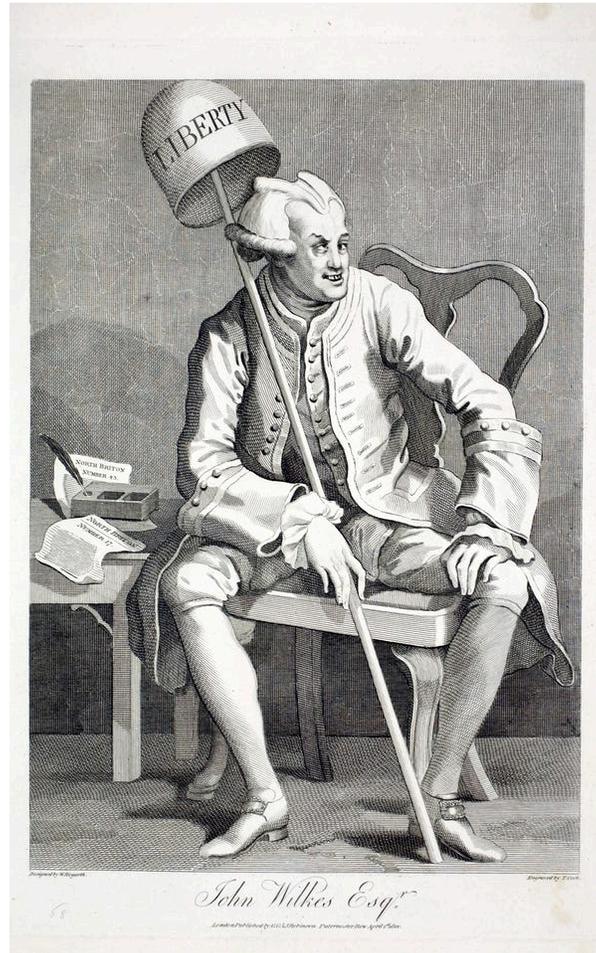


Haggerty Museum's 'Defying Empire' visits colonial fight for freedom

[jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2026/03/10/haggerty-museum-defying-empire-250th-america/88839326007](https://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2026/03/10/haggerty-museum-defying-empire-250th-america/88839326007)

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[ARTS](#)

'Defying Empire' relives American struggle for independence via art

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It was a polarized time, with fierce disagreement about the limits of executive power, press freedom, protest, assembly and dissent.

2026, shake hands with 1776.

["Defying Empire: Revolutionary Prints From Britain and America,"](#) which opened recently at Marquette University's [Haggerty Museum of Art](#), gives Americans living through today's turmoil the chance to look at the turbulent period their colonial forebears experienced.

The exhibit is the Marquette museum's contribution to cultural discourse around the [semiquincentennial](#), or 250th, anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. With that in mind, the Haggerty is keeping this show on view through Aug. 1.

Curated by [J. Patrick Mullins](#), Marquette associate professor of history, with coordination by postdoctoral fellow Jessica A. Cooley, the exhibit brings together 27 framed prints on paper and seven ceramic objects from the Haggerty collection and from the Fox Point-based [Chipstone Foundation](#), plus nine replica prints that visitors can handle.

Divided opinions in Britain and colonies

The exhibit begins, roughly, in the period of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) when people living in the American colonies conceived of themselves as loyal British subjects and saw the empire as the guardian of liberty. The enemy was France, mocked here in prints that contrast well-fed Englishmen with the scrawny, desperate French.

Even as colonial opinions diverged from English ones, "most of the artwork that speaks to the issues of the revolution were conceived, designed, manufactured and sold in Britain in most cases for a British market, although some were imported to America," Mullins said.



Opinions were not monolithic on either side of the Atlantic. Just as Americans were divided on whether to support the revolution, so were the British, Mullins pointed out. Some Britons were sympathetic with the colonists because of similar concerns about the king's power and limits on the freedom to dissent. One was Isaac Barré, a former British army officer who lost use of an eye while fighting in Quebec. One of the few members of Parliament with actual North American experience, Barré supported the rights of colonists, coining the phrase "Sons of Liberty" for them.

"Defying Empire" includes engraver Thomas Cook's copy of the legendary William Hogarth's caricature of "John Wilkes, Esq." (1763), which attempts to make Wilkes look both devilish and ridiculous. A publisher and radical member of Parliament, Wilkes defended the rights of colonists and would oppose the war effort in Parliament. (Wilkes even aided a covert operation to smuggle muskets from France to America, Mullins noted.) While Hogarth intended to mock Wilkes, the caricature helped launch him as an 18th century celebrity, Mullins pointed out, with even Wilkes' supporters using it for a time.

