


Spring 2012

# Allegory vs. Authenticity: The Commission and Reception of Howard Chandler Christy's The Signing of the Constitution of the United States

Samantha Baskind

Cleveland State University, [S.BASKIND@csuohio.edu](mailto:S.BASKIND@csuohio.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clart\\_facpub](http://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clart_facpub)

 Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Theory and Criticism Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

*Publisher's Statement*

© 2012 University of Chicago Press

---

## Recommended Citation

Baskind, Samantha. "Allegory vs. Authenticity: the commission and Reception of Howard Chandler Christy's The Signing of the Constitution of the United States." Winterthur Portfolio Mar. 2012: 63-92. Print.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [b.strauss@csuohio.edu](mailto:b.strauss@csuohio.edu).

# Allegory versus Authenticity

## The Commission and Reception of Howard Chandler Christy's *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*

Samantha Baskind

*Over a four-year period during the Great Depression, Howard Chandler Christy painted three diverse versions of the signing of the Constitution. The last—an enormous canvas 20 by 30 feet—was the most expensive painting commissioned by the federal government to date and took three years to research and complete. This essay examines how and why politics intervened in the commission and creation of Christy's painting and contextualizes the canvas visually and socially. Ultimately, I suggest that Congress's participation in the representation of this pivotal moment in US history was shaped by the looming threat of war in Europe.*

The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.<sup>1</sup>

We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on.<sup>2</sup>

ON MAY 29, 1940, the largest and most expensive painting commissioned to date by the federal government was unveiled in the Capitol Rotunda. Delineated in a highly painterly manner in a predominantly frothy, pastel palette, Howard Chandler Christy's *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* measures 20 by 30 feet and took three years to research and complete (fig. 1). Paid \$30,000 to make the painting,

Christy was given access to the Navy shipyard because no studio could accommodate the enormous 1,700-pound canvas. With the 290-member Navy band practicing in the background, Christy worked daily from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on the composition beginning September 19, 1939, and continuing until the end of April 1940 (fig. 2). Preceded by the artist's two earlier allegorical versions of the signing of the Constitution were very much a part of American consciousness in their own day.

As per the commission's behest, the final unallegorical *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* was the most "accurate," "authentic," and "truest" rendition of the signing—words that were used repeatedly by government officials to argue the need for a new painting of the scene and adjectives that were subsequently employed to describe Christy's canvas. Christy based his life-size figures on portraits made from life, including works by Gilbert Stuart and Charles Willson Peale, and, if no portrait existed, he situated figures to block the signer's face; at the left of the composition two upraised arms cover the faces of delegates

Samantha Baskind is associate professor of art history at Cleveland State University.

I gratefully acknowledge the Society for the Preservation of American Modernists for funding the research for this article. Rick Blondo of the National Archives facilitated my work on more than one occasion, and for that I offer sincere thanks. It is with utmost appreciation that I express my debt to Elaine Stomber, archivist of the Howard Chandler Christy papers at Lafayette College, for her knowledge and invaluable assistance.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 241.

<sup>2</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1941), 3.



Fig. 1. Howard Chandler Christy, *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, US Capitol Building, Washington, DC, 1940. Oil on canvas; H. 20', W. 30'. (Architect of the Capitol.)

Pierce Butler of South Carolina and Thomas Fitzsimmons of Pennsylvania. In addition, Christy visited Independence Hall at the exact time of day and month that the document was signed so as to precisely portray how sunlight streamed into the room. To further authenticate the moment, Christy borrowed George Washington's breeches, shoe buckles, and watch from the Smithsonian and used them to dress a model (fig. 3). The model for the pen used in the painting by North Carolina delegate Richard Dobbs Spaight to sign the document came from Patrick Henry's home, while the silver inkwell was painted from the original in Independence Hall. The Library of Congress lent three books from Jefferson's collection, pictured on the floor of the painting next to a centrally seated Benjamin Franklin. When completed, Christy's group portrait became an object of exaltation by Congress even as art critics largely ignored the painting.

The disparate responses of art critics and federal officials begin to tell a story about Christy's canvas, a painting that was the subject of much debate in its time but has been virtually disregarded by scholars since then. This essay will describe how Christy's fi-

nal Constitution image was shaped by negative responses to the allegorical, fascistic, and feminine aspects of his two earlier images of the subject. At the same time, the history of Christy's *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* highlights how, during the tumultuous years around the start of World War II, politics intervened in the commission and reception of art. By reconstructing the laborious process of ratifying the commission for Christy's painting and then placing the canvas in its wider visual and social context, this essay suggests why the government urged this particular version of a pivotal moment in US history. Certainly, the Constitution's signing is an important symbol of US democracy, and a painting of the moment stands alone as such. In 1940, however, as Congress's focus shifted from domestic economics to global conflict, Christy's painting, hung in a space laden with political and artistic significance, also registered the anxieties of a country preparing to combat the growing threat of Nazism and fascism abroad. The final canvas provided a message geared toward embodying democracy in an artistic language accessible to the masses, aiming to remind Americans of their lineage to elicit a sense





Fig. 2. Howard Chandler Christy painting *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, US Navy shipyard, Washington, DC, 1939 or 1940. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)

of national pride and support of the democratic way. The general population had grown accustomed to this mode of mimetic realism via several high-profile historic projects; the rise of documentary photography; and a new, more austere aesthetic called for in World War II posters than for posters supporting the previous world war.

### The Commission

Howard Chandler Christy (1873–1952) was already a well-known illustrator and figure in the

American art world when he began lobbying Congress for the Constitution commission. He was born on a farm in Duncan Hills, Ohio, to a soldier-father who claimed to be of eleventh-generation descent from Mayflower captain Miles Standish, and by the 1930s had secured himself a national reputation as an artist-patriot.<sup>3</sup> He arrived in New York in 1890 at the age of sixteen and soon started studying at the Art Students League with William Merritt Chase. Financial problems forced Christy back to Ohio, but three years later he returned to New York with additional funds and renewed his studies with Chase, first privately in his New York studio and later at Chase's summer home on Long Island, while concurrently taking classes at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design. The appeal of Chase's luxurious lifestyle fueled the younger artist's ambitions; Christy's desire for financial reward attracted him to the burgeoning field of periodical illustration.

According to Christy, an assignment to illustrate the "The Soldier's Dream" for *Scribner's Magazine* transformed into his first image of a woman that subsequently became known as "The Christy Girl." As he recounted it and repeated often, the image depicted an idealized, beautiful girl materializing from the drifting smoke of a soldier's pipe—as the stuff of the soldier's dream.<sup>4</sup> For whatever reason Christy constructed this story, which has been repeated through the years by scholars, no image of this sort was published by *Scribner's* in the late 1890s when the Christy Girl made her first appearances. In reality, the Christy Girl likely developed from other early images by Christy of soldiers dreaming about women. Nonetheless, akin to established illustrator Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl," Christy's girl became an archetype of the

<sup>3</sup> Over the years the ever-patriotic Christy made a good portion of his posters without remuneration. Christy was dedicated to public service; among his unpaid works are posters for the Police Athletic League, Red Cross, and Salvation Army. In recognition of his patriotism, the US Naval Academy named Christy an honorary member of their class of 1921. Past scholarship on Christy is sparse, limited to a few pages in various catalogs on illustrators. This biographical information relies on Christy's narration to Isabel Leighton, transcribed in "Model-Lives," pts. 1 and 2, *Hearst International* 95, no. 1 (July 1933): 32–35, 160–62; (October 1933): 44–45, 128–30; Susan E. Meyer's biography of Christy in *America's Great Illustrators* (New York: Abrams, 1978), 235–47; Laurence S. Cutler's two-page contribution, "Howard Chandler Christy: Bucolic Naturalism to Café Society," in *The Great American Illustrators: Exhibition*, ed. Judy Goffman (Tokyo: Brain Trust, 1993), 118–19; miscellaneous documents in the Howard Chandler Christy Papers, Special Collections, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA (hereafter Christy Papers).

<sup>4</sup> For reiterations of the story see series v, subseries 1, "unpublished biographical manuscripts," Christy Papers.



Fig. 3. Howard Chandler Christy and model of George Washington for *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, US Navy shipyard, 1939 or 1940. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)

American woman. Unlike the “New Woman,” a self-assured female no longer relegated to the kitchen or forbidden to vote, the Christy Girl was first and foremost a beautiful figure created as bait for men (so associated was he with beauty and womanhood that Christy was the single judge of the first Miss America pageant in 1921).<sup>5</sup> Images of the Christy Girl could be found in *McClure’s* and other popular magazines, calendars, and books, including *The Christy Girl* (1906; fig. 4) and *The American Girl* (1906).<sup>6</sup>

As the United States readied to join the First World War in Europe, Christy rendered his female beauties for posters promoting war bonds, the Red Cross, and Navy recruitment; materializing as an allegorical Liberty figure, the Christy Girl carries an American flag in a Liberty Loan *Fight or Buy Bonds Third Liberty Loan* poster (1917; fig. 5). *Fight or Buy Bonds* recalls aspects of Eugene Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), although Christy’s charging female is more youthful and feminine in clinging, nearly transparent fabric and with her

ruby-red lips seductively parted. Seven additional World War I posters by Christy utilize the female figure, including *Clear the Way!! Buy Bonds Fourth Liberty Loan* (1917–18), which shows a scantily dressed woman with a swirling American flag framing her torso (fig. 6). The same year a Christy Girl provocatively teases the male viewer with a come-hither look in *Gee!! I Wish I Were a Man ... I’d Join the Navy* (1917), one of the artist’s most widely distributed World War I Navy recruitment posters. Transferring this fashionable and attractive icon of American womanhood from trendy magazine illustrations to war posters with minimal changes did not appeal to many critics, several of whom felt that they were undignified or aesthetically inferior. One critic remarked that Christy’s posters are “simply illustrations strayed out of one of the monthlies or weeklies.”<sup>7</sup> Even so, Christy’s posters were hugely

<sup>5</sup> For more on the “New Woman” in art, see Ellen Wiley Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Howard Chandler Christy, *The Christy Girl* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1906), and *The American Girl* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1906).

<sup>7</sup> N. N. “The War Poster,” *Nation* 107 (September 14, 1918): 303. One critic commented, “We have a legion of artists who can draw and paint posters—but how few we have can think posters.” See Matlack Price and Horace Brown, *How to Put in Patriotic Posters the Stuff That Makes People Stop-Look-Act!* (Washington, DC: National Committee of Patriotic Societies, 1918), 5. For other contemporaneous discussions of artists and their war posters, see “Government Asks Artists to Make War Posters,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 20, 1917, 14; “C. D. Gibson’s Committee for Patriotic Posters,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 20, 1918, 11.



