

The Transmission of Revolutionary Ideals Through the Art of the Medal **Wayne Hanley**

In a 28 October 1792 speech before the National Convention, artist Jacques-Louis David called for the creation of a series of medals to be modeled on ancient Greek and Roman coins which would commemorate the “glorious or happy events” and the “great men” who made those events happen.¹ Indeed, the importance of using medals to propagate revolutionary ideals is evident even in the first years of the French Revolution.² These medals were designed and struck by a host of médailleurs, ranging from unknown engravers seeking to establish their reputations to former royal engravers, such as Augustin Dupré, Bertrand Andrieu, and Benjamin Duvivier who now turned their talents to the glorification of the French Revolution.³ Medals and jetons commemorated the great figures and events of the period and were available to a surprisingly broad audience. Prior to his flight to Varennes, for example, medals depicted Louis XVI as the restorer of the French constitution and as a great supporter of reform; still other medals honored Jean Sylvain Bailly, the comte de Mirabeau the Marquis de Lafayette, and other great Revolutionary political figures.⁴ Medals also commemorated key events such as the opening of the Estates-General, various Revolutionary fêtes, and the great journées during which the crowd helped to shape the course of the Revolution.

¹ Roger Marx, Les Médailleurs Français depuis 1789 (Paris: Société de Propagation des Livres d’Art, 1897), 1.

² See Jean Babelon, La Médaille de France (Paris: Larousse, 1948), 77, and Jean Babelon, La Médaille et les Médailleurs (Paris: Payot, 1927), 199-200.

³ Marx, 3-4; Babelon, Médaille de France, 77; and Sylvie de Turckheim-Pey, “Les médailles révolutionnaires conservées au Cabinet de la Bibliothèque Nationale,” in Les Images de la Révolution Française, ed. Michel Vovelle (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988), 199.

⁴ Mark Jones, The Art of the Medal (London: British Museum Publishing Ltd., 1979), 99; Mark Jones, Medals of the French Revolution: British Museum Keys to the Past (London: British Museum Publishing Ltd., 1977), 3-7; and Babelon, Médaille de France, 78; and Marx, Médailleurs, 3.

Of the many crowd actions of the Revolution, perhaps none captured the popular imagination as much as did the events of 14 July 1789.⁵ As Rolf Reichardt has argued, the importance of the storming of the Bastille can also be seen in the proliferation of images associated with that event, several of which are part of this collection.⁶ And while engravings and prints are among the most familiar of these images, they were not the only means by which the revolutionaries commemorated the event or used the event to promote public awareness of the power of collective action. Early in the course of the Revolution, political leaders, like David, also encouraged the art of medal-making to commemorate the great journées, key figures, and important ideals of the French Revolution. Thus medals, like popular prints, became an important method of spreading the ideals and images of the Revolution. This is particularly true of the fall of the Bastille.⁷

Perhaps the most artistically impressive of these medals is Bertrand Andrieu's *Siège de la Bastille* [Image 39], first advertised in the 6 January 1790 issue of the Journal de Paris to commemorate the event of the previous summer.⁸ In vivid detail, one sees a depiction of the besieged prison, of the "violence" described so well in Vivian Cameron's essay. Soldiers of the Paris National Guard arrive on the scene as others are firing on the Bastille. At least one soldier (entering on the right) carries a pitchfork, reflecting not only the role actually played by the newly created National Guard, but also more broadly the people of Paris, an idea driven home by the exergue of the medal: "Prise par les

⁵ Michel Hennin, Histoire Numismatique de la Révolution Française, ou description raisonnée des médailles, monnaies, et autres monumens numismatiques relatifs aux affaires de la France depuis l'ouverture des États-généraux jusqu'à l'établissement du gouvernement consulaire, 2 vols. (Paris: J. S. Merlin, 1826; reprint, Maastricht: A.G. van der Dussen, 1987), I: 15-16.

⁶ Rolf Reichardt, "Prints: Images of the Bastille," in Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775-1800, eds. Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 226.

⁷ Hennin, I: 16.

⁸ Journal de Paris (Paris) 6 January 1790; cf. Hennin, I: 16.

citoyens de la ville de Paris le 14 Juillet 1789.” Three cannons, aimed at impossibly high elevations, are in various stages of firing—the one on the left is being loaded, the one in the center, being aimed by a soldier, and the one on the right, firing. Rising smoke obscures part of the scene, conveying a sense of the intensity of the crowd action. The two corpses—on the right and the center—are also reminders that the fall of the prison was not without casualties. More casualties, of course, would occur following the fall of the Bastille, including most notably the killing the governor of the prison, the marquis de Launay.

