

# SYMBOLS OF THE NEW REPUBLIC

## KEY TERMS

- Bald Eagle
- George Washington
- Symbol
- Import Goods
- United States of America



## CLOSE LOOKING

**A FULL-LENGTH FIGURE** of George Washington dressed as commander of the Continental Army stands on a platform decorated with the likeness of the Greek god Apollo surrounded by acanthus leaves.<sup>1</sup> Washington's left hand rests on his sword hilt and his right holds a scroll. "Rue Michel-le-Comte, No. 33," the address of the Parisian clockmaker Nicolas Dubuc, is inscribed on the clockface. Below it, a tribute written by Major General Henry Lee upon

### **MANTEL CLOCK** c. 1815

Mercury gilded brass, iron, enameled metal  
Designer: Jacques Nicolas Pierre François  
Dubuc  
Active Paris, 1815–1819  
Gift of Mrs. Henry V. Ward  
BMA 1932.33.5



Eagle Detail From  
Dubuc's Mantel Clock

#### FRENCH INGENUITY.

*Extract of a letter from Paris, received by the schooner Vixen.*

"The MANTLE CLOCKS, with the statue of WASHINGTON, which we had the honor to plan when you were here, are completed; and I can assure you, they are equal in elegance and intrinsic value to any work of the kind and price, ever executed in this city. They are about 18 inches long and 21 high, and will cost, with an elegant glass and every thing complete, from 300 to 320 francs—I shall soon execute a small one, 8 inches long and 15 high, which will cost, when superbly finished, from 220 to 250 francs.

I pray, sir, that you will acquaint your gallant countrymen of this national and elegant piece of furniture. You may rely upon it, that the statue is a good likeness of "the Father of the Republic," as no pains and expense were spared searching the Louvre, the galleries and hotels, which abound with efforts to perpetuate his memorable person. There are connected with this work other devices, entirely American, which cannot fail to make it desirable to the Patriots of your country.

I have the honor, sir, &c. &c. &c.

DUBUC,

Aine horloger, rue Michéle  
Compte, No. 33, en face Le  
Bureau des Hypothèques à Paris."

#### Washington clock advertisement by

Nicolas Dubuc published in the Charleston, SC, *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, April 7, 1815.

Washington's death in 1799 reads, "The First in War, The First in Peace, and in his countrymen [sic] hearts." With wings outstretched, an eagle, bearing an escutcheon, or shield, holds in one talon an olive branch and in the other a sheaf of arrows. The orb below the eagle rests on a plinth engraved "E Pluribus Unum." The clock, standing fifteen inches tall, is one of two Dubuc Washington clocks in the BMA collection.

## ART IN CONTEXT

AS THE HEAD OF THE CONTINENTAL ARMY for six years during the Revolutionary War and the nation's first president from 1789 to 1797, George Washington became a national hero to many. During his tenure, he worked to expand the federal government, create a national economy, more formally unite states that had functioned independently, and shape foreign policy. At the death of Washington in 1799, a market quickly developed for Washington-related keepsakes. Entrepreneurs, both in this country and in Europe, created an explosion of "Washingtonia"—paintings, prints, porcelain, silver, jewelry, collectibles, and textiles—that bore the deceased president's likeness. Often these goods came from France because many Americans continued to boycott English goods following the Revolution.

Parisian clockmaker Nicolas Dubuc capitalized on the popularity of commemorative Washingtonia by making and selling clocks adorned with the figure of Washington to the American market. While some Washingtonia was inexpensive, Dubuc clocks were affordable only to the very well-to-do. A clock was the second most expensive item in middle-class homes, the first being a wooden high chest of drawers. In 1815, an unnamed Baltimorean received a letter from Nicolas Dubuc describing plans to produce timepieces bearing Washington's likeness in two sizes, one fifteen inches tall, the other twenty inches tall. An excerpt of this letter, dated 1815, appeared in early American newspapers in Philadelphia, Raleigh, and Charleston:

"The mantle clocks, with the statue of Washington, which we had the honor to plan when you were here, are completed. . . . I pray, sir, that you will acquaint your gallant countrymen of this national and elegant piece of furniture. You may rely upon it, that the statue is a good likeness of 'the Father of the Republic,' as no pains and expense were spared searching the Louvre, the galleries and hotels, which abound with efforts to perpetuate his memorable person. There are connected with this work other devices, entirely American, which cannot fail to make it desirable to the Patriots of your country."<sup>2</sup>

Many of the "entirely American" devices to which Dubuc referred are symbols that came to be associated with the United States from

its infancy. The colonists fought bravely and against the odds for an independence marking the end of rule under England's monarchy and the establishment of a democratic government. But how to represent the abstract ideas of military power and might symbolically?