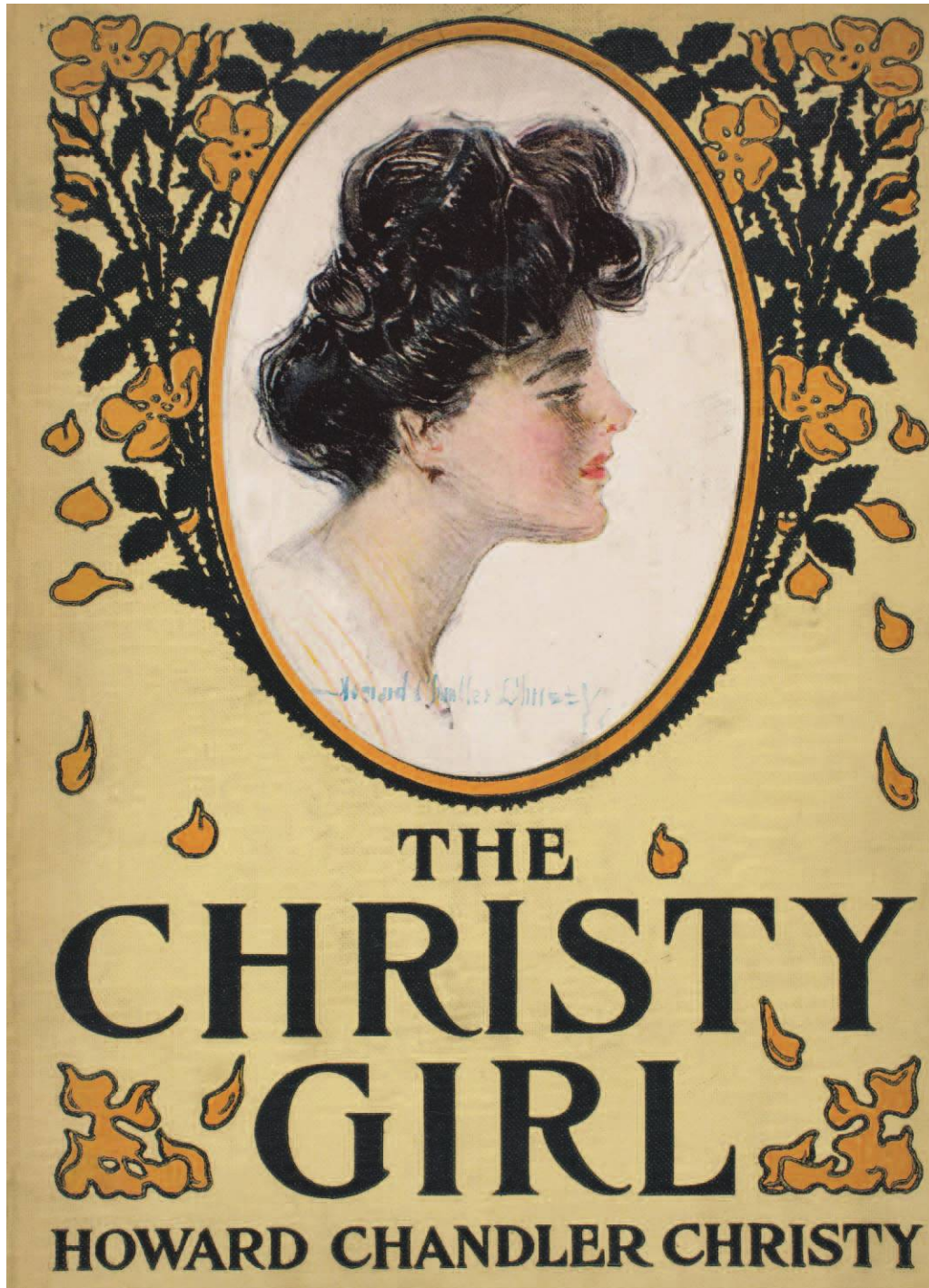


Fig. 4. Howard Chandler Christy, *The Christy Girl*, 1906. From Howard Chandler Christy, *The Christy Girl* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1906), cover. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)

successful. *Fight or Buy Bonds*, for example, enjoyed 1 million reproductions in two different sizes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Postering the Third Liberty Loan," *Literary Digest* 56 (March 28, 1918): 29.

With a household name and a successful career as an illustrator (by 1910, his commission rates reached \$1,000 per week), Christy parlayed his reputation and soon became a portrait painter of celebrities and, even more important for his subsequent



Fig. 5. Howard Chandler Christy, *Fight or Buy Bonds Third Liberty Loan*, 1917. Lithograph poster. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)

Constitution commission, a painter of members of the House and Senate.<sup>9</sup> Thus, he commanded lucrative commissions for portraits of Benito Mussolini, Crown Prince Umberto of Italy, humorist Will Rogers, aviator Amelia Earhart, and Mr. and Mrs.

<sup>9</sup> Cutler, "Howard Chandler Christy," 118.

William Randolph Hearst, as well as likenesses of US Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, James Polk, Martin Van Buren, and James Garfield. Of the members of Congress who would ultimately authorize *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, Christy painted portraits of Representative Sol Bloom (1936; fig. 7), Vice





Fig. 6. Howard Chandler Christy, *Clear the Way!! Buy Bonds Fourth Liberty Loan*, 1917-18. Lithograph poster. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)





Fig. 7. Howard Chandler Christy, *Sol Bloom*, 1936. Oil on canvas; H. 29", W. 24". (Collection of the US House of Representatives.)

President John Garner (1937), and Speaker William Bankhead (1937).

Christy's position as a patriot and success as a poster artist were significant factors that led to his receipt of the much-debated Constitution commission. Moreover, he had conceptualized two previous versions of the Constitution's signing, a strategic maneuver initiated by Christy's most ardent supporter, Sol Bloom. Indeed, Christy designed his first scene of the signing at the request of Bloom, New York Democratic representative to the House since 1923. An avid patriot and recreational constitutional historian nicknamed "super-salesman of patriotism" and "Washington's press agent" in his own day, Bloom unsuccessfully attempted to push a bill through Congress sanctioning a film about the story of the Constitution in 1926.<sup>10</sup> Gaining esteem as the director of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission—a celebration encompassing seven years, culminating with Washington's 200th birthday in 1932 and followed by two additional years of Washington tributes—in 1935 Bloom was appointed director

<sup>10</sup> Hugh A. Bone, "Sol Bloom: 'Supersalesman of Patriotism,'" in *Public Men In and Out of Office*, ed. J. T. Salter (1946; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1972), 230–31.

general of the Constitution's Sesquicentennial Commission and soon began to promote his interest in that particular historical moment.

It was during the planning of the sesquicentennial celebration, which ran from September 17, 1937, until April 30, 1939, that Bloom discovered that no scene of the signing of the Constitution adorned the Capitol Building, and those Constitution paintings that did exist in other locales rarely included all of the signers. Bloom approached Christy about painting the subject, and together the pair began searching for images of the signers and historically specific costumes and conducting additional research for the canvas. Bloom also paved the way for Christy to paint aspects of the Constitution scene in its actual locale through correspondence with the superintendent of Independence Hall.<sup>11</sup> While Christy was working on the painting, Bloom suggested to the artist that he design a poster for the sesquicentennial celebration (1936; fig. 8).<sup>12</sup> Set against a gold background, this poster presents ten of the signers in the bottom half of the composition with an oversized personification of Liberty holding a fasces hovering above the scene. A banner emblazoned with the words "We the People" surrounds Liberty's body along with a billowing US flag and the outstretched wings of an eagle. Liberty is clearly based on the Christy Girl; in fact, Elise Ford, one of the most recognized Christy Girls and Christy's mistress, was the model for the ethereal figure.<sup>13</sup> The widely circulated

<sup>11</sup> In a final letter of correspondence Carpenter agrees to "do anything I can toward furthering the interests of your Commission." Horace T. Carpenter to Sol Bloom, January 30, 1936, Christy Papers, 1:67.

<sup>12</sup> This poster is commonly dated 1937, and that was the year the image enjoyed its popularity in association with the sesquicentennial. However, the poster is reproduced on the September 9, 1936, cover of the *Christian Science Monitor* weekly magazine section, along with an article providing an overview of the Sesquicentennial Commission's goals by Sol Bloom titled "How the Constitution Grew: That American Men, Women, and Children May Gain an Understanding of the Charter Upon Which Their Nation Rests, Congress Has Approved a Vast Program of Enlightenment," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 6, 1936, weekly magazine sec., 2, 13. Here Bloom notes, apropos to my discussion, that the "chief aim of the commission in connection with the purely ceremonial celebration [is] ... the sweeping away of errors, the inculcation of established truth, [and] the encouragement of factual study of the Constitution. ... Chief emphasis will be laid upon the spread of authentic history through the educational world, aimed primarily at youthful minds" (2).

<sup>13</sup> After Christy's poster was complete, Congress did not have the funds to purchase it, and so Bloom asked Tammany leader William Solomon to buy the rights to the image and give the Commission permission to use it as their official poster. 75 Cong. Rec. H1469 (February 23, 1938). To further commemorate the sesquicentennial, a cut-out display of several figures in the poster was also distributed in three sizes, including one large 42½-by-27¾-inch



Fig. 8. Howard Chandler Christy, *We the People*, 1936. Lithograph poster; United States Constitution Sesquicentennial Celebration. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)



poster was mass-produced in three different sizes, the largest 29 by 43 inches.<sup>14</sup>

In Christy's incarnation of the oft-represented allegorical Liberty figure he generally follows the symbol's customs; however, a few liberties (pun intended) were taken to modernize her and make her appealing to his viewers, who would expect certain Christy Girl conventions in female representations by the artist. Early images of Liberty, as far back as the third century BCE in Rome, showed her in a draped white robe, similar to Christy's incarnation but alternatively with attributes such as a scepter, symbolizing sovereignty; a cat, an animal with no master, at her feet; and a shattered pitcher indicating the breaking free of confinement or perhaps the more obvious broken chains. One of the key symbols of Liberty was her Phrygian cap, the *pilleus libertatis*, bestowed upon freed slaves. In Cesare Ripa's influential seventeenth-century emblem guide *Iconologia*, Liberty is depicted as a middle-aged woman wearing white classical robes and a helmet, with her Phrygian cap hanging atop a scepter, sometimes termed a "liberty pole," and a cat at her feet. The Phrygian cap appeared on a scepter and also on the heads of American Liberty figures, but other headdresses, such as Indian feathers or a stars and stripes cap complemented additional distinctly American elements such as the US flag and the bald eagle, rather than a cat or shattered object.<sup>15</sup>

In her American manifestation Liberty took on many guises, with amendments to her representation based on an artist's desire or commissioner's request, as in the case of Thomas Crawford's bronze *Statue of Freedom* (1857) surmounting the Capitol dome (fig. 9). Crawford deviated from typical Liberty imagery because one of his proposed designs, which included a shield, a sword, and stars around a liberty cap, was opposed by slave owner

version, and a slightly modified adaptation of the poster's design appeared on a commemorative bronze plaque designed for the celebration; one side shows a portion of Christy's poster, and the reverse presents the Capitol Building, above which seals of the original thirteen states form an arch.

<sup>14</sup> Sol Bloom, *History of the Formation of the Union Under the Constitution with Liberty Documents and Report of the Commission* (Washington, DC: US Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission, 1941), 591, 596.

<sup>15</sup> E. McClung Fleming provides an excellent discussion of changing images of America in two articles, "The American Image as Indian Princess, 1765–1783," *Winterthur Portfolio* 2 (1965): 65–81, and "From Indian Princess to Greek Goddess: The American Image, 1783–1815," *Winterthur Portfolio* 3 (1967): 37–66. See Nancy Jo Fox, *Liberties with Liberty: The Fascinating History of America's Proudest Symbol* (New York: Dutton, 1985) for copious American folk images of the figure.