Andrieu is known to have produced two versions of this medal, although their differences were slight (in one version, for example, the windows in the building on the right have more cross-hatching than those of the other) [Image 40].⁹ These medals also proved to be extremely popular. Over 800 forgeries were produced to meet public demand.¹⁰ In all, these medals complement those images produced in contemporary prints such as Charles Thévenin’s *Prise de la Bastille le 14 Juillet 1789* [Image 24]. Encouraged by the success of these medals, Andrieu planned to create a series of medals commemorating the great events of the Revolution.¹¹

His second great medal was a depiction of the October Days and the king’s arrival in Paris. The image produced here, unlike the print *A Memorable Day at Versailles*, shows the arrival of the royal family at the Place Royal (later to be renamed Place de la Concorde). The equestrian statue of Louis XV (which gave the place its name) can be made out in the background. Escorted by marching soldiers and mounted officers, Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and their dauphin (the “baker, the baker’s wife, and the baker’s

⁹ Paul Delaroche, ed. *Trésor de Numismatique et de Glytique* (Paris: Chez Ritterner et Goupil, 1836), 8.

¹⁰ Babelon, *Médaille de France*, 78, and Babelon, *Les Médailleurs*, 194.

¹¹ Hennin, I: 48-49.

son”) are plainly visible in the windows of the carriage. The atmosphere is one of jubilation. Well-dressed Parisians cheer the royal family. In the family depicted on the right, a father even lifts his son to his shoulders for a better view of the event. The only hint of the mob action that ultimately brought the king to Paris may be the image of the more commonly dressed woman (in center-left) who walks beside the royal carriage and brandishes a sword or stick of some kind. She is almost lost, however, in the throng of soldiers.

As with Andrieu’s earlier works, two versions of these pewter medals were struck.¹² Each possessed a different legend. The original medal bore the legend “La Nation a conquis son roi” [Image 41], a title which at first glance appears to be provocative, to say the least. It is not a reference, however, to what was to become the reality of the king’s moving to Paris (to be removed from power by the mobs in August 1792), but rather a reference to the 17 July 1789 greeting said by the mayor of Paris, Jean Sylvain Bailly, to the king in the aftermath of the fall of the Bastille. While giving the king the keys to the city, Bailly noted that they were the same keys given by the city to Henry VI, who had conquered the hearts of his people; in 1789 it was the people who had conquered the king.¹³ According to Michel Hennin, Andrieu soon came to regret that legend and produced a second variant with the less controversial “Arrivée du roi à Paris” [Image 42] which was perhaps more appropriate to the circumstances of 1790.¹⁴

While the commemorative medals of Bertrand Andrieu are obviously the work of a master craftsman who attempted to depict historical events realistically, other medals

¹² The first advertisements for these medal appeared almost a year after the 10 October 1790 issue of the Gazette nationale, ou le Moniteur universal and the 25 October 1790 issue of the Journal de Paris. See also Hennin, I: 48-49.

¹³ Hennin, I: 48-49 and Delaroche, 17.

¹⁴ Hennin, I: 49-50.

and jetons often commemorated those same events symbolically. An example of this later type is represented by the sole jeton in this virtual collection. Jetons, smaller and made of baser metals, were less expensive and were, thus, designed for a mass audience and often freely distributed as souvenirs. Larger works such as medals or medallions were intended for wealthier audiences and dignitaries and were typically struck in bronze, pewter, or precious metals.¹⁵ The size and type of metal used to create these medals reflected their intended audiences. Frequently the same medal was struck in copper for a mass audience as well as in gold or silver for those able to bear the cost. Such a diffusion made it possible for a particularly successful design, such as Bertrand Andrieu's *Siège de la Bastille*, to reach the widest possible audience.¹⁶

The symbolism is readily evident in the various elements of the *Vivre Libre ou Mourir* jeton, a medal undoubtedly used to commemorate the capture of the Bastille [Image 17]. The most obvious symbols—the legend “Vivre libre ou mourir,” the Phrygian cap, the fasces, and the fleur-de-lys (which dominate the field of the medal)—were frequently associated with the events of 14 July 1789 in various medals, banners, and other commemorative devices. A quick scan of Hennin's catalog of Revolutionary-era medals, for example, reveals that a number of medals and jetons bore the legend displayed on this jeton [Images 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, and 38];¹⁷ and with few exceptions, those medals commemorated the fall of the Bastille as the birth of liberty. Likewise, the Phrygian cap, originally worn in ancient Rome by freedmen as a sign of their

¹⁵ See Anthony Griffiths, “The Origins of Napoleon's *Histoire Metallique*, Part II,” *The Medal* 17 (1990), 29 and 36. Both of Andrieu's medals, for example, were made of pewter. See Hennin, I:16 and Delaroche, 8.

