

Thinking about Monuments and Memory



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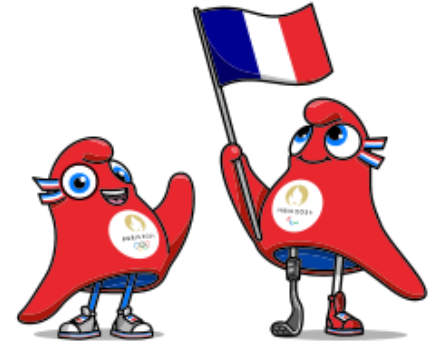
Three Atlantic
Revolutions:
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Like all Olympics host cities, Paris wanted to represent the proudest moments of its history in the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. So they created a unique mascot—the Phryges—to symbolize the French Revolution and France’s commitment to democracy, republicanism, and human rights. The Phryge (pronounced “free-jee-uh”) evokes the red woolen Phrygian cap worn by the lower-class sans-culotte in Paris during the French Revolution. Olympic organizers described the Phrygian Cap as a “symbol of freedom” that would lead a “revolution through sport” at the Paris 2024 Olympics.¹ But students of history know that the French Revolution was not so simple. The people of Paris who wore Phrygian caps in 1792 staged a violent uprising that overthrew an elected legislature and led to the creation of the guillotine, an invention of the French Revolution that

1. “Paris 2024 The Mascot,” International Olympic Committee, accessed April 2025, <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/paris-2024/mascot>

was definitely not part of the celebration in Paris 2024. The ensuing chaos led to Napoleon's coup and the return of monarchy to France for decades. Those who might be looking for a revolution through sport should not wish for a revolution like the French Revolution.



The Olympic and Paralympic Phryges, mascots of the 2024 Paris Olympics

The Paris 2024 Olympic Mascots are an example of why it is so difficult for a single object or image to adequately represent a historical event, especially one so important and politically fraught as the founding revolution of a nation. It is easy to reduce our founding revolutions to straightforward events led by heroic individuals we can idolize and emulate. We know, however, that history is much more complicated. When we understand and remember more about our history, we can have a deeper appreciation for the real, imperfect people who courageously risked their lives and property for principles of freedom and justice that they themselves sometimes struggled to live up to.

It might be impossible for a monument to adequately convey the complexity of the historical event, idea, or person it commemorates. This is why we must approach all monuments with a critical eye and ask the kinds of questions you and your classmates have been asking throughout this module: What parts of the revolution is this monument representing? What parts has the monument left out? How is history being conveyed to a public audience through this monument? How effective is it in this task? We have looked at many different monuments relating to the American, French, and Haitian revolutions in this class. Some are realistic-looking figural sculptures that allow you to look revolutionary leaders in the eye or gaze up to them astride their pedestals. Others feature lesser-known figures of the revolution, or anonymous figures meant to represent the many nameless people who contributed to the revolution. Some artists have chosen to create abstract monuments that convey a feeling or idea associated with the revolution rather than a specific person or event. All monuments have limitations, but many have been very effective at helping people remember and have pride in key parts of their history.



French Revolutionaries shown wearing Phrygian caps

The American *Declaration of Independence* (1776), the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789) and the Haitian *Declaration of Independence* (1804) all articulate a vision of freedom and natural human rights that encouraged individuals to protest their current government and agitate for political change. Because of their symbolic power, monuments are often the sites where protests take place. In 1776, the citizens of New York City marked their approval of the *Declaration of Independence* by tearing down a statue of King George III. People wearing Phrygian caps toppled statues of King Louis XVI all over Paris in 1792. Today, protests against government leaders and policies often take place near monuments such as the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial. Though the founding Declarations of the three Atlantic Revolutions do not condone vandalism or destruction of property, they all articulate a right to speak freely and resist tyranny. Perhaps it is appropriate that monuments have become sites and subjects of contention as people articulate new visions of how society can be more free, more fair, and more responsive to the needs and interests of citizens.



George Washington statue by Thomas Ball in the Boston Public Garden



Protesters gather around the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, across from the Washington Monument in Washington D.C., 2020 (top); Kehinde Wiley's statue Rumors of War in Times Square, New York City, 2019 (bottom)



As you have also learned, history is not merely a collection of events that happened in the past. History is made up of the stories we choose to remember and tell about the past. As society changes, certain aspects of our founding revolutions have become more important, and others less so. For example, today's students of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions are likely to hear more stories about contributions from common people, including women and Black people. Discussions of revolutionary leaders like George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Toussaint Louverture are more likely to portray them as real people who were courageous but flawed.

For your final project, you will have an opportunity to do an in-depth analysis of an existing monument, or create the kind of monument that you think best reflects a person, event, or idea from the American, French, or Haitian revolutions.

Image Citations

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Olympic Phryges of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris France, Fair Use, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Phryges.svg
“France, 1793” in Deputierter vom rat der “Fünfhundert”. Gala-Kostüm eines Mitglieds des Direktoriums, 1900, Munich Germany, New York Public Library Digital Collections, Public Domain, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-b4ee-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Page 3:

George Washington statue in the Boston Public Garden, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Washington_statue_in_the_Boston_Public_Garden_-_DSC04193.jpg
A group of protesters gather for a Black Lives Matter protest around the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool in Washington, D.C., June 6, 2020, U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Jovi Prevot, Public Domain, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6233306/protest>
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