Fig. 9. Thomas Crawford, *Statue of Freedom*, atop US Capitol Building dome, Washington, DC, 1857. Bronze; H. 19'6". (Architect of the Capitol.)

Jefferson Davis—Secretary of War and later President of the Confederacy—who requested the elimination of the traditional liberty cap because of its status as a symbol of freed slaves. In a subsequent design, Crawford replaced the liberty cap with a helmet surmounted by an eagle headdress. Crawford's final, more militant nineteen-foot Liberty figure grasps the hilt of a sheathed sword in her right hand, and in her left she holds a laurel wreath of victory and the shield of the United States with thirteen stripes. Dressed in traditional classical

drapery, she stands on a globe encircled with the national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, and fasces and wreaths decorate the lower part of her base.<sup>16</sup> Christy's Liberty is not armed and bellicose like Crawford's, but, rather, she peacefully strides forward with the conventional Liberty trapping of an American flag and is joined by the bald eagle. On her head, though, she wears a dainty tiara and a laurel wreath instead of a liberty cap. Some Liberty figures did carry fasces, or at least were accompanied by them, but this was Christy's most obvious deviation from more common Liberty iconography (and as will be described later, this controversial symbol caused problems that led to some of the changes in his later Capitol Building Constitution painting).

The poster subsequently hung at commemorative events across the country celebrating the Constitution's anniversary and adorned the cover of *The Story of the Constitution* (1937), a short book by Bloom written specifically for the sesquicentennial that straightforwardly described the government's interworkings for the lay reader. Seven hundred thousand copies inexpensively priced at fifteen cents each were distributed; not only was the book placed on trains, boats, and ocean liners but it was also widely available for purchase at drug stores, five-and-ten stores, and bookstores.<sup>17</sup> Bloom's introduction explained, "The front of this book shows the official poster of the United States Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission, painted by Howard Chandler Christy; and like that poster and the work which the Commission expects to do, the book is dedicated to 'We the People'—to the 128,000,000 who desire to know something about the story of the constitution, and to have it told to them in such a way that they can understand what it is all about."<sup>18</sup> The commission's requirement that the Constitution be presented in an eminently understandable way significantly influenced Christy's

Capitol Building scene, prompting the removal of allegory and thus answering calls for verity and accuracy.

Both conceived and completed in early 1937, the 7-by-5-foot canvas on which the poster is loosely based shows all signers of the document, some out of scale and others materializing as apparitions (fig. 10). Known at different times as *Signing of the Constitution* or *We the People*, it is in this painting that Christy first introduces all of the figures present at the signing and covers those signers' faces for which he could not find images.<sup>19</sup> His early *Signing of the Constitution* was exhibited during December 1937 at the Grand Central Fifth Avenue Galleries. At the opening Christy explained, "I wanted the painting to be accurate in every detail because I feel deeply the meaning the Constitution holds for every American."<sup>20</sup> While the heavily populated painting is similar in conception to the poster, the gaudier canvas is much more elaborate in its symbolism.<sup>21</sup> Above the great figures of American history float three allegorical renderings. At left, Christy depicts a church choir in the guise of religious freedom joined directly below by soldiers from different eras portraying national defense. A Liberty figure termed by Christy as "We the People" (similar to Liberty representations in France named Marianne or "The French Republic") appears at center in the form of a woman wearing a laurel wreath of victory and a tiara, akin to the sesquicentennial poster. Surrounded by a rising sun, within which lightning strikes in reference to Benjamin Franklin and electricity, she strides forward. In addition, the sun alludes to a somewhat obscure comment by Franklin; upon viewing a sun painted on the back of a chair in Independence Hall, Franklin stated that in art it is often difficult to distinguish a setting sun and a rising sun, but with the Constitution's signing he was sure the sun had now risen. "We the People" holds thirteen rods bound together and surmounted by an eagle to illustrate the sovereignty and unification of the

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of the evolution of Crawford's sculpture and Liberty imagery, see Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the U.S. Capitol, 1815–1860* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 177–208. This meticulously researched book presents a discussion of Capitol Building iconography from the War of 1812 to the Civil War within the context of an imperialist agenda.

<sup>17</sup> Bloom, *History of the Formation of the Union Under the Constitution*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (Washington, DC: US Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission, 1937), 3. The book reproduces various official founding documents, including the text of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and Washington's farewell address. *The Story of the Constitution* was reissued in 1986 in anticipation of the 200th anniversary of the Constitution signing.

<sup>19</sup> Currently the Gilcrease Museum, holder of the painting, titles this canvas *Signing of the Constitution*. In his lifetime Christy referred to it on occasion as *We the People*, as indicated by various papers in his archive as well as in the unpublished "Journal of Elise Ford," Christy Papers, 69:11.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Kilgallen, "Epic Painting Pictures Signing of the Constitution," *New York Journal American*, December 1, 1937, 18, Christy Papers, 19:24.

<sup>21</sup> The following description is based in great part on Christy's characterization of the painting as found in the unpublished "Journal of Elise Ford." This manuscript comprises Christy's dictation of his life on his deathbed to his long-time companion Ford; Christy Papers, 69:11.



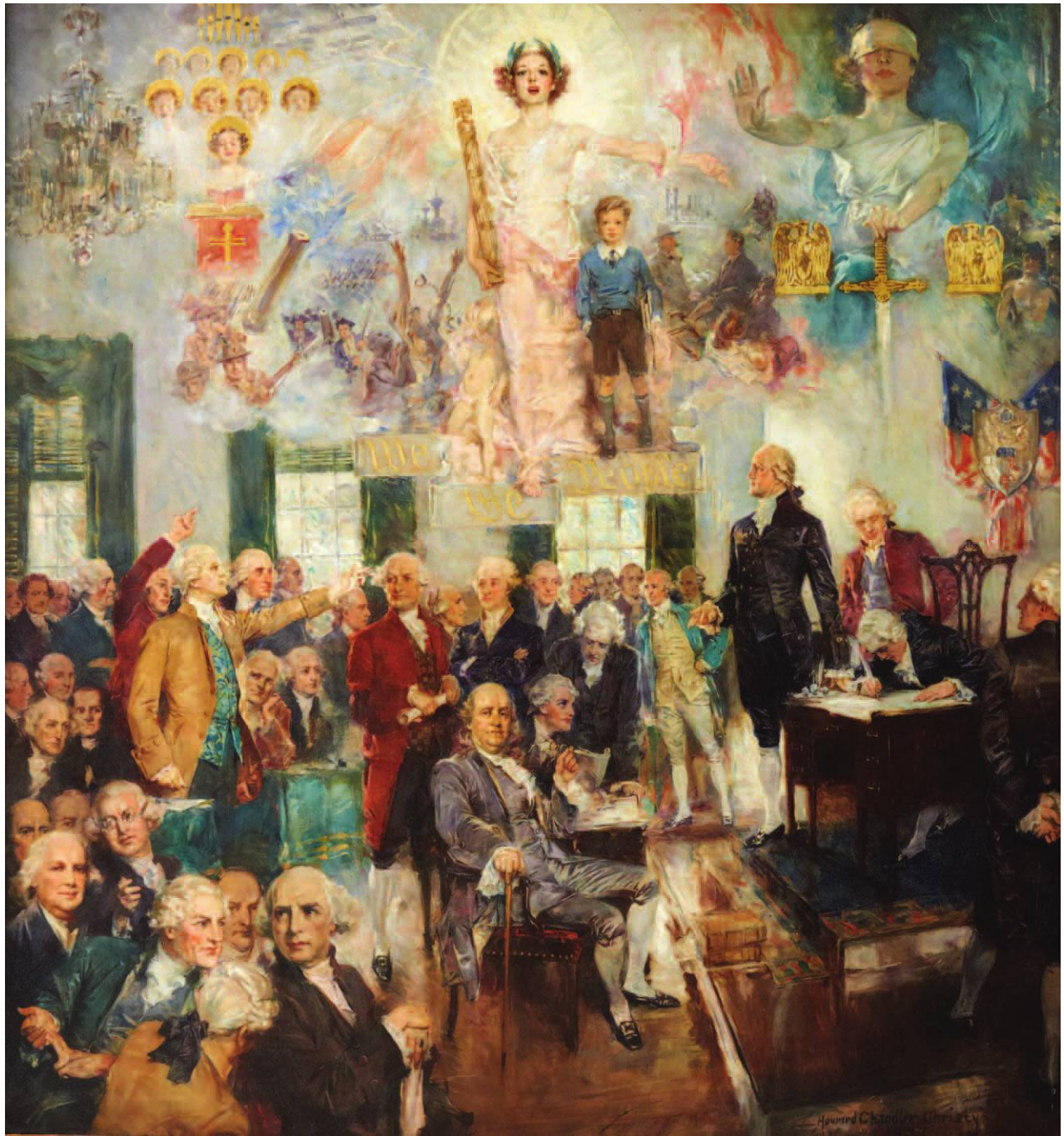


Fig. 10. Howard Chandler Christy, *Signing of the Constitution*, 1937. Oil on canvas; H. 7', W. 5'. (Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK.)

people in the original thirteen colonies. A boy and small child stand with her as representatives of posterity. On the far right, Justice personified as a female embodiment of blind justice holds her typical attributes of a sword symbolizing power and scales signifying impartiality; the hilt of the sword and the two eagles are painted in a striking gold

hue. Of the central allegorical woman, Christy noted, "She's an American girl. Not a Greek figure."<sup>22</sup> Congress, however, did not agree that this "American girl," a derivation of the Christy Girl, was quite American enough, for she disappeared from the

<sup>22</sup> Kilgallen, "Epic Painting Pictures Signing of the Constitution."

final version of the scene placed in the east stairway of the Capitol Building. Nor, it seems, did Congress feel that an allegorical painting was "accurate in every detail"; note especially that the "real" men, some dressed in gaudy red and teal hues, are overshadowed by the imaginary, otherworldly women. Still, Christy's offer of the painting to the Sesquicentennial Commission as a gift to America was happily accepted by Congress.

Both the poster and early canvas of the Constitution theme were so well received that in April 1939 Congress passed a resolution authorizing Christy to paint his better-known 20-by-30-foot variant of the scene for the grand staircase. Of interest are the compositional changes and the lag time between the 1936 and 1937 images of the Constitution and the 1939 resolution for the last adaptation of the signing, indicating that some salient conversations took place about Christy's commission. Indeed, these debates and discussions conflated the ideas of authenticity, truth, and accuracy. During this period members of the federal government who already had invested time into the Constitution commission pushed more vigorously than before for a painting that would be easily readable (or understandable akin to Bloom's Constitution book) stylistically for viewers and thus would indelibly imprint the magnitude of democracy on all who beheld the canvas.

