

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

9-2012

Sleeping Amongst Heroes: Copperplate-printed Bed Furniture in the "Washington and American Independence [sic] 1776; the Apotheosis of Franklin" Pattern

Whitney A. J. Robertson

Marymount University in Arlington, wajrobertson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Robertson, Whitney A. J., "Sleeping Amongst Heroes: Copperplate-printed Bed Furniture in the "Washington and American Independence [sic] 1776; the Apotheosis of Franklin" Pattern" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 739.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/739>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Sleeping Amongst Heroes: Copperplate-printed Bed Furniture in the
"Washington and American Independance [sic] 1776;
the Apotheosis of Franklin" Pattern**

Whitney A. J. Robertson

wajrobertson@gmail.com

Nowadays, it's uncommon for grown adults to have superheroes on their bed linens, but in the late eighteenth century, the idea was not such a preposterous one. Granted, these superheroes weren't the comic-book kind; instead, they were the protagonists of current political and military events depicted in the midst of battle or surrounded by symbols of glory. And, in one particular case, these bedsheet champions were the celebrated builders of a new, proud nation: George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.



Figure 1. Courtesy, Winterthur Museum, Bed Hangings and Quilt, Apotheosis of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, 1780-1800, Cotton, England or United States, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David J. Grossman (Quilt 1974.135) and museum purchase (Bed Hangings 1960.166).

This paper will examine one of the most common copperplate-printed fabrics to appear in museum collections in the United States: a pattern called “Washington and American Independance (sic) 1776; The Apotheosis of Franklin,” commonly known as “The Apotheosis of Franklin and Washington.” The “Apotheosis” fabric is represented in no fewer than 18 museum collections, and probably many more, including the American Textile History Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, the Cooper-Hewitt, the DAR Museum, Dumbarton House, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, The Henry Ford, The Met, the National Museum of American History, The New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, Old Sturbridge Village, the Philadelphia History Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, The Society of the Cincinnati, the V&A, the Wadsworth Athanaeum, Winterthur, and the Yale University Art Museum. In comparison, a similar patriotic toile, “America Presenting at the Altar of Liberty Medals of Her Illustrious Sons,” appears in at approximately five collections, and other related fabrics exist in even fewer collections. It’s uncertain whether this fabric is so ubiquitous because of its popularity during its own time, its appeal to collectors in the 19th and 20th centuries, or both. But whatever the case, it serves as an example of the richness of early American iconography and the role played by interior furnishings in displaying and reinforcing the symbols of American liberty and republicanism.

Before we examine the pattern and its use, let’s briefly remind ourselves of the origins of copperplate-printed bed furniture. In seventeenth-century England, cotton and linen bed furnishings became a popular alternative to more costly and less washable wools and silks. Known as “washing furnitures,” these were first introduced in the form of block-printed patterns called “chintzes,” imported from India and later produced domestically.¹ Block-printing allowed for colorful but rather crude designs limited to relatively small pattern repeats. In 1752, Francis Nixon of the Drumcondra Printworks in Ireland adapted the copperplate engraving technique used for paper to produce patterns on textiles, and advertised his wares as “Drumcondra printed Linens, done from Metal Plates (a method never before practiced) with all the Advantages of Light and shade, in the strongest and most lasting colours.”² Copperplate-printing offered the possibility of a much larger pattern repeat and higher level of detail, but it limited designs to one color as it was next to impossible to accurately line up a second colored plate on top of the first without producing a muddy appearance. Therefore, toiles almost exclusively appear in one color on a white or off-white background of bleached cotton, linen, or a cotton and linen blend. The two most common dyes for copperplate toiles were madder (red) and indigo (blue), although other examples exist in sepia and purple.

Copperplate-printed textiles are frequently known as “toiles,” which is a shortening of “Toile de Jouy,” or fabric from Jouy-en-Josas, a French town that was home to the most famous producer of these textiles, the Oberkampf manufactory. Oberkampf was founded in 1760 and given the title of “Royal Manufactory” by Louis the sixteenth in 1783, on which occasion its best-known designer, Jean-Baptiste Huet, created this pattern, known as “Les Travaux de la Manufacture” or “the process of manufacturing.” It depicts in detail the textile-printing process that took place at the manufactory.

