



FRANCE
VIEWS
AMERICA
1765-1815

*AN Exhibition to Commemorate the
Bicentenary of French Assistance in
the American War of Independence*

PRESENTED BY THE
Eleutherian Mills Historical Library
WILMINGTON • DELAWARE

FRANCE VIEWS AMERICA, 1765-1815 presents French opinion concerning America as it was expressed in writing, in pictures, and in song during a turbulent half-century. Events on both continents shaped French thoughts about America. In the New World, the colonies grew restive under British domination. They revolted and formed an independent constitutional government and survived a second conflict with England. In Europe, France itself experienced the Enlightenment, the decline of the monarchy, the Revolution and the Terror, and the rise and fall of Napoleon.

The Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Wilmington, Delaware, offers this exhibition to commemorate the Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce of 1778. Not only did that treaty provide crucial military and monetary assistance to our infant nation, but it marked the height of favorable French attitudes toward America.

This exhibition uses a framework of four themes to depict the dynamic shifting in French opinions about America. "The Myth and the Land" examines the early image of an exotic new world and how it

was altered by firsthand observation. "The Utopian Government" illustrates Enlightenment ideals and their modification in the laboratory of American political experience. "The Atlantic Market" portrays the French dream of unlimited trade and how it was transformed by competition. "The Yanqui" presents French perceptions of the American character developed over the fifty-year period. Indeed, it was direct experience that changed French thoughts about America and its people from a basis in myth to a basis in reality.

Most of the surviving evidence of the French view of America is in the form of books and manuscripts, which reflect primarily the view of a small number of literate Frenchmen, an elite. A significantly larger group knew virtually nothing about the New World. They held vague emotional impressions of a faraway place and formed judgments on the basis of graphic and oral traditions. Prints, textiles, songs, and memorabilia convey those nonverbal attitudes. Thus, this exhibition offers a panorama of public opinion ranging from popular tradition to the most articulate expression of French genius.



The Myth and the Land

FEW Frenchmen before 1765 held views of America based on fact or personal knowledge. Then as travelers to America increased in the late eighteenth century, their detailed descriptions of the flora, fauna, and natives of North America helped effect a change from myth to reality in the French image of the New World.

The Noble Savage was the symbol of exotic America in French decorative arts and in literature. When factual accounts of native *mores* became more plentiful by the turn of the century, the meeting of Indian and European cultures became a dominant literary theme, as shown in Chateaubriand's *Atala*. In art, the Baroness Hyde de Neuville's watercolor of a pitiful, blanket-wrapped Onondaga couple, painted in 1807, contrasts with Desève's earlier proud "Amériquains."

French views of the landscape of the new world underwent a similar transition. Around 1765, exotica—palm trees, poison sumac, alligators, and rattlesnakes—piqued the curiosity of French travelers. After that date, botanists like the Michaux published more scientific descriptions of North American forests.

For Frenchmen, the Quaker epitomized the virtuous farmer in that land of plenty. The idealization of the Quaker, shown in Marsillac's *The Life of William Penn*, satisfied their yearning for bucolic simplicity in France's highly complex society. Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* reinforced the image of labor rewarded by the New World's natural bounty.

The dream of land ownership in idyllic rusticity lured many Frenchmen to emigrate after the War of Independence. Despite the warning of Benjamin Franklin in his *Information to those who would remove to America* (1784), many were trapped in land swindles and speculation. The Scioto Colony debacle, pictured in map, cartoon, pamphlet, and letter, exemplified a tempering of the French dream.

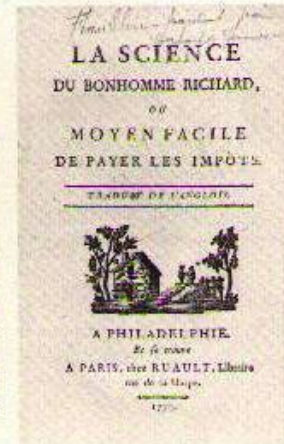


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AMÉRIQUAINS.

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The Utopian Government

LEADING French intellectuals of the eighteenth century sought the form of an ideal republic. Their search intensified as the monarchy declined and revolution made way for constitutional government, first here and then in France itself. French emigrant experience in the United States, however, clearly revealed that America was no utopia.