On August 16, 1937, Arkansas Senator Hattie Caraway and Illinois Representative Kent Keller, both members of the Committee on the Library, submitted a report to their respective branches elaborating on why a Constitution painting was necessary and why Christy was the artist for the job. The report explained that a painting of "such heroic size" and set in the prominent location of the Capitol "befits a subject so important in our history."<sup>23</sup> It details the three years of painstaking research Christy undertook in preparation of the 1937 canvas of the Constitution, which enabled him to make "authentic" portraits of the men and the incident. The report explains, "rather than not be accurate concerning the features of the two delegates whose portraits have so far not been located, the artist has arranged them cleverly so that their features do not show" (this is the first time supporters of the commission use the words "accurate" and "authentic").<sup>24</sup> The document

goes so far as to note the many books that Christy consulted and provides an extensive description of the canvas, which praises the allegorical and symbolic elements of the painting and then concludes, "that such a bewildering variety of figures could be woven into a harmonious whole is amazing, and attests the quality of Mr. Christy's genius. To see the painting is an unforgettable experience, and one who sees it lingers to study, to ponder, to admire—and finally leaves with an exalted sense of having been in communion with the very spirit of the Constitution."<sup>25</sup> The painting was further glorified for its combination of "the historical aspect of the Constitution with the symbolic." Without an open competition (although Reginald Marsh and John Stuart Curry were considered), the report requested that Congress authorize Christy, who was deemed "best qualified" to paint the composition.<sup>26</sup> Congress did not agree with the library committee, and so the joint resolution failed.

Ten months later, on Monday, June 6, 1938, the House of Representatives convened to pass a new bill requesting authorization of the painting for placement in the Capitol Building. With Christy in the audience listening to the debate, Keller asked for unanimous consent of the resolution. Much ado ensued in the House when various representatives questioned the \$35,000 price tag for the commission; why a painting that had yet to be painted was being authorized; and why such a painting was even needed, as the subject had been addressed in the past.<sup>27</sup> Bloom clarified that the resolution specified that once the painting was complete it was subject to the approval of the joint Committee on the Library and explained that, although a painting of the Constitution did exist, "there is not a single authentic painting of the Signing of the Constitution."<sup>28</sup> Reiterating the importance of authenticity, Bloom cited a need for the painting because the most recent previous rendition, a mural painted in 1936 by Barry Faulkner for the National Archives (he could not remember the artist's name), presented the signers in ahistorical Roman togas and only offered twenty-six figures, six of whom were not present at the signing of the document: "[It] portrays 26 figures, 6 being of persons who never had anything to do with the signing of the Constitution. There were 39 signers of the constitution. What is correct in The Archives

<sup>23</sup> 75 Cong., 1st Sess., Rep. No. 1285 (August 16, 1937), to accompany Senate Joint Resolution 206, 1. The House report is identical in wording save the resolution number. For the House report see 75 Cong., 1st Sess., Rep. No. 1569 (August 16, 1937), along with House Joint Resolution 487.

<sup>24</sup> 75 Cong., 1st Sess., Rep. No. 1285, 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> 75 Cong., 3d Sess., H8235 (June 6, 1938).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



Building is only 20 figures out of 39 ... [and] President Washington is dressed up with a sword. You would imagine they were going to war instead of going to sign the Constitution; furthermore, there were no uniforms of that kind at any time in the history of our country. ... This picture as painted by Mr. Christy [referring to the 1937 canvas] is authentic."<sup>29</sup>

After Bloom's attempt to convince the House of the need for the painting, Congressman Ulysses S. Guyer weighed in on Christy's merits as the painter of choice: [Christy is] "a genius who paints these pictures and puts into the figures and the faces the soul and character of the great men he portrays. ... This Christy painting [the 1937 canvas] is an authentic picture of every one of those men as painted by men who lived at that time."<sup>30</sup> Other House members did not feel that Christy was a great artist; while praising Christy's patriotism and service to the country, Representative Thomas Amlie described the poster *We the People* as "a garish nightmare."<sup>31</sup> Representative Robert Luce called Christy "a painter of magazine covers" and noted that his life-size portrait of Grace Coolidge (1924), showing the First Lady in a red sheath next to her white collie, was "charming" but also "flamboyant in style, ornate, not simple and dignified" (fig. 11).<sup>32</sup> Despite much backslapping and cajoling on Christy's part before the debate, the resolution subsequently failed when less than two-thirds of the House approved at a vote of 56 ayes and 52 noes. Seven days later Bloom wrote to Christy on official sesquicentennial letterhead suggesting that he "start and paint the picture of the 'Signing of the Constitution' and have it finished ... but please remember there are certain changes in the position of the people in the picture which I spoke to you about so as to be sure to have it historically accurate."<sup>33</sup> The changes that Bloom alludes to are not detailed in any extant documents, but based on later comments made at the unveiling ceremony for *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* it can be safely inferred that Christy was instructed to remove the allegorical portions, thus making the painting less "flamboyant in style," less "ornate," more "simple and dignified," and, of course, "authentic."

It was not until April 20, 1939, that a joint resolution authorizing the painting of the signing and



Fig. 11. Howard Chandler Christy, *Grace Coolidge, White House, Washington, DC*, 1924. Oil on canvas; H. 90<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>", W. 42<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>". (White House Collection, White House Historical Association.)

its placement in the Capitol Building was ratified at a reduced price of \$30,000.<sup>34</sup> To circumvent approval of both the House and Senate, the resolution created a commission consisting of the Vice

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., H8235-36.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., H8236.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., H8237.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., H8238.

<sup>33</sup> Sol Bloom to Howard Chandler Christy, June 13, 1938, Christy Papers, 1:67.

<sup>34</sup> Public resolution no. 11, 76 Cong., approved April 20, 1939.



Fig. 12. Barry Faulkner, *The Constitution of the United States*, National Archives, Washington, DC, 1936. Oil on canvas; H. 13'10", W. 34'10". (National Archives; photo, Earl McDonald; digital manipulation, Steve Puglia.)

President of the United States (John N. Garner), the Speaker of the House of Representatives (William Bankhead), and the Architect of the Capitol (Elliot Woods) to choose an artist to paint the canvas. This sham of a commission, which included two members who had their official government portraits painted by Christy in 1937 (Garner and Bankhead), chose Christy by unanimous vote on May 19, 1939, to paint the work. Christy had a contract in hand by July 24, 1939, and soon thereafter started to paint his long-planned conception of a true, authentic, and accurate Constitution signing minus any female figures and allegory. Nearly a year later, Christy signed the completed canvas on the lower right corner: Howard Chandler Christy, Sail Loft, U.S. Navy Yard, Washington D.C., April 1940.

#### Constitution Painting Precedents

Prior to Christy's painting, the most public of Constitution paintings was the aforementioned mural by Barry Faulkner, measuring 13 feet 10 inches high by 34 feet 10 inches long and installed in the newly built National Archives in 1936 (fig. 12). Held up by Bloom as the exemplar for why a new image of the scene needed to be made, although his counting of the figures is off by one, Faulkner's rendition shows twenty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention, nineteen of whom signed the Constitution and six who did not (Edmund Randolph, Virginia; Oliver Ellsworth, Connecticut; Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts; George Mason, Virginia; William R. Davie, North Carolina, and Luther Martin,

Maryland).<sup>35</sup> While Christy covered the faces of the two delegates for whom he could not find portraits, Pierce Butler of South Carolina and Thomas Fitzsimmons of Pennsylvania, Faulkner simply opted to omit them from his composition. After receiving the commission in 1934, Faulkner was given two years to complete it (the commission also included a Declaration of Independence mural). Unlike Christy's painting, Faulkner's commission was awarded by a single individual, the architect of the Archives Building, John Russell Pope, not Congress. Faulkner was compensated \$36,000 for his work, which was installed starting on October 1, 1936, subsequently approved by the Commission of Fine Arts, and formally accepted on December 8, 1936. The final composition was influenced by the commission members, who commented on several studies for the murals, although details are not available.<sup>36</sup>

Not only is Faulkner's mural inaccurate according to Bloom but it does not demand much from the viewer. There is nothing elaborate in the iconographical program; the viewer's gaze traverses the horizontal, tableau-like composition, across which

<sup>35</sup> In his autobiography, Faulkner notes that his "knowledge of history was inadequate to select the statesmen to be represented in murals of this importance, but a historian in the Library of Congress suggested that I take two representatives from each of the thirteen states and supplementary figures who had been powerful in the two conventions." He had three assistants help him search for portraits of the signers. See Barry Faulkner, *Barry Faulkner: Sketches from an Artist's Life* (Dublin, NH: Bauhan, 1973), 158.

<sup>36</sup> General Correspondence Files 1926–39, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Archives Building, College Park, MD, Record Group 121, National Archives. My information about Faulkner's Constitution project relies on these materials.





Fig. 13. Albert Herter, *Signing of the United States Constitution*, Wisconsin State Capitol Building, Madison, 1917. Oil on canvas; H. 9', W. 18'6". (Photo, Zane Williams.)

the ill-attired, flatly painted figures awkwardly stand on the porch of a classical building. At center, an exceptionally tall Washington stands fully frontal in a yellow floor-length cape with his chest puffed out, and Alexander Hamilton also wears a yellow cape, but his face appears in profile with his back to the viewer while incongruously carrying a sword. The remainder of the figures don equally inappropriate costumes and strike odd poses. This neoclassical conception echoes other versions of the scene made prior to it, notably by Albert Herter, a New Yorker who was commissioned to paint four murals for the Wisconsin Supreme Court Hearing Room in the Wisconsin State Capitol Building in Madison (ca. 1917). All 9 feet by 18 feet 6 inches in size, each mural depicts a source of Wisconsin law, including the Constitution image hanging above the bench (fig. 13). Sitting at the back of the composition at a table, George Washington presides over the horizontal scene rendered in a decidedly nonpainterly fashion in somber hues. Herter's painting includes only twenty figures. Most notably, Benjamin Franklin stands on the left conversing with two other gentlemen, one of whom turns his back to the viewer, and on the right, James Madison, "Father of the Constitution," is shown with his cloak hanging on his arm talking to Alexander Hamilton. Although he was in France at the time and did not sign the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson stands to the right of the

desk talking to an unidentifiable figure who turns away from the viewer.

Junius Brutus Stearns's painting of the Constitution's signing is also anchored by Washington (fig. 14). *Washington as Statesman at the Constitutional Convention* (1856), which was part of a larger program of scenes by Stearns depicting Washington's life, presents the nation's first president standing regally on a platform presenting a document to members of the convention. Painted in subdued hues in a room that somewhat closely approximates Independence Hall, Stearns included all thirty-nine signers in period costume. An engraving of Stearns's painting was reproduced on a tiny, purple three-cent postage stamp issued for the 1937 sesquicentennial celebration (fig. 15).<sup>37</sup>

Of course there are other Constitution images, although the scene has not enjoyed nearly as much popularity as one might expect.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Pritchard

<sup>37</sup> The Christy stamp followed in the footsteps of commemorative stamps depicting historical figures; e.g., in 1928 a red two-cent stamp was issued on the occasion of the Valley Forge sesquicentennial, based on an 1866 engraving by John McRae. For a discussion of this stamp as well as scores of Washingtonia items over the decades, see Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> In Michael Kammen's comprehensive book on perceptions of the Constitution in American life from the eighteenth century to



Fig. 14. Junius Brutus Stearns, *Washington as Statesman at the Constitutional Convention*, 1856. Oil on canvas; H. 37½", W. 54". (© Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch; photo, Katherine Wetzel.)

