

# A Message to YOU the Designers and Your Audience

As both are creations of the human mind, art and politics have coexisted, in one way or another, throughout recorded history. At times, the relationship has been beneficial and fruitful for both – Maya Lin’s design for the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial (1980–82) in Washington, D.C. is one of the more recent examples. Far more common, however, are those cases in which one side – to put it delicately – creates “difficulties” for the other: e.g., governments that suppress and censor, or seek to co-opt artistic creativity for their own ends (as in socialist realist and Nazi art); or, conversely, artists acting as political dissidents, or even as revolutionaries (the political poster, which can combine evocative design with an ability to speak to a mass audience, has been part of almost all modern civil insurrections, from 1917 Russia to the Arab Spring). Thus, while the works in *We the Designers* may reflect current issues and concerns, they also stand as representatives of a long-standing (albeit highly varied) artistic tradition.

This same art-politics tradition is also evident in exhibition’s title, *We the Designers*. The reference, of course, is to the opening sentence of

the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, i.e., “[w]e the People (of the United States....).” Effective as it is, however, I would argue that the title is more than simply a clever play on words (though it certainly is that). There is a historical relevance here that extends far beyond the present exhibition. Indeed, I believe that a persuasive case can be made that the linkages between our Constitution and the work of graphic designers (here understood to mean both modern practitioners and their 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century counterparts) date all the way back to the 1787 Philadelphia Convention.

To begin with, consider the way the document *looks*, or, to be more precise, the way it would have looked during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today, we are so thoroughly accustomed to the “fancy” script of those “original” copies of the Constitution, that we seldom (if ever) consider the fact that its physical appearance didn’t “just happen”: someone had to make a series of *design decisions*. That “someone,” in fact, was the Committee on Style and Arrangement (yes, that really was its name), meeting during the final days of the Constitutional Convention.

Most of the “look” that has become so familiar to us, including in particular the final wording of the Preamble (and, in turn, the title of this exhibition), comes directly from the work of this committee.

Even when viewed today, the bold highlighting of “We the People” (those words again!) (fig. 1) looks impressive. When the Constitution was first unveiled in public, it caused a sensation. *The Pennsylvania Packet*, the first newspaper to publish the document, printed the bold first words using six lines of type. Here we have another example of a design decision – and an especially effective one at that. To be sure, it was common practice to emphasize the opening passages of these types of manuscripts. Even so, one has only to look at the layout of the original printed version of the hapless Articles of Confederation (fig. 2), the country’s earlier governing document, to get a sense of how different the Preamble must have seemed to people reading it for the first time. Looming above the densely packed text of the Articles appear the enormous words, “To All To Whom....” Some might disagree, but it

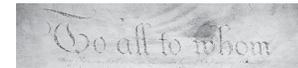
seems clear to me that, unlike its successor, this does not strike one as all that inspiring.

Second, immediately after Ratification, and for the next two hundred years, American studios and workshops turned out amazing quantities of pottery, engravings, posters, pieces of furniture, and all manner of other artifacts containing Constitutional themes. What makes this level of productivity all the more striking is how few paintings or sculpture from this time period take the Constitution for their subject.

With very few exceptions (most of which tend to be either portraits or murals for capitol buildings), painters and sculptors have preferred to utilize scenes associated with the Revolutionary War or the signing of the Declaration of Independence. As far as I know, no one has ever presented a satisfactory explanation for this disparity. It is tempting, however, to draw upon some of the traditional stereotypes that still prevail among some artists, and note how painters and sculptors seem drawn to dramatic events such as declaring one’s independence or fighting wars, leaving to the designers the portrayal of less



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exciting, but nonetheless practical and important activities, like drafting a constitution.

