

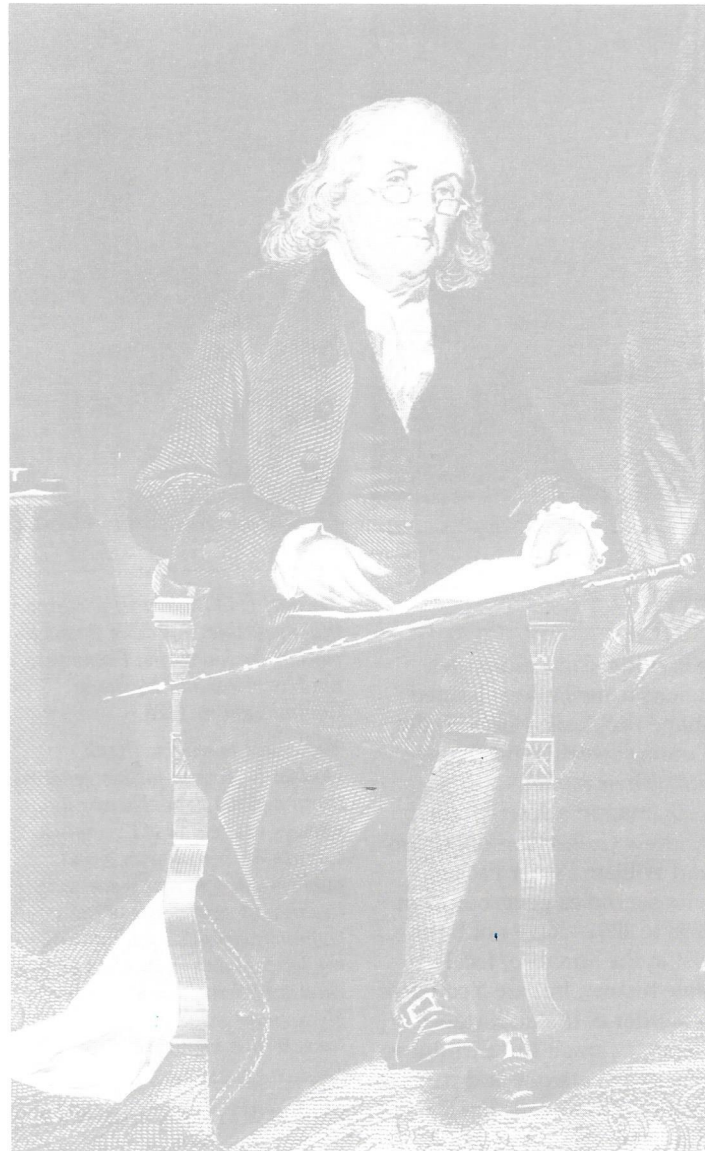
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, IMAGE MAKER

by William C. Kashatus III

"The history of our Revolution," John Adams once sniffed, "will be one continued lye from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington, fully clothed and on his horse. Franklin then proceeded to electrify them with his rod and thence forward these three—Franklin, Washington and the horse—conducted all the policy, negotiations and war."

Although Adams' statement is more a reflection of his own insecurity, believing that his enormous contributions to the cause of American liberty were overshadowed by those of the great Pennsylvania statesman, it is doubtful that Franklin himself could have conjured a better image. John Adams, like so many of Franklin's contemporaries, were awed by Philadelphia's most popular citizen. Not only were they impressed by his civic and scientific contributions, but they also fell victim to the many images Franklin promoted of himself: "Ideal Citizen," "Scholar," "World-renown Scientist" and the prototypical "American."

Benjamin Franklin was so effective in propagandizing his reputation that two hundred years after his death in 1790, Americans still are confused about the true identity of the founding father. Franklin was first and foremost a common man. He was the son of a modest New England family;



apprenticed as a boy, he ran away from home, educated himself and went into business for himself. His skills—printing, writing, inventing and seeking knowledge—were all fundamental to the colonial period in which he lived. This

common man succeeded through his hard work and self-education. There were other Benjamin Franklins, though—the "Doctor Franklin" of European intellectual circles; the virtuous citizen who founded schools, fire

Benjamin Franklin, the "image maker," at work. He was scientist, diplomat, writer, philosopher—and many things to many people.

companies and libraries; the respected statesman who helped inspire the American Revolution; and the world famous scientist who tamed lightning. Franklin clearly chose to enhance these facets of his life, acting as his own image maker.