Rossiter's painting of the moment is now lost, but a preliminary sketch (ca. 1860–70) by him can be seen at Independence Hall. In the sketch, all thirty-nine signers sit in a somewhat haphazard semicircle around the platform on which Washington and two others sit at a desk. Another noteworthy example is John Froelich's *The Adoption of the Constitution* (1935) and its companion *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*, both paid for by the Civil Works Administration's Museum Administration Project (fig. 16). Each of the 10-by-15-foot canvases was made for the State Museum of Pennsylvania as part of a series showing "Pennsylvania's contribution and relationship to American History."<sup>39</sup> Froelich's Declaration of Independence painting is deliberately

copied after John Trumbull's iconic image hanging in the Capitol Rotunda, while the Constitution canvas bears a strong resemblance to Stearns's composition, with Washington overseeing the convention on a dais at right surrounded by delegates.



Fig. 15. Three-cent United States Constitution Sesquicentennial postage stamp, 1937. Engraving after painting by Junius Brutus Stearns.

the present time, he briefly notes that Constitution iconography appeared infrequently over the ages. A chapter of the book discusses the logistics of the Constitution's Sesquicentennial Commission, focusing to a degree on Sol Bloom. See Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 91–92, 282–312.

<sup>39</sup> State Museum of Pennsylvania archives, Harrisburg.





Fig. 16. John Froelich, *Adoption of the Constitution*, 1935. Oil on canvas; H. 10', W. 15'. (State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.)

None of these previous Constitution scenes seems to have served as a precedent for Christy's composition; even if Christy's painting does show Washington presiding over the event, the animated group is rendered with a much less solemn technique and characterization than its predecessors. Rather, in style Christy looked toward the rapidly executed, heavily painted portraits of his favorite painter, John Singer Sargent (Christy named his dog Sargent after the British master), and in form he attempted to incorporate the key requests made by his Congressional commissioners—namely, the creation of an accurate, unallegorical group portrait with appropriate accoutrements that might serve as much as a civics lesson as a propagandistic commemoration.

No doubt, the request for accuracy marred Christy's conception, which has, in part, led to the painting's relegation to the bowels of the Capitol Building.<sup>40</sup> From the start, those few contempora-

neous reviewers who commented on the work did not have much positive to say. In one pointed assessment, J. Watson from the *Magazine of Art* described the canvas as "nothing more than a blown-up illustration."<sup>41</sup> Leila Mechlin of Washington's *Sunday Star* was equally unimpressed: "In this painting, he seems to have missed the dramatic implication of the scene portrayed. . . . Not once does the onlooker catch his breath or sense the enormous significance of the occasion. There is animation, movement, but no emotion. The visitor's eye ranges over the great canvas, he wonders what it is all about, and moves on."<sup>42</sup> What Congress described in its aforementioned report as "a bewildering variety of figures . . . woven into a harmonious whole" is, in fact, a disorienting clutter of men. Christy's mandate to copy surviving eighteenth-century portraits and to include every man who signed the Constitution contributed to the disorderly scene populated by staid, frozen figures. Particularly egregious and awkward is Christy's effort—on the left side of the canvas—to include Pierce Butler and Thomas Fitzsimmons

<sup>40</sup> Bad planning on the part of the commission committee also contributed to the painting's poor placement. After it was unveiled, the architect of the Capitol found himself in an awkward situation; the government commissioned an enormous and expensive painting that by law had to remain in the Capitol Building, but only four areas of the building could accommodate the canvas—and those four spaces were already adorned with art. Details about this predicament can be found in a humorously subtitled article from the *Washington Post*: Gerald G. Gross, "Colossal Christy Painting Puts Capitol Architect in Quandary," *Washington Post*, May 31, 1940, clipping from Signing of the Constitution file, curator's office, Records of the Architect of the Capitol, Washington, DC (hereafter Records

of the Architect of the Capitol). The subtitle reads: "David Lynn, Ordered to Hang It, Asks 'Where?' Wisdom of Solomon Needed for There's No Free Space Available."

<sup>41</sup> J. Watson, "Christy and the Capitol," *Magazine of Art* 33 (July 1940): 431.

<sup>42</sup> Leila Mechlin, "Events in the World of Art," *Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), June 23, 1940, clipping in Records of the Architect of the Capitol.

yet strategically shield them from view with fellow constituents' raised arms because no portraits could be found. While Faulkner's mural of the Constitution signing is equally ineffective, it fails for entirely opposite reasons.

Stearns and Froehlich offer, arguably, the most legible of Constitution images. And so, in a way, their paintings communicated the historical moment better in the spirit of Bloom's goals than did Christy's. Each painted in naturalistic hues appropriate for the gravity of the moment and presented a more linear, modeled delineation of the quieter figures. With Trumbull's still and solemn *Declaration of Independence* clearly as their standard, Stearns and Froehlich painted more reserved and readable, if derivative, images (qualities that make evident why Stearns's painting was reproduced as an engraving for the postage stamp issued for the 1937 sesquicentennial celebration). Christy's painterly canvas, infused with a pink undertone, by contrast, suggests more of a carnivalesque atmosphere, especially in conjunction with the chaotic scene populated by various life-size figures gesturing wildly, leaning forward dramatically, and even some staring awkwardly at the viewer. Paradoxically, when compared to Stearns and Froehlich's uninspired yet lucid Constitution images, Christy's 1940 canvas seems convoluted (and unquestionably it is). Yet, when weighed against Christy's own earlier allegorical conceptions in his 1936 poster for the sesquicentennial celebration and 1937 *Signing of the Constitution* canvas, the Capitol Building Constitution depiction appears—relatively—strong and stoic.

*The Signing of the Constitution of the United States*  
as Antifascist Propaganda

After an arduous day in which twenty men worked from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. to move Christy's unwieldy painting from the Navy shipyard, on May 29, 1940, it was unveiled on the floor of the Capitol Rotunda with much fanfare. Two two-story-high American flags covering the painting were dramatically pulled open as the United States Navy band played "The Star-Spangled Banner" (fig. 17). Additional patriotic songs comprised the musical program, including "March of the Constitution," a new composition written for the occasion. Despite earlier misgivings, members of the Senate and the House heaped praise on Christy's painting, described the process by which he made the work, and exalted the wisdom of the Constitution. The

importance of patriotism and the instability of human liberty pervaded the event in subtle and overt ways; the unveiling became a venue to address current politics, and in doing so the speakers specifically connected the painting to world unrest.

No doubt, Americans felt the ravages of war abroad even though international aggression was first fought by the United States only with rhetoric, if that. Since World War I, America's international policy was one of isolation and nonintervention. As the tyrants Benito Mussolini in Italy, Adolf Hitler in Germany, Francisco Franco in Spain, and Emperor Hirohito in Japan forcefully took power and attempted conquests of free governments, America continued to adopt a neutral stance. During this time, though, American fears mounted as news of European battles and abominations dominated newspapers and entered political rhetoric. Even at an outwardly mundane event on October 5, 1937, for the dedication of the Outerlink Bridge over the mouth of the Chicago River, President Roosevelt delivered an address noting that the moment was an "occasion to speak to you on a subject of definite national importance. The political situation in the world, which as of late has been growing progressively worse, is such as to cause grave concern and anxiety to all the peoples and nations who wish to live in peace and amity with their neighbors."<sup>43</sup>

The seemingly interminable Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and destruction wrought on *Kristallnacht*, the first large-scale attack on Jews in Germany on the evening of November 9–10, 1938, still did not spur the United States to action. It was not until Germany's March 1939 occupation of Czechoslovakia, in violation of the Munich Agreement, and the devastating blitzkrieg invasion of Poland in September 1939, which prompted Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany, that the isolationists were finally convinced that the United States' only option was to repeal some of the Neutrality Acts legislated earlier in the decade, which restricted the selling and transporting of arms to nations at war. In 1939 Congress approved a cash-and-carry provision that would provide arms to England and

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, *American White Paper: The Story of American Diplomacy and the Second World War* (New York: Literary Guild, 1940), 90. *American White Paper* is just one of many helpful primary sources describing the years leading up to America's entrance into World War II; not only does the book detail the events of the day but it also reprints several key speeches delivered by President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. See also Franklin D. Roosevelt's papers, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs*, 2nd ser., vols. 4–16, ed. Donald B. Schewe (New York: Clearwater, 1979–83); vols. 4–16 cover January 1937–August 1939.





Fig. 17. Unveiling of Howard Chandler Christy's *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* in the Capitol Rotunda, May 29, 1940. (Howard Chandler Christy Papers, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA.)

France as long as they paid for such supplies and transported them. This compromise to a full repeal of the 1937 Neutrality Act's arms embargo was in great part too little too late; the neutrality policy ended completely with the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941, over eighteen months after war was initially declared. The US entered the war in December 1941, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. While Christy put the final touches on his canvas, further indications of Hitler's military power and expansionist goals startled the world with his army's quick, one-day defeat of Denmark and Norway on April 9, 1940, followed by invasions of Belgium, Holland, Luxemburg, and France on May 10. Christy's painting was unveiled within weeks after these decisive onslaughts—alarming developments abroad and convincing evidence that Britain might be next to fall prey to Nazi

aggression. The nearness of war for once-neutral America amid further devastations in Europe surely influenced the oratory at the unveiling.

In the proceedings describing the presentation of the painting, ceremoniously recounted in a thirty-two-page document, chairman of the event William B. Bankhead, Speaker of the House of Representatives, noted that of the historic paintings adorning the Rotunda, it was a "grievous omission, that up until this hour no provision has been made for the perpetuation in enduring form of that scene of such transcendent importance to our people, as well as to all the people of the world."<sup>44</sup> He subsequently pointed to the Constitution as a

<sup>44</sup> *Proceedings Held at the Unveiling of the Painting Depicting The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1940), 10.

document delineating "a righteous and enduring form of government for free people" and noted that

no more appropriate time than this could have been selected for the dedication of a perpetual memorial to those men of genius and high resolve and profound Philpot [*sic*] who made possible our great experiment in human freedom. And such observation is based upon the fact that today we are confronted with the menace of diabolical doctrines and powers. ... As we look upon the faces of those great men, the signers of the Constitution ... let us swear by the memory of the founders that if constitutional and representative government shall succumb in all other parts of the world, it shall be preserved inviolate in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>45</sup>

Bankhead later read a letter from President Roosevelt, which in part reiterated the Speaker's remarks and connected the decisive national event of 1787 with the then-current crisis overseas. It is worth quoting Roosevelt at length:

We should all be immeasurably happier could this ceremony take place in another kind of world—in a tranquil world where men and nations alike were free to seek out peacefully their individual destinies.

But, tragically, the condition of the world is vastly different. Beyond the seas, the way of life so brilliantly outlined in the document that we salute today is under attack by force of arms unprecedented in human history.

And so I believe that I express the sentiments of every thoughtful and loyal member of this democracy when I say that the present occasion is one far less for rejoicing than for sober resolve; resolve that neither by moral unfitness nor neglect of our physical defense shall we permit the lamp of freedom to be distinguished in this land.