The subject matter of these toiles borrowed some from the imagery of chintzes and included floral and bird motifs. Because of the increased capacity for detail allowed by the copperplate method, toiles were also printed with more complex designs, often borrowing from existing engravings. Toile patterns

¹ Edith A. Standen, “English Washing Furnitures,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series 23, no. 3 (Nov. 1964), 114, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3258160>.

² Ada K. Longfield, “Some Eighteenth-Century Advertisements and the English Linen and Cotton Printing Industry”, *The Burlington Magazine* 91, no. 552 (Mar. 1949), 72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/870109>.

sometimes mirror the original engraving because they were copied from the positive engraving directly onto a new (negative) copper plate. These intricate images included pastoral scenes and landscapes, but depictions of political and military subjects were particularly common. The “Defense of Gibraltar” toile, created in England circa 1785, depicts the climax of the unsuccessful attempt by France and Spain to retake Gibraltar from the British and is based on an aquatint by Archibald Robertson after a painting by William Hamilton. Benjamin West’s famous painting of William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians was also printed on a toile by an English printing firm, circa 1788.

While French and English manufacturers produced numerous “washing furnitures” for domestic use, they created many more for export. Both Franklin and Washington had become aware of the trend for copperplate furnishings soon after they became available and had placed orders as early as the late 1750s, but production of toiles for the American market boomed after the Revolution was over.³ American textile manufacturing and printing was not advanced enough to produce this kind of material, so Americans looked to Europe—and particularly to England—to supply their furnishing needs. Whether or not they had been sympathetic to the American cause, English tradesmen recognized the vast amount of money to be made in supplying their overseas cousins with these fashionable goods.



Figure 2. *Bed curtain, c. 1785, Cotton and Linen, England. The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, D.C.*

Produced by an unknown English firm around 1785, the “Apotheosis” pattern is just one of many toile designs intended for the American export market.⁴ In fact, many more eighteenth-century English

³ Standen, “English Washing Furnitures,” 114.

⁴ E. McClung Fleming, “From Indian Princess to Greek Goddess: The American Image, 1783-1815,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 3 (1967), 47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180500>.

printed cottons survive in America than in England. Like the “Gibraltar” and “Penn” designs, the Apotheosis pattern begins with images taken from other sources, but it takes the subject further; rather than commemorating a specific historical event, the toile’s designer combined images of Washington and Franklin with a wealth of well-known symbols of liberty, glory, and the American nation to create an allegorical piece that celebrated both the creation of America and its greatest heroes. In fact, even the likenesses of the two men serve not as portraits, but as icons.

Washington, whose image is taken from a 1781 print by Valentine Green after a painting by John Trumbull, stands as an exemplar of character, courage, and unity. The profile of Franklin comes from a medal produced by Jean-Baptiste Nini in 1777. America’s favorite diplomat and renaissance man, depicted here in academic robes, embodies reason, discovery, and statesmanship. Washington drives a chariot drawn by leopards, accompanied by the figure of America in a plumed headdress (a classicized and anglicized version of earlier depictions of America as an Indian princess).⁵ She carries a caduceus, in this case a symbol of commerce blessing the country after the war’s end. Ahead of them, an American Indian blows a trumpet from which a flag hangs decorated with a thirteen-sectioned snake branded “Unite or Die,” an adaptation of Franklin’s famous “Join or Die” motif. Next to him is another American Indian, this time bearing a striped flag meant to represent the Union flag, one iteration of the American flag that originated in Massachusetts in 1774 or 1775.⁶ The Battle of Bunker Hill is depicted in the background, and to the side is the Liberty Tree with a tattered, upside-down copy of the Stamp Act tacked to it. The goddess of wisdom Minerva, bearing a shield with thirteen stars, leads Franklin and his companion Liberty (carrying a liberty pole and cap, symbols of freedom since Roman times) to the temple of Fame, where two winged cherubs hold aloft a map of America. Instruments of war and American flora and fauna, including the symbolically industrious beaver, fill in the scene.⁷ Even the choice of trees is symbolic; the pattern depicts intertwined oak and pine trees, the oak a representation of the original “Liberty tree” that was a center for revolutionary demonstration in Boston and the pine another frequently-used symbol in Massachusetts, appearing on both the state’s coinage and on an early version of the American flag, pictured here in Trumbull’s painting “The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill.”⁸