On July 2, 1776, the day that the Continental Congress declared America's independence, a motion was passed to create a national seal with emblems that would symbolize the tenacity of the colonies. As a practical matter, American leaders needed a national seal to affix to official documents. Unlike European seals that included centuries-old symbols of monarchy, America's seal needed imagery that would convey democracy, liberty, republicanism, and strength—abstract ideas that were at the center of the Revolution. After much debate, the final version of the Great Seal was adopted on June 20, 1782. The actual seal is, in fact, only a written document. It describes the official imagery to be engraved on a die or illustrated on a crest, as it is in the example below, right.

Dubuc included on the clock the Great Seal's central image, the eagle, which is associated with the strength of Zeus, the ancient Greek king of the gods and protector and ruler of humankind. The "American" bald eagle was chosen for the Great Seal because it was believed at the time to be a species unique to the new nation. The official description reads, the "Escutcheon is born on the breast of an American Eagle without any other supporters to denote that the United States of America ought to rely on their own virtue."<sup>3</sup> The eagle is a symbol of independence and power. It holds in one talon an olive branch, associated with peace by early Roman poets and, in the other talon, arrows. Described together on the Great Seal, they ". . . denote the power of peace and war which is exclusively vested in Congress."<sup>4</sup> The olive branch and arrows convey that the United States "has a strong desire for peace, but will always be ready for war." In most cases, the eagle's head is turned toward the olive branch signifying the nation's preference for peace over war.

Included on the clock is an inscription, "E Pluribus Unum." The translation, "From Many, One," refers to the thirteen states that formed one nation under the United States Constitution. The Great Seal describes the eagle as holding the motto on a scroll in its beak. Dubuc, however, placed the motto below the eagle, probably because a thin brass scroll in its beak would have been too fragile. The acanthus leaves adorning the clock base were borrowed from Greco-Roman antiquity, where they were used as a decorative architectural motif on friezes, moldings, and capitals on top of columns. Finally, the clock includes an image of the head of Apollo, considered by the ancient Greeks to be the Lawgiver and the God of Light and Prophecy.

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

**THERE WERE, IN FACT**, two Dubuc clockmaker brothers working in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nicolas, the elder, whose workshop was located at Rue Michel-le-Comte, No. 33, was the maker of the two Washington clocks in the Museum's collection. Rue Michel-le-Comte, located in Le Marais district in east central Paris, was an area where many artisans worked. In the years prior to 1816, Nicolas Dubuc was described as a clockmaker in commerce directories, but in 1816, he appears as both a clock maker and a clock store owner.<sup>5</sup> He made and assembled the highly finished gilded clock case from a multitude of individually molded, cast, and formed pieces. Many of the elements were attached to the case by very small nuts and screws. While Dubuc produced the clock case in his workshop, the clock workings would have been supplied by another artisan.



### GREAT SEAL

#### Arms

Paleways of thirteen pieces Argent and Gules: a Chief, Azure. The Escutcheon on the breast of the American bald Eagle displayed, proper, holding in his dexter talon an Olive branch, and in his sinister a bundle of thirteen arrows, all proper, & in his beak a scroll, inscribed with this Motto. "E pluribus unum".—

#### For the Crest

Over the head of the Eagle which appears above the Escutcheon, A Glory, Or, breaking through a cloud, proper, & surrounding thirteen stars forming a Constellation, Argent, on an Azure field.—

#### Reverse

A Pyramid unfinished. In the Zenith an Eye in a triangle surrounded with a glory proper. Over the Eye these words "Annuit Coeptis". On the base of the pyramid the numerals MDCCLXXVI & underneath the following motto. "novus ordo seclorum"



## RELATED ARTWORK

**AFTER THE FOUNDERS** of the United States adopted the Great Seal, the bald eagle quickly became a popular motif in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American art. Carved versions, such as the BMA *Eagle Finial* (above, right), could be found adorning furniture and architecture. With wings outstretched, the *Eagle Finial* was likely carved in Boston by a craftsman as a decorative element on a piece of furniture. Made of a single piece of wood and then gilded (covered with thin gold leaf or paint), the eagle holds in its beak and talons a metal branch with leaves.