It was truly a momentous scene whose reproduction is to be unveiled in the Capitol. It marked the culmination of a prodigious, unparalleled, and amazingly successful effort to express in a charter of government the eternal spirit of a just and humane society. God grant that the day is not far distant when that spirit will be free to assert itself in the councils of all mankind.<sup>46</sup>

Roosevelt expresses his grave concern over the war abroad and, by doing so, may be slyly dropping yet another hint to Congress—who had rebuffed his earlier attempts to repeal the Neutrality Acts—that the United States must take action; he realized that by remaining neutral the United States was not just keeping arms out of the hands of enemies to democracy but also hurting the allies on the front fighting for democracy. Roosevelt's and Bankhead's comments indicate that in 1940 the role of Christy's painting was bound up as much with the growing crisis abroad as a Constitution fervor that began around the sesquicentennial celebration of

the document, culminating with the presentation of the large canvas. These carefully constructed remarks, clearly aimed at connecting the painting to an antifascist agenda and to rousing patriotism, were widely distributed; according to a congressional resolution ratified on July 11, 1940, a staggering 500,000 copies of the proceedings were printed and circulated throughout the country.<sup>47</sup>

The press disseminated parts of the proceedings as well, also linking the Constitution with an antifascist stance. Under the headline "President Prays Our Constitution May Prevail in 'Different' World," the *New York Times* reprinted Roosevelt's letter, and the *Washington Post* announced Roosevelt's sentiments with the headline "U.S. Leaders Pledge Battle for Liberties at Unveiling of Christy Historical Painting."<sup>48</sup> The June 10, 1940, issue of *Life* magazine even more specifically connected the Constitution celebration and the events in Europe with a pictorial essay headlined "What Americans Said and Did as Nazis Triumphed" (fig. 18).<sup>49</sup> Thirty-three pictures across a two-page spread highlight American activities. Of the ten pictures on the first page, several demonstrate how Americans were resisting the growing tension and menaces overseas. For instance, one picture depicts Roosevelt meeting with the National Defense Council, another portrays officials in Georgia fingerprinting its "aliens," the Legion of Mothers are shown arming against parachute troops, and a fourth image presents the US Army practicing blitzkrieg techniques in Louisiana. Amid these preparations appears a photograph of Christy's enormous patriotic picture at the unveiling, thus standing as the singular positive achievement of national significance amid defensive measures. While perhaps looking back with historical hindsight, the savvy Sol Bloom realized the possibilities of merging the sesquicentennial celebration with anti-Nazi propaganda early on and enlisted Christy in this goal. Bloom recalled in his autobiography: "In a world again on the edge of war, it seemed to me that our celebration was very timely. It emphasized the contrast between our own kind of free government and the despotism that threatened to envelop all Europe. It was a reminder that democracy was not an antiquated philosophy but a living force."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> House Concurrent Resolution No. 73, July 11, 1940.

<sup>48</sup> "President Prays Our Constitution May Prevail in 'Different' World," *New York Times*, May 30, 1940, 10; "U.S. Leaders Pledge Battle for Liberties at Unveiling of Christy Historical Painting," *Washington Post*, May 30, 1940, clipping in Records of the Architect of the Capitol.

<sup>49</sup> "What Americans Said and Did as Nazis Triumphed," *Life* 8, no. 24 (June 10, 1940): 26–27.

<sup>50</sup> Sol Bloom, *The Autobiography of Sol Bloom* (New York: Putnam's, 1948), 221–22. For a discussion of antifascist art from the pages of

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



## WHAT AMERICANS SAID AND DID AS NAZIS TRIUMPHED

In Steelton, Pa. as the German Army crunched toward the Channel, Persilla, the Monkey Girl, married Emmitt, the Alligator Boy, in Washington, Mrs. Roosevelt ate a 5¢ Relief meal with the "Daughters of the American Depression." Congress unveiled Howard Chandler Christy's huge painting of *The Signing of the Constitution* in the Capitol rotunda and passed a bill providing \$500 fine and six months' imprisonment for shooting a bald eagle. North Carolina chose a Rhododendron King. In New York City an indignant citizen wrote a letter to the *Times* protesting that low-flying passenger planes from LaGuardia Field threaten to spoil this summer's Stadium concerts.

But a more typical letter-to-the-editor during the battle of Flanders began: "Isolationism! The stupidest blunder, the cruellest cowardice to stain the bright epic of America!" Kansas Editor William Allen White organized a Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. Harvard's President Conant took the radio to declare: "I believe the United States should take every action possible to insure the defeat of Hitler." The Gary, Ind. *Post-Tribune* urged an immediate declaration of war.

President Thornwell Jacobs of Atlanta's Oglethorpe University, sealing up a Crypt of Civilization "for 6,000 years," addressed himself thus to its prospective openers: "The world is now engaged in burying our civilization forever and forever, and here in this crypt we leave it to you." The graduating class of Horace Mann High School for Girls in New York City was told by its baccalaureate speaker: "You must remember you were born at a fortunate time. You can always remember the world as it was before 1940."

Poet Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress, suggested that war-debunking writers of his own generation had disillusioned current American youth not merely with war but with the ideals that World War soldiers believed they were fighting for. But college boys were once again closing their books to go off and drive ambulances in France.

Humorist H. I. Phillips unsmilingly wrote in his New York *Sun* column that what America needs is "a decision to give the hotfoot to sophistication, the rabbit punch to smart aleckism and the bum's rush to the bottlers of idealism, religion and patriotism."

Citizens of Pekin, Ill. mobbed ten Communist pamphlet distributors. A German-American clubhouse near St. Louis was burned to the ground. The House voted to bar aliens, Reds and Nazis from WPA rolls, the Civil Service Commission to bar Reds and Nazis from future Government jobs. Georgia's Governor Rivers ordered aliens to report for fingerprinting. FBI offices were jammed with tipsters on spies, saboteurs, Fifth Columnists. The National Legion of Mothers of America began arming to pot parachutists.

A strike of 6,000 C. I. O. workers at the Federal Shipbuilding yards in Kearny, N. J., halting construction of four Navy warships, drew angry protests in Congress and a burst from Secretary of the Navy Edison: "We cannot afford to have trouble of this sort in these times."

President Roosevelt warned that the war may soon spread around the world, called for still another billion for defense, summoned a Council of National Defense, asked the right to mobilize the National Guard.

After the last war, chalking up mistakes that brought his country defeat, Count von Bernstorff wrote: "The juxtaposition in the American people's character of Pacifism and an impulsive lust of war should have been known to us, if more sedulous attention had been paid in Germany to American conditions and characteristics."

26



Fig. 18. "What Americans Said and Did as Nazis Triumphed," 1940. From *Life* magazine (June 10, 1940), 26.

the *New Masses* to work by canonical regionalist artists like Thomas Hart Benton to the avant-garde Stuart Davis, see Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

### Allegory

During the unveiling proceedings, Congressman Keller briefly addressed the initial canvas version

of the work and, in doing so, provides evidence of Congress's strong stand against allegory: "This first picture contained in the upper part an allegorically expressed idea—the spirit of the Constitution in relation to the people it was to serve. The figures representing this allegory, however, were entirely rejected by the Commission when they instructed Mr. Christy in the form the painting was to take. He was instructed to follow strictly the historical facts in painting this picture, and this instruction he followed to the letter."<sup>51</sup> Although scanty archival material exists delineating these instructions, the commission obviously did not feel that allegory could most effectively advocate the principles of democracy.

As described, members of Congress insisted on an "authentic," "true," and "accurate" rendition of the Constitution scene; these comments even pervaded the unveiling ceremony when, for example, Keller noted that Christy painted "the truest portraits of these men."<sup>52</sup> Akin to Bloom's aforementioned book, *Story of the Constitution*, Congress envisioned the painting as geared to instruction on the benefits of democracy. It seems, though, that the elaborate style and open-ended interpretation of allegory (Greek for "speaking otherwise than one seems to speak") made the mode challenging for a history painting as envisioned by the Constitution Commission. Certainly, the veiling quality of allegory allows for a multiplicity of meanings. According to Hegel, allegory aims to produce "the most complete clarity, so that the external thing of which the allegory avails itself must be as transparent as possible for the meaning which is to appear in it."<sup>53</sup> This ideal is just that—an ideal. Paul de Man more realistically observes of allegory: "Why is it that the

furthest reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such a lopsided, referentially indirect mode?"<sup>54</sup> In Christy's initial conceptions, democracy was disguised and shown in a subjective manner. With the orientation of America's priorities shifting from sesquicentennial celebration to fear of fascism and war, somehow Christy's painting had to be persuasive and truthful—to provide a direct message about democracy—and allegory and illusionism's relation to artifice and untruthfulness did not comply with this propagandistic goal. Too, in an unstable world, meaning could not be allowed to appear unstable and particularly not the meaning of the Constitution. Ironically, taken to its extreme the freedom of interpretation enabled by allegory's disjunction of the signified and signifier is democracy at work in the visual arts. Congress's armchair art critics suppressed that open, or democratic, interpretation.

With the ideal discarded, Christy's *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* becomes less a celebration and more of a stoic, irrefutable fact. The relative clarity of Christy's last Constitution painting accorded with World War II posters that were increasingly austere and frequently simpler in design than those from the previous world war. To be sure, the changes to Christy's painting anticipate a codified poster-making philosophy that differed somewhat from the one that made Christy so popular during World War I.

When poster making for World War II began to increase, guidelines were presented to artists as to how to best appeal to the public. *Art News* summarized the results of a Young and Rubicam advertising firm study noting one particularly important finding: "[The poster maker's] style should not be too abstract. If symbolism is used, it must be symbolism which is understood, even by the illiterate, and tricky points of view, however handsome, should be avoided."<sup>55</sup> Some World War II poster themes were also criticized when artists employed the pretty, objectified women so popular in posters from the previous war. Critic Manny Farber observed that the "cosmopolitan cutesy-pie school" and "their babes

<sup>51</sup> *Proceedings Held at the Unveiling*, 13–14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 1:399. One author of a history of allegory observes that some allegory "challenges us to interpretation by means of an elliptical form and fragmented imagery"; see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 101. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). In an interpretation of Benjamin, Frederic Jameson observes, "Allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence"; see Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 71. Although Christy did not use allegory to obscure meaning, the mode had that unintended effect. For a discussion of allegory as postmodern in its propensity toward polysemous meaning, see Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 13 (Spring 1980): 59–80.

<sup>54</sup> Paul de Man, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 2. Ironically, after de Man's death it was revealed that during World War II he wrote many newspaper articles supporting fascism.

<sup>55</sup> "Facts and Figures: Real Results of Polls and Surveys," *Art News* 41 (August–September 1942): 43. In 1918 similar recommendations were made for the World War I poster. Based on the number of Christy posters made, in addition to their popularity and success, this advice was not taken at the time. See Price and Brown, *How to Put in Patriotic Posters the Stuff That Makes People Stop-Look-Act!*



are more lush than ever; so are their men. ... All this slush is so beside the point of this desperate war that its morale-building is heading toward the idea that lipstick will win for us."<sup>56</sup> Instead, if women were pictured in World War II posters, they tended to be strong mothers or female figures who worked to support their country, often by taking over jobs left open by men who were sent to combat. For example, the sharply defined recruiting poster bearing the headline *This Is My War Too!* pictures a uniformed woman staring stoically ahead in three-quarters view in front of a billowing American flag (fig. 19). This 1942 poster successfully encouraged women to join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (renamed the Women's Army Corps, or WAC, in 1943); in July 1942, only 728 women (1 commissioned, 727 enlisted) were members, but by the end of 1942, 12,767 women (1,545 commissioned and 11,222 enlisted) had joined. Even more astounding, by July 1943, 61,403 women (5,457 commissioned and 55,946 enlisted) belonged to the WAC, working in offices, factories, and military noncombatant jobs.<sup>57</sup>

No matter what the theme, women provided undemanding, easily synthesized iconography that directly addressed the viewer and also helped to sell the war, sell democracy, and inspire the nation. As he put it in his book on the Constitution, Bloom told the story of the document "in such a way that they [readers] can understand what it is all about." In his day Christy seemed the ultimate artist for the job of painting a persuasive Constitution painting aimed at functioning as one big poster for democracy and at garnering support for the turmoil abroad. While critics criticized Christy's World War I posters, they proved to be extremely convincing propaganda; it is believed that Christy's poster *Geel! I Wish I Were a Man* convinced 15,000 men to join the Navy.<sup>58</sup> However, the method by which

Christy had achieved his previous successes—allegory and provocative female figures—was passé, and he needed to embrace a newer and more effective poster style in his Constitution painting.

