

Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community

A Study in Rhetorical Iconology

Lester C. Olson

Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community focuses on the rhetoric of the pictorial images Benjamin Franklin created to represent the British colonies that became the United States. Franklin designed at least one such image during each decade from the 1750s to the 1780s. No other American colonist's pictorial representations of the emerging nation were more original or influential in their time than Franklin's.

Although Franklin disseminated his pictorial images among Americans, Lester C. Olson's study is international in scope since Franklin presented the images to audiences in Britain and France as well. Franklin was a representative in the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1754, a colonial agent at London in 1765–66, a representative to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia in 1776, and the U.S. ambassador at Paris in 1783. At each of these times, roughly a decade apart, Franklin's political and social role had changed. In 1754 and again in 1776, he was well situated as a representative in Pennsylvania to participate directly in the formation of governmental policies. But in 1765–66 and again in 1783, he was on the periphery of the forums of political power and social privilege centered in the British Parliament and the French ministry.

Olson contends that attention to the visual images created in each of these roles dramatizes fundamental changes in Franklin's sensibility concerning British America. In 1754 Franklin was an American Whig supporter of the British Empire's constitutional monarchy. During the late 1750s and early 1760s he veered toward increasing the power of the Crown over Pennsylvania by changing the colony's form of government, before ultimately rejecting constitutional monarchy and advocating republican politics during the 1770s and 1780s. The shifts in Franklin's fundamental political commitments are among the most arresting aspects of his life. *Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community* highlights those changes as it examines his pictorial representations of British America through several decades.

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LESTER C. OLSON is an associate professor of communication at the University of Pittsburgh, where he teaches courses on rhetoric, visual communication, and human rights. His first book, *Emblems of American Community in the Revolutionary Era*, which concentrated on eighteenth-century visual culture in Britain, France, and the United States, received the National Communication Association's James A. Winans–Herbert A. Wichelns Memorial Award for Distinguished Scholarship in Rhetoric and Public Address in 1992. Olson lives in Pittsburgh.

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