Like the Washington clock, this porcelain dessert platter (above, left) was made in France for an American market. It was created by the Parisian firm Dihl et Guérhard (pronounced Dee-l eh Geh-rar) for the Brown family of merchants, whose Baltimore patriarch Alexander Brown was one of America's earliest millionaires. Painted in black enamel with gold highlights on a peach background, the border motifs reflect Greco-Roman influences and speak to ideals important to the new nation. Four seated figures in a classical style are separated by agricultural tools, weapons, and musical instruments. The tools may symbolize the New Republic's foundation on an agrarian economy and the instruments the importance of the arts and culture to the nation. The weapons of war and the laurel branch of victory in the center of the plate recall the recent victories of the Revolutionary War. The American flag is dramatically situated in the center of the plate. Its thirteen stars represent the thirteen original states of the New Republic. Part of a larger dessert service, the round platter is evidence of American taste for upscale French porcelain.

**ROUND PLATTER** (left) c. 1800–1815  
Porcelain  
Manufacturer: Dihl et Guérhard, Paris,  
1781–c.1824  
Gift of Solomon Grossman, New York  
BMA 2012.577.1

**EAGLE FINIAL** (right) c. 1750  
Basswood, carved and gilded; metal  
Dorothy McIlvain Scott Collection  
BMA 2012.335

<sup>1</sup> Lara Pascali, "Desirable to the Patriots': French Washington Clocks for the American Market" (Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, 2006–2007), 3. Apollo, the ancient Greek god of truth and protector of colonists was an apt symbol for Commander and President George Washington. Acanthus leaves, an ornamental motif in ancient Greek architectural friezes, columns, and moldings allude to the Greco-Roman inspired principles discussed later in this lesson on which the New Republic was based.

<sup>2</sup> "French Ingenuity," *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Charleston, South Carolina, April 7, 1815; Poulson's *American Daily Advertiser*, Philadelphia, March 28, 1815; *The Star*, Raleigh, North Carolina, April 7, 1815.

<sup>3</sup> John D. MacArthur, "Explanation of the Great Seal's Symbolism," [www.greatseal.com/symbols/explanation.html](http://www.greatseal.com/symbols/explanation.html).

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, "Explanation of the Great Seal's Symbolism."

<sup>5</sup> Pascali, "Desirable to the Patriots': French Washington Clocks for the American Market," 5. Cited from *Almanach du Commerce*, 1816.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## ACTIVITY 1:

### Exploring the bald eagle as a symbol of American strength

**Grades: K–2**

**Subjects: English Language Arts, History/  
Social Studies, Visual Arts**

Teacher will share with students the definition of a symbol, explaining that a symbol is a visual image or an object that stands for a bigger idea. They will then share with students that there are many American symbols important to people in the United States. Examples of those are the American flag, which symbolizes freedom, and the bald eagle, which represents strength. Students will compare and contrast the images of bald eagles from the *Mantel Clock* and the *Eagle Finial*, using the following questions. Teacher will record student responses in a Venn Diagram on a black/white board.

- What types of lines, colors, shapes, textures, and forms can you find in the two artworks?
- Compare and contrast the two objects. What can you see that is the same? What can you see that is different?
- Which of the objects do you think best shows strength? Why?

Individual students will create their own drawing or paper collage of a bald eagle that they feel best illustrates the idea of strength.

## ACTIVITY 2:

### Comparing and contrasting George Washington in image and text

**Grades: K–2**

**Subjects: English Language Arts, History/  
Social Studies, Visual Arts**

Students will examine and describe the depiction of George Washington on the *Mantel Clock*. Read aloud or have students read an age-appropriate description of George Washington's qualities as a leader. Students will then compare and contrast the textual description with the visual image using the

following questions. Teacher will record student responses throughout the discussion.