Among the posters made during World War II aiming to elicit pride from viewers through nationalistic imagery is a series of posters created from 1941–45 by the US government. Some images from the series titled *This Is America* adopted a photograph of a storied American monument (man-made or natural) that was complemented by inspirational words that recalled America's greatness and freedom; one poster depicts the Lincoln memorial augmented by words from the Gettysburg address: "Government of the People—by the People—for the People—Shall Not Perish" (fig. 20). Through text and imagery, this poster reiterates the important theme of everlasting democracy, a key concern of the period torn apart by continual fascist victories abroad. G. H. Gregory notes that "America's World War II posters rallied the nation's pride by evoking the uniqueness of the country's institutions and its great tradition of freedom and democracy—its flag, its enduring documents, its national monuments, its political heroes, its historic heritage of fighting for liberty."<sup>59</sup> Christy's painting was intended to achieve the same goal but on a larger, more visible scale. Indeed, congressional attitudes concerning persuasive images touting democracy and American progress veered toward images in a style unmuddled by allegorical flourish.

Not only was allegory viewed as an obscuring device but the vocabulary of allegory was often associated with Europe rather than with America.<sup>60</sup> Of course some allegorical figures are depicted in American art and some as part of the Capitol Building program. Too, there are occasional Liberty

<sup>56</sup> Manny Farber, "War Posters," *New Republic* 106 (March 16, 1942): 366–67.

<sup>57</sup> Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1954), 765. One of the best-known and still extensively reproduced images of the strong, independent woman who worked hard to support her country is J. Howard Miller's poster *We Can Do It!* (1942), frequently misidentified as Rosie the Riveter. The actual Rosie the Riveter was first the subject of a 1942 song by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb and subsequently immortalized in various other venues, including Norman Rockwell's May 29, 1943, cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*. On Rosie the Riveter, see David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 535–38. Fischer also provides a brief overview of Liberty imagery, focusing mostly on America (233–42).

<sup>58</sup> Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 572.

<sup>59</sup> G. H. Gregory, *Posters of World War II* (New York: Gramercy, 1993), 9. Some World War I posters also referred to the country's lineage as a means to garner support. For instance, *Ring It Again* (1918) by an unknown artist for the Third Liberty Loan shows a group of colonists standing outside the Liberty Bell Tower in Philadelphia. Watching the bell ring, the colonists wave their hats in reverence and acknowledgment of their newly accorded freedoms. The artist created a connection here between the first Americans who initially won freedom and those Americans in 1918 who supported continued freedom by purchasing war bonds.

<sup>60</sup> During the Revolutionary years, America was frequently depicted as a female personified as a virtue, such as Freedom or Liberty. For transplanted Europeans accustomed to this type of imagery, the allegorical mode made perfect sense. On early manifestations of allegorical women in both American paintings and material culture, see Joshua C. Taylor's initial chapter, "America as Symbol," in *America as Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 3–35.



Fig. 19. Dan V. Smith, *This Is My War Too! Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, United States Army*, 1942. Poster. (Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.)



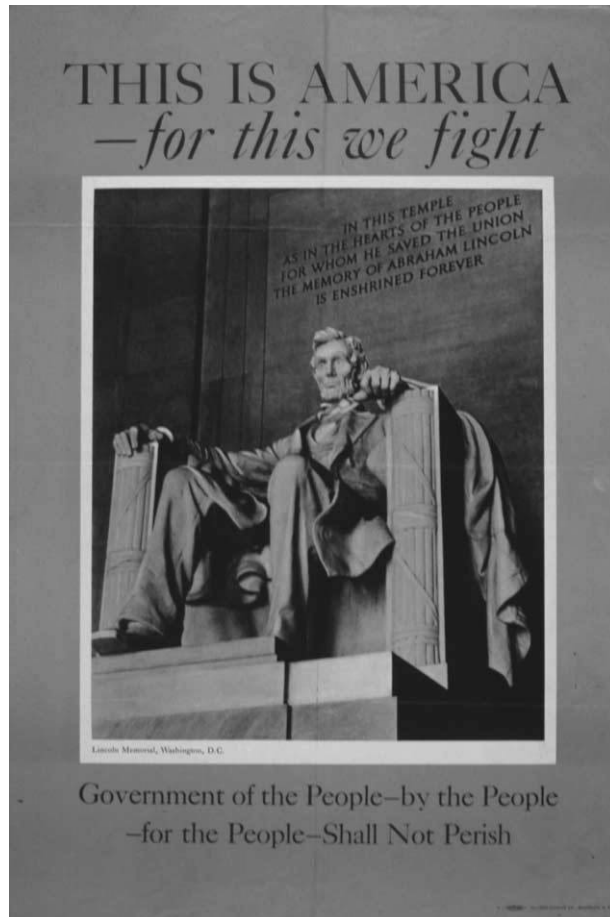


Fig. 20. Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, *This Is America—For This We Fight*, 1941–45. Poster. (US National Archives and Records Administration.)

figures on and around the building; for instance, Thomas Crawford's bronze *Statue of Freedom* crowns the Capitol dome, and Constantino Brumidi used allegory for his copious Capitol decorations, including *The Apotheosis of Washington* (1865) in the eye of the dome. This highly illusionistic fresco shows Washington ascending to heaven flanked by female allegorical figures, including Liberty. Nonetheless, the motherland is more typically understood as Europe, and European female national personifications preceded Lady Liberty, with Marianne as the French national icon and Britannia standing as the United Kingdom (frequently referred to as the Mother Country), as well as the ubiquitous allusion to Russia as Mother Russia.<sup>61</sup> Americans do not describe their country as the

motherland even though the nation is frequently noted by the feminine "she." The classical, Latinate form of *allegory* was not viewed as "authentic," which may, in fact, have functioned as a code word for American in the late 1930s. Certainly the Statue of Liberty is as allegorical and indicative of America as one can get, but the sculpture was a gift from France.<sup>62</sup>

Just as important, soon after Christy completed the design that would eventually be printed as the sesquicentennial poster, there was some criticism of the image on grounds that the allegory atop the signers contained a fascist symbol; the United States Flag Association, according to a letter from Bloom to Christy, "objected to the lady carrying the fascist emblem."<sup>63</sup> Christy's Liberty figure "We the People" carries a traditional Roman fasces, a bundle of birch rods tied together with a ribbon. A symbol of power and unified strength, this emblem is most associated with republican Rome, although when shown in a Roman context an ax typically appears with the fasces (Liberty was also shown with fasces on the first and second seals of the French Republic and she, in fact, was the Republic's emblem).<sup>64</sup> Fasces, however, do function as an official symbol in several US government contexts; among other venues, two fasces are pictured on either side of the US flag in the House of Representatives, the official seal of the Senate includes a pair of crossed fasces at its bottom, fasces ring the base of Crawford's *Statue of Freedom*, and Brumidi's Liberty in the Capitol dome carries a fasces. Despite these American manifestations of the symbol, the word "fascism" conspicuously derives from "fasces," and the symbol was used quite frequently in accordance with Italian fascism. The symbol's association with and proximity to fascism during a period overwhelmed with fear of fascist dictatorships augmented its foreign origins and caused enough

<sup>62</sup> For an informative discussion of the Statue of Liberty from its creation to more current perceptions and appropriations of the monument, see Marvin Trachtenberg, *The Statue of Liberty*, revised ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986). Horatio Greenough's half-nude colossal statue of George Washington (ca. 1840) presents another case of allegory as unacceptable for Americans. Commissioned by Congress for the Capital Rotunda to commemorate the centennial of Washington's birth, the portrait sculpture shows Washington with what the public viewed as unacceptable allegorical elements and incited much criticism upon its arrival in Washington.

<sup>63</sup> Sol Bloom to Howard Chandler Christy, May 31, 1937, Christy Papers, 1:67. A few months later when Stearns's stamp was released, it included fasces in the upper left corner. The *New York Times* noted the rarity of this symbolism, which was "a device familiar on the Fascist postal stamp of Italy" as a "symbol of power." See "Rare Symbolism Marks New Constitution Issue," *New York Times*, August 29, 1937, 8.

<sup>64</sup> See Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle*, 18–22.

<sup>61</sup> On Marianne imagery, see Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).



Fig. 21. John G. Chapman, *Baptism of Pocahontas*, US Capitol Building, Washington, DC, commissioned 1837, placed 1840. Oil on canvas; H. 12', W. 18'. (Architect of the Capitol.)

discomfort for the fasces to be removed from Christy's ultimate Constitution conception.

One last consideration must have affected Christy's final painting; Congress wanted a Constitution scene to complement the program already in place in the Capitol Building, and sexy women functioning allegorically are rarely found in Capitol Building iconography. In the eight paintings hanging in the Rotunda, for example, women are portrayed rarely and not allegorically; the only canvas that makes a female its main subject is John G. Chapman's *Baptism of Pocahontas at Jamestown, Virginia, 1613* (1836–1840), and here Pocahontas wears a long, flowing white dress, chastely bowing as she is baptized by a minister (fig. 21).<sup>65</sup> Christy's womanly

figures, with their suggestive, sensual mouths, tight-waisted clothes, and heavy eyes, equated sexuality and patriotism. As Martha Banta observed, Christy created "images of patriotic zeal" in which "patriotism is turned back 'nicely' into sexuality through the provocative form of his Girls."<sup>66</sup> A Liberty figure in line with Hollywood's conception, such as Mae West's campy, sexual pose as the Statue of Liberty with torch in hand, crown, and skintight "flag" dress in *Belle of the Nineties* (1934; fig. 22), was not appropriate for America's staid citadel of democracy. Congress wanted patriotism connected to democracy, not to sensual allure or an allegorical Liberty figure, and so changes to Christy's Constitution conception were requested and made.

<sup>65</sup> The other seven paintings in the Rotunda are John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* (1787–1819), *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, October 19, 1781* (1787–1820), *The Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga, October 16, 1777* (1822), and *General George Washington Resigning His Commission, December 23, 1783* (1822–24). Trumbull's four paintings are accompanied by Robert W. Weir's *Embarkation of the Pilgrims at Delft Haven, Holland, July 22, 1620* (1836–43), John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies, October 12, 1492* (1836–47), and William H. Powell's *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto, A.D. 1541* (1847–55).