In view of the quantity, it is hardly surprising that the artistic quality of these works is, to say the least, fairly uneven. A few even come off – particularly to the modern viewer – as rather silly. One (arguable) example is Howard Chandler Christy’s (again those words!) *We the People* (1937, fig. 3), the official poster of the Constitution Sesquicentennial. Here, we see a female figure presumably meant to represent Lady Liberty, wrapped in an American flag and accompanied by a bald eagle, floating above (her legs are partly submerged inside a small cloud) the Founders, who are in the act of signing the Constitution. By 1937, Christy had become a well-known and highly prolific illustrator; his work includes a large number of book and magazine covers, as well as a variety of patriotic posters. A great many of these illustrations, particularly those from around 1920, feature at least one attractive young woman, posed in a provocative or alluring (at least for the time) fashion (see, for example, fig. 4). Although almost certainly unintentional (especially in view of the seriousness of occasion for which the poster was commissioned), the similarity between the

Lady Liberty of *We the People* and the “Christy Girls,” as the models were popularly known, is as unmistakable as it is unfortunate. The juxtaposition of this figure with the sober portrayal of the Framers (although it is difficult to escape the impression that George Washington is staring at her legs, or at least at the portion not hidden by the cloud) is quite jarring indeed. Perhaps a better title for the poster might be, *The Founders and the Flapper*.

A much more effective work – both artistically and politically – comes from 1837. Although it too was produced during an anniversary year (the 50<sup>th</sup>), the *Lovejoy Memorial Plate*, by a designer whose name is lost to history (fig. 5), was meant to commemorate a different, far more tragic, event. Elijah Parish Lovejoy had been the editor of an abolitionist newspaper in Alton, Illinois. On the evening of November 7, 1837 (two days before his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday), he was attacked and murdered by a pro-slavery mob, which then dumped his printing press into the Mississippi River. The incident sent shockwaves throughout the nation: it was the first recorded case in which a white man had been killed over the issue of black slavery. There was also the highly troubling fact that the

attack on Lovejoy had been caused by the opinions he had published in his newspaper.

As it happens, shock and dismay over the attack was not limited to the U.S. The Staffordshire factory of Great Britain, maker of transfer-printed ceramics, created the commemorative plate (also known as the abolitionist or anti-slavery plate, as “The Tyrant’s Foe”) only a month after Lovejoy’s death. All of the plates produced in the series – the exact number is unclear – were exported to the United States, where they were sold to raise money for the abolitionist cause.

In contrast to the Christy poster, the political message of the Lovejoy plate is presented in a rather straightforward, almost understated, fashion. Direct reference to the editor himself, the presumed subject of the work, is confined to a small section in the top center of the rim. The dominant feature of the work (and what makes it relevant to a discussion of the Constitution) is the complete text of the First Amendment, which is etched into – and completely fills – the center of the plate. On closer examination, it can be seen that a few of the clauses have been highlighted in one way or another. Citizens of the time would have

immediately recognized these, most notably the clauses pertaining to freedom of the press and the right to petition, as a list of the rights over which Elijah Lovejoy was murdered. Despite the fact that it hardly even mentions the event that inspired its creation, the Lovejoy Plate is able to deliver a potent reminder of the larger issues at stake in the slavery controversy.

Finally, while we do not often think of it this way (at least not outside of political science departments), the writing of a Constitution is itself a design process. Earlier, we discussed elements of the document’s appearance; here, we are referring to the construction of a set of governing institutions – clearly an act of craftsmanship. Indeed, delegates to the Convention frequently described their work in just these terms – James Wilson of Pennsylvania spoke of “laying the foundation of a new building,” and Benjamin Franklin compared reaching an especially difficult compromise with crafting a table. By far, the most common such image invoked in Philadelphia was that of “creating an instrument,” which also caught on with succeeding generations of statesmen (a Supreme Court Justice writing in the 1820s called the Constitution “the



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most wonderful instrument ever drawn by the hand of man”).

It is only partly a coincidence that an examination of one of the more remarkable—certainly the most unique—feature of this particular design brings us all the way back to the first three words, “We the People.” The aforementioned Articles of Confederation had been drawn up by the Second Continental Congress and ratified by the 13 state legislatures. This procedure, whereby some existing authority enacts a legal code or governing framework for a people or nation-state, has a very long history. The Articles, like all earlier writs, such as the Ten Commandments or the Code of Hammurabi, were literally *handed down* from rulers to the ruled. Even *Magna Carta*, for all its historic significance, was of this “top-down” sort. A *true* constitution, by contrast, moves in precisely the opposite direction. As the word — “constitute” — itself suggests, it is a legal code created by citizens coming together. In the U.S. Constitution (the first of its type in world history), this idea is encapsulated in those first three words. Or, to be more precise, the phrase “we the people” is to be regarded as more than just words. The delegates to the Philadelphia Convention were assembled

solely for the purpose of drafting the document, which was then ratified by 13 special state conventions.