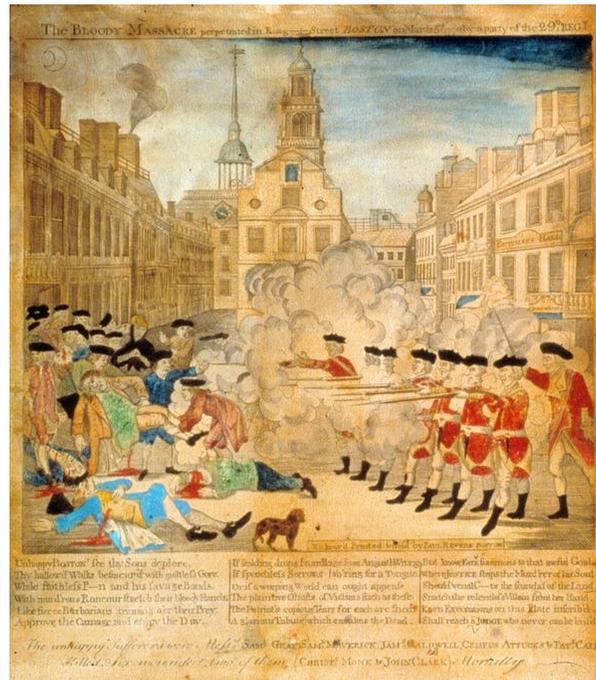
The Pennsylvania city of Wilkes-Barré is named for these two British sympathizers.

Using images to move people to action

"One thing I wanted visitors to get from this exhibit is ... the use of images to try to trigger emotion and move people to political action," Mullins said.

Just as meme makers do today, artists and engravers of the 18th century didn't necessarily let reality get in the way of their visual argument.

"Defying Empire" includes Paul Revere's well-known engraving of the Boston Massacre of 1770, which he based (without permission) on a work by Henry Pelham. It offers a view of that fateful encounter "most slanted toward the Sons of Liberty interpretation," Mullins said. The engraving shows an orderly line of sharp-faced British redcoats firing, upon their leader's order, into a crowd of unarmed colonists.



That's not how it really happened, Mullins pointed out. The shouting colonials threw clam and oyster shells, chunks of ice and even clubs at the redcoats, he said. According to some witnesses, the first British soldier fired only after a protestor hit him with a club. Far from ordering shooting, the British leader got in front of his men with his sword to stop them, Mullins said.

In the lower left corner of Revere's engraving, the dark-haired figure lying dead on the ground is Crispus Attucks, Mullins pointed out. You may remember hearing in grade-school history class that Attucks was a Black man who was the first colonial killed in fighting with the British. The truth is more complicated, Mullins explained. A colonial boy was actually killed before Attucks in a different encounter. Today, historians see Attucks as a mixed-race person of African and Wampanoag (Natick) ethnicity, Mullins said. Revere's "Bloody Massacre" was printed in black and white. Artists who added watercolor to different copies of Revere's engraving have variously colored Attucks' face as brown or black. In one case, an artist added greenish watercolor to the face, likely trying to create light brown, Mullins noted.

You can explore this engraving in detail, including how it uses imagery to communicate a message, at gilderlehrman.org.

Political conversations at home and elsewhere

Ceramic objects and housewares, represented by a few pieces in the exhibit, demonstrate how political discussion in the colonial era extended even into the kitchen.

If a woman wanted to talk with her friends and neighbors about the issues of the day, Mullins said, she might have her friends over for tea, then bring out her "Wilkes & Liberty" or "No Stamp Act" teapot, and use it as a conversation starter.

Political discussions also happened in coffeehouses, which were bastions then of male sociability. To echo that experience, Mullins and his collaborators have placed a table in the exhibit with laminated replicas of period prints that visitors can handle and look at, just as colonials might have while debating political points. In a follow-up email, Mullins said that most of these replica prints "feature historical or allegorical women. I wanted to be sure that women were represented in the exhibit because they figured prominently in the actual political discourse and protests of the time." In an 18th-century coffeehouse, there likely would have been a newspaper or pamphlet on that table, too, Mullins pointed out.

In a clever juxtaposition, the Haggerty has placed "Defying Empire" adjacent to "[Declaration of,](#)" an exhibit of contemporary politically oriented prints and zines curated by Rose Camara with coordination by Cooley. Some of these works, such as Aaron Hughes' screen print "This Is What Democracy Looks Like," are visually simple and textually blunt. But those qualities are precisely what makes them appealing. "Declaration Of" is on view through May 16.

If you go

["Defying Empire: Revolutionary Prints from Britain and America"](#) continues through Aug. 1 at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art, 1234 W. Tory Hill St. Museum admission is free. Info: marquette.edu/haggerty-museum.