### Why Authenticity Now?

Why was Congress so fixated on the seemingly immaterial concerns of art and authenticity when

Powell's canvas includes two small, bare-breasted Indian women in the background.

<sup>66</sup> Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 209–10.





Fig. 22. *Belle of the Nineties*, 1934. Film still. (Photofest, New York.)

the country was on the brink of war? In fact, Congress was primed for “authenticity.” That is to say, Congress’s preoccupation with authenticity took cues from the historical moment directly preceding the Constitution sesquicentennial and the accompanying onset of war when a culture of authenticity emerged. This period saw the rise of the documentary film, book, and photograph, especially during Roosevelt’s New Deal Federal Art Projects. Photographs, in particular, were viewed as “real.” As William Stott remarks in his classic study: “The camera is a prime symbol of the thirties’ mind ... because the mind aspired to the quality of authenticity, of direct and immediate experience, that the camera captures in all its photographs.”<sup>67</sup> Even though the subjectivity of the photograph and photographer has since been discussed extensively by contempo-

<sup>67</sup> Stott argues that the information gap led to a distrust that was only alleviated by eyewitness accounts or approximations thereof. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 67–73, quotation on 77. On claims of documentation, credibility, and authenticity in the reception of John Steinbeck’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the Dust Bowl, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and related *Life* magazine photographs, see Samantha Baskind, “The ‘True’ Story: *Life* Magazine, Horace Bristol, and John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Steinbeck Studies* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 40–74.

rary critics such as Roland Barthes, Alan Sekula, and Susan Sontag, people in the 1930s believed what they saw in photographs. Wisely, thirties’ documentary writers used the camera to add authenticity to their individual causes. Walker Evans and James Agee’s famous documentary collaboration *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939) was conceived with these kinds of ideas in mind; Agee hired Evans because Agee believed the camera was “like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth.”<sup>68</sup> Erskine Caldwell’s affiliation with photographer Margaret Bourke-White developed because he felt that “the realism of photography would support the disputed realism of my words” in their photo essay on sharecroppers, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), and his earlier fictional *Tobacco Road* (1932), which was called into doubt by many.<sup>69</sup> The common perceptions that a photograph makes it more difficult to deny authority and that the photograph carries stronger conviction than the written word were pervasive.

Authenticity was also sought in other projects in the decade prior to Christy’s commission.<sup>70</sup> Bloom cultivated this mentality during his tenure as director of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission. For example, a booklet produced in conjunction with the celebration, *The Book of Authentic Colonial Costumes* (1932)—adorned on the front by a couple in matching ornate, pink garments—presented re-creations of colonial attire appropriate for men, women, and children at reasonable prices (frontier fashions for boys cost from \$1.98 to \$4.48; (fig. 23). Americans also highly valued the preservation of historical sites, especially

<sup>68</sup> James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939; repr., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 234.

<sup>69</sup> Quotation from the preface to a special edition of *Tobacco Road* illustrated by Bourke-White’s photographs; see Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (1932; repr., Savannah, GA: Beehive Press, 1974), viii.

<sup>70</sup> Among compelling literature on authenticity, see Benjamin’s classic essay on the aura of authenticity, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 217–51, and Miles Orvell’s important study, *The Real Thing*. Orvell delineates a conceptual change from a culture of imitation in nineteenth-century America after the Civil War, when reproductions were prized, until the 1880s, at which time there “was a reaction against the earlier aesthetic, an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more ‘authentic’ works that were themselves real things.” Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xv. In contrast, Jean Baudrillard argued that simulation is valued in the postmodern world over authenticity and that even when authenticity is conjured, it is false; see *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

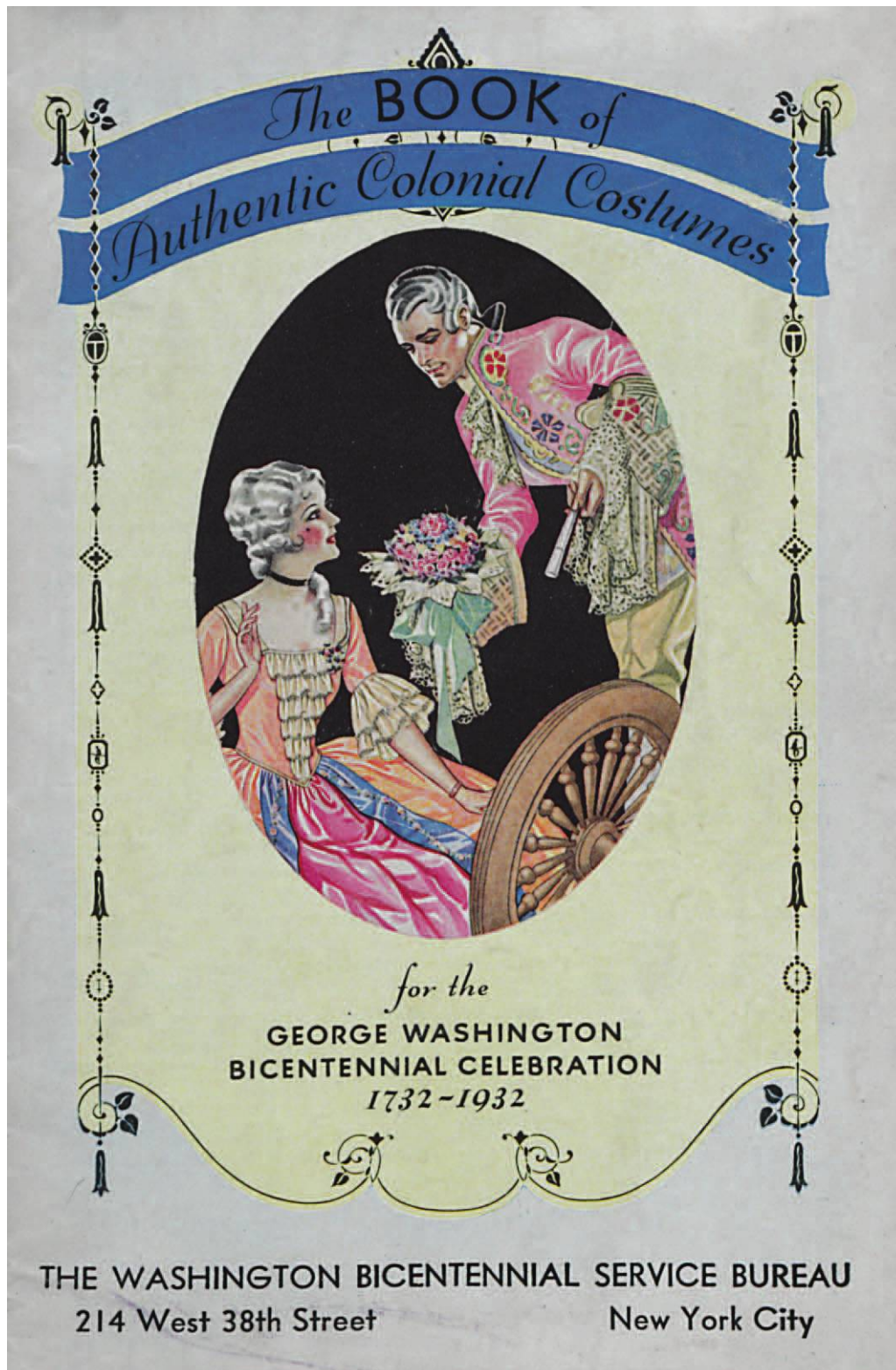


Fig. 23. *The Book of Authentic Colonial Costumes for the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration, 1732-1932*, 1932. From Washington Bicentennial Service Bureau, *The Book of Authentic Colonial Costumes for the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration, 1732-1932* (Washington Bicentennial Service Bureau, 1932), cover. (Saul Zalesch Collection of American Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)



focusing on the restoration of the colonial milieu. One of the most noteworthy endeavors of the late 1920s and early 1930s was the conceptualization and erection of George Washington's Birthplace National Monument, opening in 1932 on the 200th anniversary of the first president's birth. The group charged with recreating the farm where Washington was born meticulously researched the house's site (it burned in 1779), including an archaeological excavation in 1936.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, Henry Ford started Greenfield Village, an eighty-acre paeon to Americana (opened in 1934), and John D. Rockefeller sponsored the preservation of Colonial Williamsburg.<sup>72</sup> These projects—spurred by the popular colonial revival, an emerging climate of hero worship, and patriotism—were partially instigated by nostalgia for what was remembered as easier times or the good old days. While colonial America had its own problems, they paled in relation to World War I, the Red Scare, and the immense influx of foreigners during the great wave of immigration. Furthermore, the Founding Fathers embody the paradigm of successful, sufficient, self-starting Americans—colonial models serving as comforting figures for the troubled present day—an archetype employed by Christy and the other projects delineated here. Seth Bruggeman aptly explains in his study of national monuments: “Appearing as they did during the 1930s, both Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg sought to fortify a nation beset by economic collapse with vivid living narratives concerning America’s greatness.”<sup>73</sup> Too, the historic house museum gained in stature and

popularity during this moment, aiming to recreate the lifestyle and environs of earlier inhabitants in an authentic manner, as did period rooms painstakingly reconstructed with original furniture and objects. Moreover, it is no coincidence that historical pageantry peaked in the 1910s.<sup>74</sup> From authentic horse droppings littering Colonial Williamsburg amid blacksmiths and weavers to the painstaking historical details of ancestral costumes and seventeenth-century buildings at Greenfield Village, these projects serve as just two prime examples of the lengths early twentieth-century Americans would go to ensure credibility. Christy and Bloom’s ultimate conception of the Constitution scene fits neatly into this mode (recall the fine details attended to from Washington’s shoe buckles and breeches to proper sunlight in the room at the time of signing).

As this biography of Christy’s *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* demonstrates, in the late 1930s, Congress and other venues disseminating material related to democracy and war equated authenticity with historicity, truth, and accuracy. Such authenticity was clearly valued as essential an artistic subject as the document that outlines America’s democratic system of government. Christy’s painting carried out the mission of “authenticity” in its use of conventional Capitol Building portrait iconography—group portraits akin to those along the walls of the Capitol Rotunda, faithfully executed from proven likenesses; the exclusion of sexy women in skimpy dresses; and, most important, the elimination of allegory—all amendments aimed at heightening contemporary viewers’ sense of the canvas’s historical accuracy and thus its legitimacy. As such, *The Signing of the Constitution of the United States* offers a continuum of a significant representational change in American society, influenced by numerous historic and documentary projects from the first decades of the twentieth century. By examining Christy’s painting and related visual culture, along with broader conversations about the prevalence of historical authenticity across the arts, one can better understand how—during pivotal years in the late 1930s when the principles on which America was built were under siege—the government viewed the function of art, how that art should look, and how art participated in the fight against fascism.

<sup>71</sup> Ironically, no matter how deep researchers looked, a lack of information has led to the possibility that the first president’s birthplace may have been built over an outhouse. Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 92. Bruggeman’s exhaustively researched study reconstructs the story of Washington’s birthplace, which also provides a case study for how public memory is shaped over time.

<sup>72</sup> On Colonial Williamsburg and authenticity, see Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). More generally on its conservation and restoration, see Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). A comprehensive account of historic preservation from 1926–49 can be found in Charles B. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust*, vols. 1 and 2 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born*, 162.

<sup>74</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).