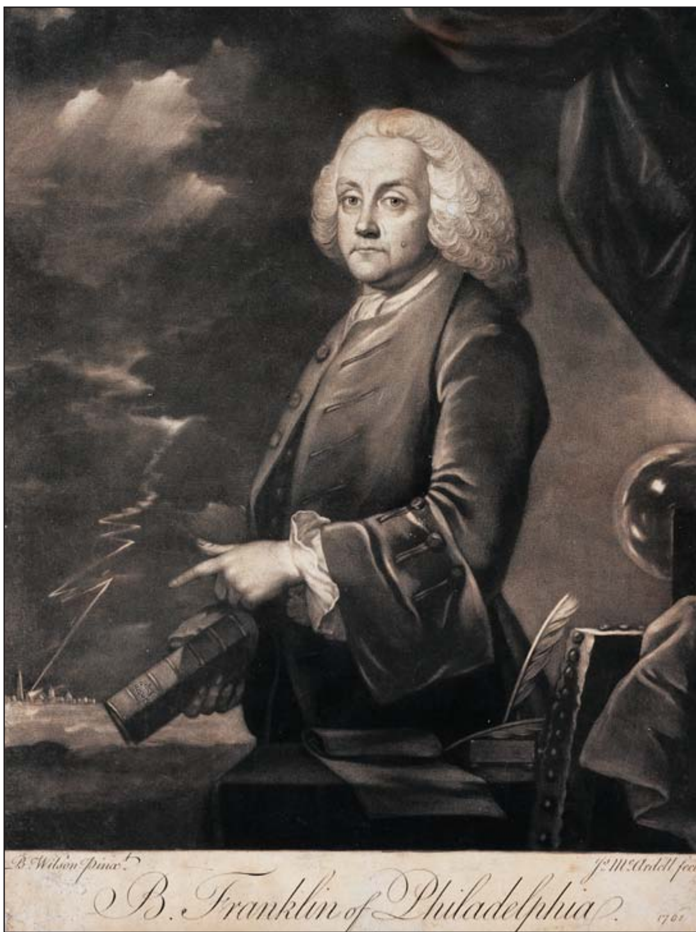
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