Some of the tropes featured in the “Apotheosis” pattern were not unique to representations of America but had long been used to signify glory and freedom. The pattern titled “Louis the Sixteenth, Liberator,” designed by Jean-Baptiste Huet for the Oberkampf Manufactory circa 1789, shows the king in Roman-style battle dress accompanied by Liberty with her cap and pole and Mercury with a caduceus. It’s possible that Minerva is featured in the print as well, although that is difficult to determine. Trumpeting fame, while not appearing here, was another common figure. These features were easily transposed to American subject matter, as in the toile titled “The Apotheosis of Washington,” produced by the Henry Gardiner manufactory in England around 1800. Washington, based on another Trumbull likeness, is in front of an obelisk, with Fame overhead. He is accompanied by Minerva and Liberty with her pole and cap.

It’s clear, however, that the designer of the “Apotheosis” pattern was well-versed not only in the traditional imagery of glory and liberty but also in specifically American symbols including America

⁵ Fleming, “Indian Princess,” 46.

⁶ David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153-4

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

represented as an Indian princess or plume-bedecked woman, the Union and “Unite or Die” flags, the Liberty tree, and the beaver. Various combinations of these commonly appeared in printed representations of America, whether on paper or on fabric.



Figure 3. Roger, L., engraver. *Indépendance des Etats-Unis*. Paris: Chez Blin, 1786. The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection, The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, D.C.

French images tended to represent America in a somewhat exotic, primitive guise and glorify France’s role in the Revolution. An Oberkampf toile titled “America Paying Homage to France,” designed by Huet around 1783 or 84, depicts America as a bare-chested American Indian with feathered cap and skirt, accompanied by liberty with her pole and cap and a European-dressed “native” boy with an American flag. Fame trumpets not over America but over the seated and crowned figure of France to which she pays her respects. The 1786 print “Independence des Etats-Unis,” published in Paris in 1786, again shows America draped in a feathered cap and skirt with a pelt around her waist. Here she holds the liberty cap and pole as well as the caduceus and steps on a leopard representing England. Franklin and Washington (incidentally, misspelled “Waginston”) appear in medallions beside her.

Unlike their French counterparts, English printers had no desire to play up their homeland’s role in the Revolution. They were also more likely to show America as a more classical figure, her plumage as much a nod to current fashion as to American Indian dress. An English toile known as “America presenting at the Altar of Liberty medallions of her illustrious Sons,” produced contemporaneously to the “Apotheosis” design, uses many familiar images including trumpeting Fame, Minerva, and Liberty with her pole and cap, adding the figure of America in a plumed headdress. It also employs an almost identical image of Washington, taken even more faithfully from the Valentine Green print, and intertwined oak and pine trees.



Figure 4. Frontispiece from: Cooper, Reverend. *The History of North America: Containing, a Review of the Customs and Manners of the Original Inhabitants...* London: Printed for E. Newbery..., 1789. The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection, The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, D.C.

The Frontispiece to *The History of North America*, published in London in 1789, is a print titled “America Trampling on Oppression.” Washington, Franklin, the Caduceus, and the Liberty cap and pole all appear here as well. Although America treads on the neck of the British leopard as in the French print, she is not shown as an American Indian but instead wears Minerva’s helmet and breastplate over classicized garments.

While these prints all share a canon of symbols, the “Apotheosis” toile achieves a depth and breadth that the others do not. Every inch of the pattern repeat is both visually appealing and loaded with meaning, creating a design that almost begs the viewer to play “I Spy.” Perhaps this is why the “Apotheosis” became so well-known in its own time and so highly collected afterwards.