- What kinds of words are used in the text to describe George Washington as a leader?
- What kinds of lines, shapes, colors, textures, and forms do you see in this image of George Washington?
- What do the things you can see in this object make you think about what George Washington was like?
- Do you get the same idea from the writing about George Washington as you do from the image of George Washington on the *Mantel Clock*? If so, why? If not, what is different?

Individual students will then select someone they feel is an important leader in their lives, such as the president, a community leader, a relative, or a sports or media personality. They will each make a list of up to 10 words that describe the leader they selected. Using drawing or paper collage techniques, students will then create an image of the leader they chose to depict. Reflecting on the previous discussion, they will share their artworks and explain the artistic choices they made to communicate leadership qualities.

## ACTIVITY 3:

### Reimagining the Great Seal of the United States

**Grades: K–2**

**Subjects: English Language Arts, History/  
Social Studies, Visual Arts**

Students will look closely at the *Mantel Clock*, *Eagle Finial*, and *Round Platter*, describing what they see in the in the artworks. Teacher will share with students the definition of a symbol, explaining that a symbol is a visual image, an object, or even a person that stands for a bigger idea. They will then share with students that there are many American symbols important to people in the United States. Using these resources (original or adapted), teachers will share that George Washington can be seen as a symbol of leadership, the American bald eagle as a symbol for strength and independence, and the American flag as a symbol of freedom.

Teacher will include explanations of the Greek and Roman symbols visible on the works.

Teacher will divide students into teams of two or four to design a new flag for the United States, using the questions below to guide their thinking. Student teams will designate a note-taker to record their responses.

- Which symbols would you use for the new flag?
- The three objects that you looked at contain symbols from ancient Greece and Rome, to connect the United States to societies and ideas that the founders admired. Are there images from other cultures that you might use in the flag or as inspiration for the flag?
- What would you keep from the current flag? Why?
- How would you want Americans to feel when they see the new flag? Proud? Excited?

Student teams will create a flag on a large sheet of paper, using markers and/or paper for collage. Each group will then share their new flag with the class and describe their process for selecting the symbols they incorporated into their work.

# STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### English Language Arts

Grade 1

CCSS.ELA—Literacy.RI.1.9 Identify basic similarities and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).

CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.1.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

Grade 2

CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.2.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

## MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

### History/Social Studies

Grade 1

1.A.2.a. Identify and discuss the meaning of common symbols associated with the United States of America, such as the bald eagle, the White House, and the Statue of Liberty.

Grade 2

1.A.2.b. Connect certain people, symbols, songs and poems to the ideals they represent, such as George Washington portrays leadership, the American flag represents loyalty and respect, and the Star Spangled Banner represents courage and freedom.

### Visual Arts

Grade 1

1.2.b. Use color, line, shape, texture, and form to represent ideas visually from observation, memory, and imagination.

1.3.a. Explore and discuss the qualities of color, line, shape, texture, and form in artworks.

2.1.a. Observe works of art and identify ways that artists express ideas about people, places, and events.

Grade 2

1.1.a. Describe colors, lines, shapes, textures, forms, and space found in observed objects and the environment.

1.2.a. Describe how artists use color, line, shape, texture, form, and space to represent what people see, know, feel, and imagine.

1.2.b. Use color, line, shape, texture, form, and space to represent ideas visually from observation, memory, and imagination.

2.1.a. Observe works of art and describe how artists express ideas about people, places, and events.

2.2.b. Communicate a variety of reasons for creating artworks, such as feelings, experiences, events, places, and ideas.



*Mantel Clock*, c. 1815, Mercury gilded brass, iron, enameled metal  
Designer: Jacques Nicolas Pierre François Dubuc  
Active Paris, 1815–1819  
Gift of Mrs. Henry V. Ward, BMA 1932.33.5



*Round Platter*, c. 1800–1815, Porcelain  
Manufacturer: Dohl et Guérhard, Paris, 1781–c.1824  
Gift of Solomon Grossman, New York  
BMA 2012.577



*Eagle Finial*, c. 1750  
Basswood, carved and gilded; metal  
Dorothy McIlvain Scott Collection, BMA 2012.335