To many in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Europe, the notion of a government arising from “we the people” seemed as absurd as it was radical. It was, according to this view, an experiment that was destined to fail. Of course, there are many today who also regard those three words as absurd, but for a completely different reason: the Framers’ rather exclusive definition of “people.” As is often pointed out, the term included neither women nor slaves. Some political historians go even further, noting the various compromises of the Convention that guaranteed not only the continuation of slavery, but that slave states would wield disproportionate power in the new government. According to *this* view, the experiment has failed: “we the people” *are* just words.

The facts are undeniable; it is also true that the Philadelphia delegates were exclusively white, male Christians (in fact, only two were Catholics). I think that a case can be made, however, all of this actually provides further evidence of the genius of the Constitution’s design: a framework that transcends the limitations of the time and place in which it was created.

Moreover, an integral part of that design is that sometimes tarnished phrase, “we the people.” Even if the reality continues to fall short, it is terribly important that those words are there—even when they really are “only words,” they are far more than “just words.” Throughout our history, the various struggles to extend liberty or justice have always been, at some level, a challenge to Americans to *look at the words*. To take only one example, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech includes the extraordinary phrase “...that one day this Nation will rise up to live out the true meaning of its creed,” an infinitely more eloquent way of saying, “look at the words; *mean* the words” (admittedly, in this case the words come from the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution, but “created equal” are pretty good words, too).

It takes nothing away from the courage and dedication of the civil rights activists of the 1950s and 60s to point out how much, much more difficult a task they would have faced without that framework in place. In too many countries, even taking modest steps toward a more just society has required a wholesale restructuring of the government. We know, from their later writings and

speeches, that the Framers were well aware of the flaws in their handiwork; that’s why they promised — a few words later in the Preamble — a “more perfect union,” rather than perfection itself. That particular phrase, however, was not simply a case of the delegates trying to get us to lower our expectations: it also expresses their view of the Constitution as a work in progress. They fully expected that future generations (like that which ended slavery, enfranchised women, etc.) would improve upon what they started. All things considered, the Founders left us a pretty amazing set of tools: thanks to them, we have the means to continue their work, to create a *still* more perfect union. Whether we have the will is another matter — which leads us back to the political role of artists.

That admonition to “look at the words” is, I think, clearly present in the Lovejoy Plate, which is what makes it particularly effective piece of political art. It also brings to mind the last of the art-politics categories I described in the opening paragraph of this essay, namely art as political dissent. It is a mistake to associate such works solely with revolution or regime change. American history in particular provides numerous examples of an artist issuing

a challenge, not as a revolutionary, but as a political or social critic; perhaps an even more accurate description would be political or social *conscience*. The unknown designer of the Lovejoy Plate plays the role of a conscience perfectly: reminding the American public – by having the First Amendment (almost literally) shoved into their faces – of something they already know, but that many had chosen to ignore.

There is an enormous literature in both the humanities and the social sciences concerning the social and/or psychological function(s), or purpose(s), of art. I have no intention of wandering into that thicket here. What I would say, however, speaking

as a political scientist (one with a lifelong passion for the performing and visual arts), is that I have always been struck by an artwork's ability to get our attention. It may be for only a brief period, but it is an ability highly prized among politicians. It is also a useful for anyone seeking to serve as a conscience. In other words, artists who are concerned with the political and social problems of our time, and who, like those on display here, hope that their work might in some way contribute to solutions, face a simple question (albeit one for which the answer clearly is not): having gotten our attention, what do you intend to do with it?

W. D. Kay  
Department of  
Political Science  
Northeastern University

**REFRAMING  
POLITICAL ISSUES  
IN THE  
OBAMA ERA**

WE **THE** DESIGNERS

Boston  
Northeastern University  
September 29 – December 15

2011

Washington  
National Press Club  
January 16 – February 10

2012

St. Paul  
Goldstein Museum of Design  
September 28 – December 30

2012