How to Participate

- If you would like to ask a question, you can use the Q&A feature.
- We will be answering audience questions at the end of the session.
- Please note the views expressed here are those of the guest historians.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.
Sara Charles is a teacher with eighteen years of experience instructing AP Art History, AP European History, AP United States History, and AP World History in Westchester, NY. In 2008, she created an online Professional Learning Community for more than 3,000 Art History teachers dedicated to democratizing access to art education and teacher-training opportunities. She currently works at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History as an Education Program Manager and is an instructor of Art History at Sotheby’s Institute of Art for secondary students.
Liz Covart is the Founding Director of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and is best known for her work as the creator, host, and executive producer of the award-winning podcast “Ben Franklin’s World: A Podcast About Early American History.” As the Founding Director of Colonial Williamsburg Innovation Studios, Liz practices a blend of scholarly history, public history, and digital humanities. Liz has research expertise in the American Revolution and is working on a history of the Articles of Confederation and American union.
Today’s Documents

- Benjamin Franklin’s copy of the US Constitution
- Jean-Antoine Houdon’s bust of Franklin
The Art of Diplomacy: Benjamin Franklin in France

John Smith, Franklin’s Reception at the Court of France..., 1860.
(Library of Congress, 2004669623)
Major Transformations in 18th-Century Art and History

- Enlightenment ideas spread:
  - Newton’s empirical observation of gravity
  - Locke’s “natural” rights of life, liberty, and property
  - Voltaire’s rejection of the “old order” of Church and State through satirical theater, such as *Candide*
  - Rousseau’s elevation of “simple nature” and “pure feelings” over the corruption of civilization

Neoclassical Art & Architecture
Major Transformations in 18th-Century Art and History

- Neoclassical art hearkened back to Classical influences from Greece and Rome, especially the tradition of the veristic Roman portrait bust, designed to portray its subjects as embodiments of age, wisdom, and public virtue.

- Why the change in art?
  - Excavation of the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, 1709
  - Johann Winckelmann, who wrote the first text on Classical Greek art in 1764
  - Edward Gibbon, who wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776
  - Atlantic Revolutions in the United States, France, Haiti, Mexico, and South America

*Head of a Roman Patrician from Otricoli, ca. 75–50 BCE.*
(Palazzo Torlonia; Photo by Sara Charles)
The Art of Diplomacy: Benjamin Franklin in France

- While representing the American colonies in France from 1776 to 1785, Benjamin Franklin was a popular celebrity.

- The rage for his likeness resulted in images ranging from marble busts and oil paintings to prints and miniatures.

- Franklin was well aware of the need to appeal to the French court and constructed a sartorial and artistic persona rooted in how the French aristocracy imagined America.

- The impact of the artistic and diplomatic exchange that he fostered between the United States and France cannot be overstated.
Portrait of Franklin
1777

- Pastel on paper by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (French, 1725-1805) as a study for an oil portrait commissioned by Elie de Beaumont, a friend of Franklin’s and member of the Loge des Neuf Soeurs.

- Greuze rose to prominence at the Salon in 1755 and was a celebrated genre and portrait painter in the Académie known for his scenes of moralizing sensibilité and the idealized "natural man."

- Here, Franklin is depicted as a philosopher-statesman and wears a shirt with ruffled linen jabot, a white satin waistcoat, and a sable-trimmed blue banyan.
Terra Cotta Portrait Bust of Franklin
1778

- This bust is attributed to Jean-Antoine Houdon (French, 1741-1828). Houdon most likely created it based on passing observations of Franklin at the Loge des Neuf Soeurs. The two men met formally in 1783.

- Trained at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1761 when only twenty years of age, Houdon was, by the middle of the 1780s, the most famous and accomplished Neo-classical sculptor in France.

- Houdon displayed this bust alongside sculptures of Rousseau and Voltaire in his studio. In 1779, Houdon exhibited the bust at the French Royal Academy Salon in Paris to attract orders for reproductions in a variety of materials.
Here, you can see the influence of Roman verism combined with the modern, simple attire that defined Franklin's time in France.

Franklin and Houdon departed for the United States in July 1785 with two assistants. The group sailed into Philadelphia about seven weeks later, and Houdon and his assistants arrived at Mount Vernon by early October.

Houdon went on to sculpt many other famous Americans: Thomas Jefferson, Robert Fulton, George Washington.
Grand Module Portrait of Franklin

1779

- Ceramic and terra cotta medallion by Jean Baptiste Nini (Italian, 1717-1786) at the bequest of Jacques Donatien Le Ray de Chaumont (1726-1803), a businessman and personal friend and supporter of Franklin. They were incredibly popular in France during Franklin's ambassadorial stay in the country.