Before the War of Independence, leaders of the Enlightenment in France believed that America might serve as a laboratory in their search for a perfect form of government. Intellectuals were not alone in their sympathy for the American colonies' struggle with England. One manufacturer, for example, offered four dozen woolen stockings for the ill-equipped American army. Rich and poor alike supported the war and celebrated the Franco-American victory in 1783 with a *Te Deum* in Notre Dame.

France's interest in events in America faded before the immediacy of internal upheaval. Only the image of American liberty remained. Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, with its publication of the Bill of Rights, helped incite the scramble for a French equivalent, a Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Refugees from the French Revolution flooded into overcrowded American ports, only to find a scarcity of employment and an overwhelming language barrier. Dismayed by the British nature of American society, they often clustered in small colonies, forming their own clubs, like the *Société des Bêtes*, and publishing their own newspapers. Some of these Frenchmen stayed to make new lives in America, while others chose to return, taking back firsthand observations to their homeland.

The Atlantic Market

FRANCE initially envisioned trade with America as the ideal solution to her financial troubles. Difficulties of transatlantic travel, credit uncertainties of the new nation, machinations of the British, and internal bureaucratic entanglements dashed those hopes of infinite commercial reward and briefly brought the two nations to the brink of war. Events in the early nineteenth century kept trade to a minimum, as France learned to view America as a distinct commercial entity rather than as a mythical panacea.

A French print illustrating the dream of New World riches did not correspond to the reality of commercial problems described by businessmen in their letters. Distance, weather, and piracy hampered transatlantic trade, despite great naval skill and daring. To the French, the American seaman, especially John Paul Jones, was the great hero of the Atlantic, memorialized in medal and in print.



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Franco-American trade was beset by problems of credit as well as of distance and maritime conditions. After the Treaty of Amity and Commerce the French felt the burden of their loan to the young American government. Their inability to obtain prompt repayment generated distrust and suspicion of businessmen and government officials in the United States. Even Lafayette, a great admirer and honorary citizen of the new nation, urged caution in commercial dealings.

After 1800 when France accepted the fact that no trade bonanza was forthcoming, canny businessmen still saw potential for profit in America. Reports like La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt's chart on mills he visited along the east coast awakened investor interest in nascent American industry and perpetuated the French vision of America as a land of opportunity.

The Yanqui

FRENCHMEN were always deeply critical of American materialism. Letters and travel accounts such as Milfort's *Mémoire* censured the ruthlessness of the Yanqui trader, whose shrewdness was further proven in the international sphere by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Only in retrospect, as contemporary documents show, did most Frenchmen recognize the inadequacy of the bargain they had made with the United States.

A second Yanqui characteristic commonly noted by French emigrés and travelers was lack of social sophistication. Chastellux among many deplored the absence of the arts and the disregard of intellectual excellence. Some French commentators accepted De Pauw's degeneracy theory, while others, like Josephine du Pont, attributed American social and intellectual limitations to the rigors of the frontier, the British orientation of society, the newness of the nation, and materialistic priorities.



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Balancing the deficiencies of the American character were the strengths of courage and ingenuity. The Yanqui woman, lauded by returning veterans and travelers, became the courageous and virtuous heroine of plays and novels like *Miss MacRae* and *Adraste et Nancy* and a new symbol of America in the decorative arts. Her bravery and devotion to family became part of the French idealization of the American pioneer.

France perceived Yanqui ingenuity in the scientific genius of Benjamin Franklin. Thomas Jefferson and Robert Fulton were other Americans whose innovations so captured the French imagination that their images became decorative motifs. Exchanges between French and American technical societies underlined the spirit of scientific communication, which was a continuing element of Franco-American friendship.



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ILLUSTRATIONS

1—Pocahontas story on French fan, ca. 1781; 2—engraving, surrender of Cornwallis, ca. 1782; 3—Utica Church, watercolor by Mme. Hyde de Neuville, 1807 (New-York Historical Society); 4—engraving in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, 1799 ed.; 5—translation of Benjamin Franklin's *Way to Wealth*; 6—D'Estaing's victory at sea, cartoon engraving, ca. 1780 (Library of Congress); 7—engraving, American travel, ca. 1800; 8—porcelain cup, likeness of Robert Fulton, ca. 1817 (Winterthur Museum).

SCHEDULE

Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware

January–February, 1978

Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, Louisiana

March–May, 1978

Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri

May–July, 1978

Detroit Historical Museum, Detroit, Michigan

July–October, 1978

The Balch Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

November–December, 1978

Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina

January–March, 1979

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