When it first appeared, this toile was evidently well-regarded enough to furnish one of America’s most important residences, the President’s House in New York. While staying there with his uncle Richard Henry Lee in 1785, Tommy Shippen reported, “which way soever I turn my eyes I find a triumphal Car, a Liberty Cap, a Temple of Fame or the Hero of Heroes, all these and many more objects of a piece with them, being finely represented on the Hangings.”⁹ Although obviously intended for the American

⁹ Anne Home Shippen Livingston and Ethel Armes, *Nancy Shippen, Her Journal Book; The International Romance of a Young Lady of Fashion of Colonial Philadelphia with Letters to Her and About Her* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1935).

market, the pattern seems to have been well-known on both sides of the Atlantic. English poet Robert Southey's 1808 book *Letters from England*, a series of fictional letters written by a Portuguese visitor to England, features a passage describing the design in detail, appearing on the protagonist's bed curtains at an inn in Carlisle. He states, "My bed curtains may serve as a good specimen of the political freedom permitted in England. General Washington is there represented driving American independence in a car drawn by leopards, a black Triton running beside them, and blowing his conch—meant, I conceive by his crown of feathers, to designate the native Indians. In another compartment, Liberty and Dr. Franklin are walking hand in hand to the Temple of Fame, where two little Cupids display a Globe, on which America and the Atlantic are marked. The tree of liberty stands by, and the stamp-act reversed is bound round it. I have often remarked the taste of the people for these coarse allegories."¹⁰ However "coarse" the toile's symbolism may be, the ideals it conveyed were unmistakable to Americans and Englishmen alike.

Outside of the above mentions, however, it is difficult to determine what kind of individuals decorated their homes with the "Apotheosis" fabric. While countless fragments, curtains, and even entire bed furniture sets exist in museums, the majority of them have no provenance leading to the pieces' original owners. So far, I have located three examples that *do* have provenance, in varying levels of strength. The first is a bed valance in the collection of Washington, D.C.'s Dumbarton House, which descended in the family of its one-time resident Joseph Nourse, register of the Treasury under the nation's first six presidents. Nourse's manuscripts account for the purchase of "cotton furniture" for bed hangings, most likely the set from which this piece came. The second is a bed curtain sold at Whitaker Auctions in 2010, linked to Revolutionary War Surgeon Albigeance Waldo, and the third is a bed curtain in the collection of The Society of the Cincinnati, donated by a descendant of another Revolutionary War officer, Colonel Henry Sherburne. As three men make up a tiny subset of all the original owners of the textile, it is impossible to draw substantive conclusions from their similarities. It is worth noting, however, that each of them was connected to the creation of the new American republic by military or civil service and were men of some means who would have decorated their homes according to current fashion. The fabric may well have been reserved for a guest chamber in private homes, just as it is when described in literature. There, it would have loudly displayed patriotic pride while conforming to current tastes in interior decoration and being easily washable between visitors. In fact, when Scalamandre reproduced the pattern in the 1960s, Jacqueline Kennedy used it to decorate the "Empire Guest Room" of the White House, where it remained until Nancy Reagan converted the space into a sitting room in 1981.¹¹

Because of their large, repeated patterns, their appearance in multiple decorative elements within one chamber, and their physical proximity to a room's inhabitants, furnishing fabrics are able to "speak" louder than a framed artwork might. Cotton and linen "washing furnitures," relatively affordable and easy to care for, were a perfect medium for images of political allegory, and the rich combination of traditional symbols of liberty and newer icons of America made the "Apotheosis" pattern an attractive fabric both in style and in meaning. It has articulated and perpetuated the visual vocabulary celebrating America's foundation from its emergence on the market in the 1780s to its ubiquity in museum collections today, and while we may no longer sleep surrounded by the glorified heroes it depicts, the "Apotheosis" copperplate has done its part in "printing" them on the fabric of American identity.

¹⁰ Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), 192.

¹¹ "Washington Sitting Room," The White House Museum, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/floor3/sitting-room-329.htm>.