- Inscription states *Eripuit Coelo Fulmen Sceptrumque Tirannis* (He snatched the lightning from the skies and the scepter from the tyrants).

- This expression was coined by Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727-1781), a French statesman and economist who greatly admired Franklin.
Franklin was honored by these images as evidenced by a June 3, 1779, letter to his daughter Sally (Sarah Bache):

"The clay medallion you say you gave to Mr. Hopkinson was the first of the kind made in France. A variety of others have been made since of different sizes; some to be set in the lids of snuffboxes, and some so small as to be worn in rings; and the numbers sold are incredible. These, with the pictures, busts, and prints, (of which copies upon copies are spread everywhere.) have made your father’s face as well known as that of the moon, so that he durst not do anything that would oblige him to run away, as his phiz would discover him wherever he should venture to show it. It is said by learned etymologists, that the name doll, for the images children play with, is derived from the word IDOL. From the number of dolls now made of him, he may be truly said, in that sense, to be i-doll-ized in this country."

Franklin in the Studio of Houdon
Date Unknown

- Oil on canvas painting by Leon Dansaert (Belgian, 1830-1909), after Louis Léopold Boilly (French, 1761-1845)

- Boilly was known for *trompe-l'œil* ("fool the eye") imagery that depicts three-dimensional space and objects on a two-dimensional surface.

- Here, he imagines Houdon's studio as a space that welcomes contemporary French audiences to view the creation of Neoclassical art.
Franklin in the Studio of Houdon
Date Unknown

- Franklin is pictured alongside Classical *bas-relief* sculptures and Houdon's famed depictions of *l'Écorché* (The Flayed Man) and Voltaire.

- Both the light from the window and the outstretched arm of the sculpture create emphasis on Franklin.
Franklin in the Studio of Houdon
Date Unknown

Classical Putti

Voltaire

"Belvedere Torso"

l'Écorché

Leon Dansaert, *Benjamin Franklin in the Studio of Houdon*, Unknown.
(Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State, RR-1975.0044)
Franklin’s Copy of the Constitution

- Jonathan Williams, Jr., grandnephew of Benjamin Franklin
- Anne Franklin Harris (b. 1686) = half sister of Ben Franklin (b. 1706) & mother of Grace Harris Williams
- Grace Harris Williams = Ben Franklin’s niece, mother of Jonathan Williams, Jr. (b. 1750/51)
Franklin’s Copy of the Constitution

- Williams trained as a merchant & accountnant.
- Worked for Franklin & U.S. as a purchasing agent for goods in Nantes, France.
Jonathan Williams Jr.


(Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1964-111-1)
Franklin had political and familial relationship with Williams

Williams worked with Franklin in France

Williams took on the role of looking after Franklin's poorer relatives
Franklin’s Copy of the Constitution

- Franklin attended the Constitutional Convention at 81 years old
- He had to attend given his fame & stature
- Franklin’s attendance gave the Constitutional Convention legitimacy
Franklin at the Constitutional Convention

• Franklin attended the Constitutional Convention 5 hours per day, 4 days per week

• Franklin did not play a large role in the Convention

• Franklin closed the Convention and remarked that the success of any government rests “on the general Opinion of the Goodness of that Government as well as of the Wisdom and Integrity of its Governors.”

(The New York Public Library)
Franklin’s Copy of the Constitution

- Elizabeth Willing Powel confronted Franklin
- Did the Convention produce a monarchy or a republic?
- Franklin replied “A republic if you can keep it.”

Matthew Pratt, Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel, ca. 1793. (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1912.12)
Ben Franklin’s World Podcast

- New episodes every other Tuesday
- benfranklinsworld.com or your favorite podcast player

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- Weeklong residential and 3-day programs
- Online programs throughout the year
- colonialwilliamsburg.org/teach
Upcoming Programs

**Book Breaks:** February 5 at 2 pm ET (11 am PT)
- R. Isabela Morales will discuss *Happy Dreams of Liberty: An American Family in Slavery and Freedom.*

**Teacher Symposium at Gettysburg College:** July 16-19, 2023
- Choose from seven courses led by historians including David Blight (Yale University), Edna Greene Medford (Howard University), and Gary Gallagher (University of Virginia).
- Registration closes June 16 and is on a first-come, first-served basis.

**Gettysburg College-Gilder Lehrman MA in American History**
- Summer 2023 courses include: "Voting and Elections in American History," "Black Women's History," and "The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass."
- Applications to the MA program are accepted on a rolling basis.