Benjamin Franklin consciously manipulated his writings, dress, speech and personal idiosyncrasies in order to further his special interests in domestic, as well as foreign, affairs. While this image-making tendency was inspired by his vanity, Franklin chose to view it as beneficial to the particular needs of his countrymen. He admitted that vanity, although criticized by others, was "often productive of good to the possessor and to others who are within the sphere of action." Rather than deny his vanity, Franklin "thanked God for it among all the other comforts of life."

Franklin's vanity and the personal image-making inspired by it helped to build a model of civic virtue for eighteenth century Pennsylvanians, enabling the Commonwealth to develop from a small, provincial English colony to the capital state of an independent country. In foreign affairs, Franklin's propaganda allowed him to secure the respect of powerful European nations

necessary for the survival of the fledgling United States. Benjamin Franklin possessed a tremendous awareness of his historical role and used the various images he cultivated to further that role for the greater benefit of his country.

Domestically, Franklin cultivated two prominent images, "Ideal Citizen" and "Scholar." His desire to propagate these images was shaped by his experience in colonial Pennsylvania and, in particular, by the rise of a new middle class of tradesmen and farmers. Economically, this ambitious middle class was successful, despite the mercantilist restrictions of Great Britain. The opening of fertile land in western Pennsylvania encouraged increased speculation and settlement. Motivated by Protestant work ethic, Pennsylvanians capitalized on these opportunities and, in the process, discovered a means of financial success and social mobility.

The colony's political climate was also conditioned by the needs of this emerging middle class. Continuing land settlement in the western territories, once inhabited by the Delaware Indian tribes, resulted in repeated requests for protection by the Scotch-Irish and German immigrants who relocated in those areas. The request produced serious conflict within the colonial assembly between the pacifist Quakers and their pro-militia opponents from the west. By 1756, this issue proved to be so divisive that the Quaker assemblymen, believing that they could not remain loyal to their pacifist convictions and fulfill their public responsibilities as representative officials, resigned en masse from the legislature. Their retreat was the culmination of a gradual decline in Quaker influence on the Commonwealth. By the 1770s, Pennsylvania's founding fathers, the Religious Society of Friends, had become the minority in a heterogeneous society of varied ethnic and religious groups.

like education, were unstable in colonial Pennsylvania. Schooling was accomplished through parental initiative and informal local control of institutions. Colonial government had very little influence over education in the Commonwealth; rather, local communities established subscription schools, or church groups provided a religiously guarded education for their youth. For the wealthy, the rudimentary learning of childhood was followed by a classical education abroad. However, for most adolescents an apprenticeship in a particular trade became an essential step in the educational process. Any further education for these youth came through self-instruction.

Essentially, Franklin's Pennsylvania was characterized by change and instability in its economic and political institutions and by the social displacement of a Quaker elite by an increasingly ambitious, non-Quaker middle class. Under these circumstances, the New England-born Franklin sought to secularize the Puritan values of hard work, frugality, civic duty and scholarship, and to encourage this emerging middle class to pursue its material interests for the benefit of the colony. He realized, however, that members of the middle class needed a model by which they could pattern themselves. Franklin, through his cultivation of two images—"Ideal Citizen" and "Scholar"—attempted to provide that model.

The founding father's urban outlook and the many activities in which he involved himself helped to cultivate the image of an "Ideal Citizen." As a member of a rapidly growing urban community, Franklin recognized the need for civic improvements. He contributed to the process of urbanization by initiating projects such as street-paving, fire-protection, lighting and education. These activities—and Franklin's promotion of

of the individual to contribute to society, thus inspiring the "Ideal Citizen" image. However, Franklin's writings were more significant in transmitting the model of "Ideal Citizen," further defining that image for his middle-class readership.