Portrait of the Statesman as a Rock Star



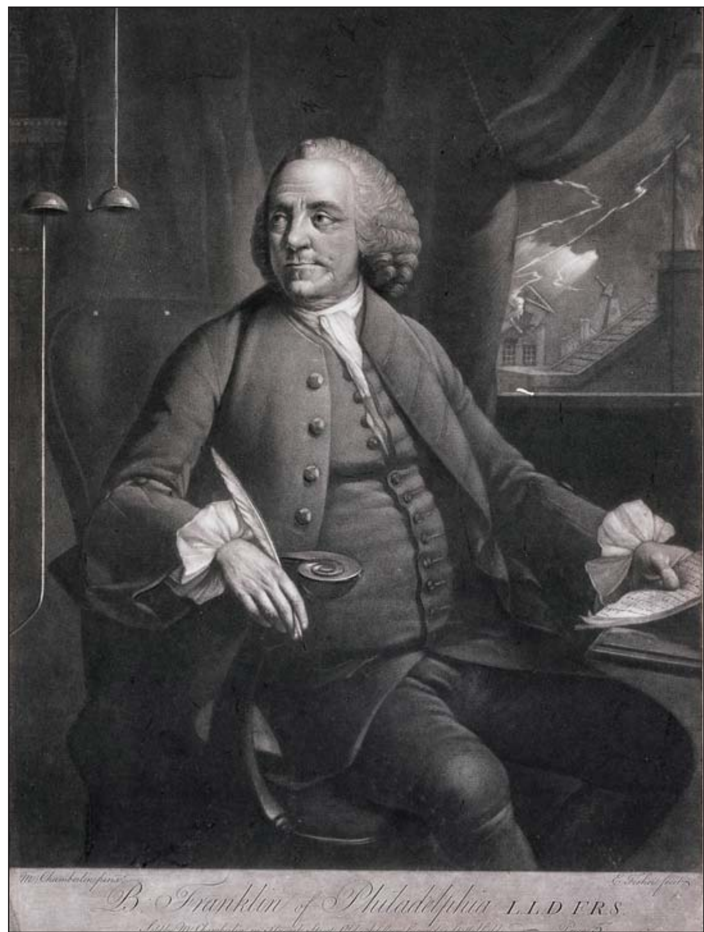


Fig. 1 *(left)*: *B. Franklin of Philadelphia,* James McArdell (1728–1765) after Benjamin Wilson (1721–1788), London, 1761. Mezzotint. 21 x 17 inches. Collection of Stuart E. Karu; photography by Peter Harholdt. **Fig. 2** *(right)*: Edward Fisher after Mason Chamberlin, *Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, L.L.D., F.R.S., 1763,* London, 1763. Mezzotint. 15 x 11 inches. Collection of Stuart E. Karu; photography by Peter Harholdt. **Fig. 3** *(opposite)*: *Benjamin Franklin,* medallion, Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) after Isaac Gosset (1713–1799), Etruria, Staffordshire, 1766. H. 5 inches. American Philosophical Society; photography by Peter Harholdt.

espite his legendary agility of mind and body, Benjamin Franklin was the eldest of our nation's founding fathers, and will be the first to reach the 300th anniversary of his birth, which will have occured on January 17, 2006. Franklin was a scientist, an inventor, a statesman, and a shrewd businessman. In addition to his many accomplishments on the home front, which included being joint deputy postmaster general of North America, helping to create Philadelphia's first library, first hospital, and its first college, he was the colonies' respected representative at the English court, and later, the new nation's effective negotiator with the French king. During his time abroad an intense admiration developed around him in London and Paris that was startlingly similar to the adulation that swirls around certain actors and musicians today. Quite aware of his circumstance, he wrote to his daughter, Sally, that his face was "as well known as that of the moon,"[1] It was an admiration that Franklin shrugged off, but doesn't seem to have rejected, distributing images of his face to visitors and friends alike.

Anticipating the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth in 2006, the federal government established the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Commission in the year 2002. With the example of Franklin's ingenuity before them, the organization's staff has been very active. An imposing museum exhibition is currently on view that will travel to four American cities before closing in Paris in 2008. A range of other events have also been taking place, among them the baking of a 300-candle birthday cake, the reenactment of an eighteenth-century fair day on Philadelphia's Market Street, and programs by several of Franklin's celebrated biographers.

All these activities are transitory, and will vanish like the crumbs of a birthday cake. Even the exhibit will leave only its catalogue which, though an impressive reference, is static. One of the projects, however, that will outlast the anniversary celebrations and continue to grow is the Frankliniana Database: an electronic resource that records and describes images of Franklin that were created during or after his lifetime, and surviving objects associated with him, from personal possessions to gifts. It will be accessible in early 2006 through the Tercentenary's web site at www.benfranklin300.org.

Those of us involved in creating the database soon realized that there were many multiples of medallions, prints, and objects commemorating Franklin. During research into their provenance it was clear that the public's fancy for Franklin was encouraged not only by commercial interests, but also by the man himself. At first, the notion of

comparing a Wedgwood medallion to a Rolling Stones T-shirt seemed absurd. But the similarities were impossible to ignore. Franklin is not the first or only public figure of his era to be commemorated by prints and medals. However, the quantity and variety of the artifacts, and the documentation that survives surrounding their production and distribution suggests that Benjamin Franklin enjoyed more international attention than any other North American public figure of his era.

Franklin first found fame as a scientist. The study of the nature and properties of "electric fire" was engaging learned amateurs like Franklin as well as scholars like Joseph Priestley. But Franklin's extended, thorough, and sometimes hazardous experiments place him among his generation's eminent men of science. Those experiments were first recorded in a series of detailed letters he wrote over several years to Peter Collinson, the English agent for Philadelphia's Library Company. Collinson reported on Franklin's experiments to London's Royal Society, of which he was a member. The reports culminated in Franklin's successful proof of the relationship between electricity and lightning (which involved considerably more than the kite-and-key gambit). They were noted in English and North American magazines, printed in a volume published by Collinson, and duplicated by scientists throughout Europe. In 1752, Franklin was awarded the Royal Society's Sir Godfrey Copley Medal for scientific achievement, an overwhelming honor for a self-educated colonist.

