote. We were guided by a collective desire to create an experience that could be shared with others. The final result, located in the “practice” room focused on voting, was a digital interactive that asked visitors, “What is the first word that comes to mind when you hear ‘democracy’?” and fed the one-word responses to a word cloud projected on the wall nearby. Words submitted more frequently were larger and those that were less common or unique were smaller. The interactive collected data but, more importantly, visualized it for visitors. Each visitor had the opportunity to cast their vote, to listen, and to be heard.

Throughout the 16-week run of the exhibition, “freedom” consistently loomed large in the center. That “freedom” is the word most commonly associated with democracy should come as no surprise, and yet there is tremendous value in observing it actually voted in by thousands of visitors. The intertwining of freedom and democracy in political discourse and in the visual arts (recall

Rockwell’s *Four Freedoms*) has a long history. The works of art featured in this exhibition serve as reminders of humankind’s moral courage, hard work, acumen, and creativity, which birthed democracy, improved upon it, and still hold it accountable. May artists continue to lift their voices in the visual and other arts, and may their work be seen and heard in all the parts of the world still yearning for democracy.