¹⁶ M. Jones, *Art of the Medal*, 99; M. Jones, *Medals of the French Revolution*, 1; and Adrien Blanchet, *Médailles, Jetons, Méreaux*, vol. 3, *Manuel de Numismatique Française*, by Adrien Blanchet and A. Dieudonné (Paris: Éditions Auguste Picard, 1930), 79.

¹⁷ Interestingly, this jeton is not listed in Hennin's catalog or in any of the other major catalogs of Revolutionary-era medals.

emancipation, represented love of liberty and came to symbolize the freedoms gained by the destruction of the Bastille. In its continued evolutions, as Maurice Dommanget has noted, by 1792 the Phrygian cap had become a patriotic and anti-aristocratic symbol to be worn everywhere in public (it also helped that the cap was similar to an inexpensive worker's hat).¹⁸

Another classical symbol, the fasces, represented strength in unity. During the Revolutionary era, the fasces took on additional complementary meanings. In the exciting days of the Estates-General, the fasces came to represent the union of the three orders. At other times, the bundle of sticks or pikes (or in rare cases baguettes) might represent the departments of France or the unity of France in general. If sixteen pikes comprised the bundle, however, the fasces represented Paris and its sixteen districts. The composition of the bundle was also important: the pike was a simple weapon that could be employed by ordinary citizens and that was associated with the crowd's role in the storming of the Bastille and with the later journées of the Revolution.¹⁹ Together the legend and these symbols not only commemorated one of the great journées of the Revolution, but they also created a powerful message for the crowds: Strength lies in collective action. It was the action of the crowd on 14 July 1789 that destroyed the vestiges of despotism, and it would be the collective strength of the crowd which would preserve its newly won liberty.

¹⁸ Maurice Dommanget, "Le Symbolisme et le Prosélytisme Révolutionnaires à Beauvais et dans l'Oise," Annales historiques de la Révolution française 3 (1926): 47-48; and Harold T. Parker, The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 140. Dommanget also notes that on 19 August 1789 the bonnet de la liberté also appeared on a medal honoring Bailly's nomination as mayor of Paris (and as with the jeton being discussed, it crowned a fasces).

¹⁹ Maurice Dommanget, "Le Symbolisme et le Prosélytisme Révolutionnaires à Beauvais et dans l'Oise," Annales historiques de la Révolution française 4 (1927): 127; and Élisabeth Liris, "De la Liberté à l'Union dans l'Iconographie des Drapeaux des Districts Parisiens," Annales historiques de la Révolution française 3 (1992): 350.

And although at first glance the fleur-de-lys might seem out of place on a medal commemorating the fall of the Bastille, one need only recall that until 1792 many perceived Louis XVI to be the restorer of the French liberties. His appearance at the Hôtel de Ville on 17 July seemed to condone the crowd's actions of three days earlier, thus linking the king to the ideals represented in the iconography of this jeton—at least until the crowds once again showed their collective power and overthrew the monarchy on 10 August 1792. Thus jetons and medals, using both symbolism and realistic depictions of events or personages, served as a means of propagating the ideals and messages of the French Revolution, in this case, the role of the crowd in winning and securing the idea of liberty.

Most important for the purposes of this collection, the persistence of those images and messages in metallic or print format served as constant reminders of the power inherent in the unity of crowd/mob actions. It was the crowd that both brought down the Bastille and forced the king to Paris. It would also be the power of the unified crowd that would bring an end to the monarchy and create the Republic. And until the suppression of the 13 Vendémiaire uprising by Napoleon's "whiff of grapeshot," the crowd would continue to be a driving force in the Revolution, and medals and jetons would continue to be a reminder of its power and its successes. It was their ability to recall past glories, after all, which led David to make his speech before the Convention.