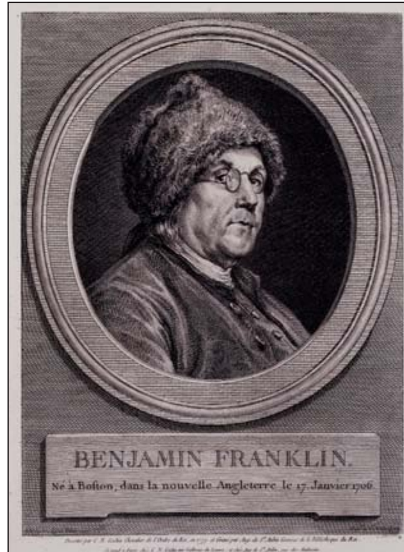


Fig. 4: *Benjamin Franklin,* Augustin de St. Aubin (1736–1807) after Charles-Nicholas Cochin (1715–1790), Paris, 1777. Engraving. 7⅞ x 5⅞ inches. Collection of Stuart E. Karu; photography by Peter Harholdt.

Franklin went to London in 1757 to serve as the Pennsylvania Assembly's representative to the English Parliament. Soon those who didn't know him for his scientific accomplishments knew him for his verbal dexterity and political views. A portrait by Benjamin Wilson (1721– 1788)—also a member of the Royal Society and a collaborator on the use of lightening rods—painted a few years after Franklin's arrival in London, was the source for what is probably the earliest graphic image of Franklin. The resulting mezzotint (Fig. 1), signed by Scottish artist James McArdell (1728–1765) and dated 1761, alludes to Franklin's experiments and cites his fellowship in the Royal Society and the honorary degree Harvard granted him in 1753; its bolts of lightening could have been describing the subject's sharp wits as much as the electricity with which he was associated.

Franklin's practice of giving or sending tokens and images to admirers and friends is well documented in his papers. A portrait commissioned in 1762 from London artist Mason Chamberlin (d.1787) was the source of mezzotints done a year later by Edward Fisher (1730–1785) (Fig 2). Franklin's son purchased 100 of the prints, and Franklin is recorded as

Fig. 5: Creamware bowl, with transfer images including a three-quarter profile of Franklin after St. Aubin. Staffordshire, 1790–1800. H. 4¼ inches, diameter 9¾ inches. The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical And Museum Commission.

Fig. 6: *Il Dirige la Foudre et Brave les Tirans (He Guides Lightning and Defies Tyrants).* Jean Baptiste Nini (1717–1786) after Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818), France, 1779. Terra cotta medallion. Diam. 4⅜ inches. Collection of Stuart E. Karu; photography by Peter Harholdt.

having given one to an admirer in 1764. His 1769 letter to Thomas François Dalibard, who had translated Franklin's account of his electrical experiments into French, contains the lines, "As I cannot soon enjoy the Happiness of being personally in your Company, permit my Shadow to pay my Respects to you. 'Tis from a Plate my Son caus'd to be engrav'd some years since."[2]

Among the men who became Franklin's "philosophical friends" in his first years in England were members of the group that called themselves The Lunar Circle, from their practice of gathering for monthly meetings on the evening of the full moon (when the bright light made road travel safer). Centered in Birmingham, the stimulating mix of scholars, physicians, and inventors included social reformer and businessman Josiah Wedgwood (1730– 1795), with whom Franklin formed a lifelong friendship. Wedgwood's Etruria factories in Staffordshire turned out a series of ceramic portraits of Franklin over the years, from cameo-sized medallions to wall plaques, of which the earliest appears to have been a 1766 medallion based on a profile by the wax modeler Isaac Gosset (1713–1799) (Fig. 3). It presents Franklin as a reserved, mature English gentleman; part diplomat, part scholar.

Wedgwood's productions found a ready market, and advanced Franklin's name and image even further. The small medallions could be mounted and worn as jewelry, or placed among the mementoes in a cabinet of curiosities. The larger plaques suited the current fashion for hanging multiple objects in strategic locations around drawing rooms or parlors. Wearing them on one's person or displaying them in one's home made a discreet statement of political inclination or intellectual pretension. More subtle than a Beatles watch or a Grateful Dead poster, they were responding to a similar commercial impetus.

Franklin spent nine years in London. He reveled in his environment, traveling in England and Scotland, and associating with men at the highest levels of learning and statesmanship. After expending great effort to keep the colonies and England together while advancing the colonial cause, his political and personal break with England came in 1775 when he was accused of treason. He returned to Philadelphia a reluctant but confirmed revolutionary. Playing the critical role of mentor to the younger members of the Second Continental Congress, he served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence and, less than two years later, sailed to Europe. He led a diplomatic team seeking a treaty of alliance with France: one that would give the new nation international recognition and a line of credit to buy supplies and arms for Washington's struggling troops.

If Franklin had been a superman in England, he was a demigod in France: a *savant,* a *raconteur,* a *philosophe.* Above all, he was the bold statesman who had led his nation to challenge France's historic enemy. Newspapers and magazines rushed into print with descriptions of the man who had "snatched lightning from the heavens and the scepter from tyrants." When he appeared in public, his activities weren't just noted, they were described in minute detail. His fur cap and his shoulder-length hair spoke to them of Rousseau's natural man. Portraits were painted, plates engraved, prints turned out quickly and sold to eager buyers. Artists made copies from their own

Fig. 7: Snuffbox with portrait print of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Franklin, French, post-1790. Horn, satinwood, gilt metal, engraved image, glass. Diam. 3 inches. Courtesy of Masonic Library and Museum of Pennsylvania; photo by Peter Harholdt.

originals, which were cribbed by other artists, so that today the Franklin we recognize is a conflation of images after Duplessis, Greuze, Houdon, Caffiéri, and others.[3]

France's declaration of support for the new nation made ocean trade perilous for all parties to the conflict. But it doesn't seem to have stopped Frankliniana from traveling across the waters with the speed of pirated CD's. One of the first French engravings marketed after Franklin's arrival (Fig. 4) became the source for a transfer that was applied in endless variations to Staffordshire creamware (Fig. 5). Think of this the next time you drink coffee from a mug printed with a political slogan.

The Revolution cramped Wedgwood's sale of Franklin images for a time, but the French porcelain factory at Sèvres began turning out numbers of small busts and medallions. They were snatched up eagerly in France. Franklin's English and American friends wrote to him at his residence in Passy, not only praising the quality of the images but asking him to buy quantities for them and ship them off to England or the United States.

The terra cotta kilns owned by Franklin's French host Donatien Le Ray de Chaumont produced a variety of striking medallions in different sizes, including several by Italian designer Jean Baptiste Nini (1717–1786) representing Franklin with fur hat, bifocals and shoulder-length hair. After King Louis XVI signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the new nation in 1778, a new, more formal image of Franklin appeared, ringed by his name and the motto, "Il Dirige la Foudre et Brave les Tirans" (He guides lightning and defies tyrants) (Fig. 6).

In 1785 Franklin returned home where he was elected president (governor) of Pennsylvania, an appointment that both pleased and astonished him. The burgeoning revolution in France took a far more violent turn than the one he had helped to bring about in the United States, dismaying him greatly. Franklin's death in 1790 rocked the French nation. Public outpourings of grief were reported in newspapers, and memorial ceremonies were held in cities and towns throughout the country. An elegant snuffbox survives as a testimonial to the reverence in which Franklin was held (Fig. 7). The engraving mounted on its lid shows the images of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Franklin; like a new "Holy Trinity" of the new republic of France.

***Constance V. Hershey** is curator of the Frankliniana Database, and a member of the team responsible for the exhibit "Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World." She is a curatorial consultant, collections manager, and decorative and fine arts researcher.*

1 Letter to Sarah Bache, June 3, 1779, first printed in W. T. Franklin, *The Private Correspondence of Benjamin Franklin, L.L.D. F. R.. S.,*. 2nd edition, London (1817), vol. I, p. 42. Quoted in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* New Haven: Yale University Press, vol. 29: 612a.

2 Letter to Thomas François Dalibard, September 22, 1769. Quoted in Charles Coleman Sellers, *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture* (Yale University Press, 1962), 221.

3 The book that remains the starting point for any study of Franklin's portraits is Sellers' *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture,* which records surviving images in dizzying variations.