Poor Richard's Almanack, which Franklin began publishing in 1732, would appear for nearly a quarter of a century in homes across the nation. The *Almanack* would spread the gospel of industry, frugality and civic virtue with quaint sayings such as: "Thou hadst better eat salt with the philosophers of Greece than sugar with the courtiers of Italy"; "The cat in gloves catches no mice"; "If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing." Franklin's *Autobiography* was, however, his most effective means of spreading the "Ideal Citizen" image.

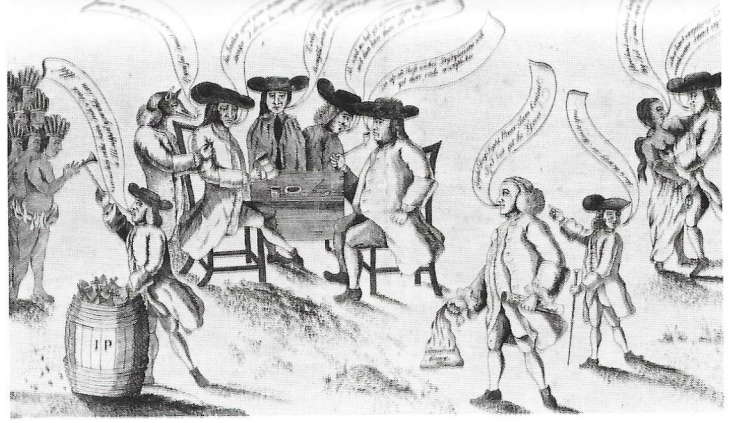
Franklin hoped that an account of his life to the year 1758 would provide readers with an example of "prudent conduct in the commencement of a useful life." Franklin's narrative portrayed the growth and ambitions of the middle-class tradesman. His rise from "poverty and obscurity" to a "state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world" was recorded to inspire the members of the colonial middle class as they sought the same upward mobility for themselves. Franklin was careful to emphasize the need for virtuous living in order to climb the social ladder, too. He credited his own success to his "Plan for Moral Self-Improvement," a "bold arduous project of arriving at moral perfection." This program consisted of thirteen virtues which Franklin intended to practice in his life, and he kept a daily record of his progress on each one. He disclosed his plan and its virtues in his *Autobiography*.

By encouraging his middle

class readers to follow these virtues, Franklin, as the "Ideal Citizen," sought to nurture in them a "steady and uniform rectitude of conduct" in the hope that they, like he, would arrive at a "state of moral perfection." Between 1790 and 1828, twenty-two editions of the *Autobiography* were published in the United States alone. If nothing else, the continuous publication of the account after Franklin's death in 1790 ensured that the founding father would continue to exercise some influence over his image for future generations. The "Ideal Citizen" image, though, was not the only one that Franklin promoted among his fellow Pennsylvanians.

Although his formal education consisted of only two years (and these were completed by the age of ten), Franklin sought to emphasize the importance of education for his countrymen and, by doing so, carefully cultivated the image of a "Scholar." He compiled a collection of books that was reputed to be the largest private library in America and often permitted his Philadelphia neighbors to borrow books, stressing the importance of self-instruction. He made a conscious effort to mingle with the "virtuosi of various kingdoms and nations" whenever he traveled abroad, thus securing for himself membership in the scholarly Royal Society of London and, later, an honorary degree from St. Andrews University in Scotland. Because of these accolades, the one-time Philadelphia printer became popularly known as "Doctor Franklin." These achievements were not without substance.

Franklin's "Scholar" image was reinforced by the host of educational institutions he founded. His establishment of the Philadelphia Academy in 1749 provided youth between the ages of eight and sixteen with a curriculum of classical and practical knowledge. This secondary education would stress not only English gram-



mar, history, rhetoric and logic, but also drawing, arithmetic and geography, so that students "could be fitted for any trade or profession" upon graduation. More importantly, the Academy aimed to provide a "Seminary for learning" that would refine the basic skills of a primary education and "lay the foundation for posterity in [the] infant country." The Philadelphia Academy later became the University of Pennsylvania.

Adult education would be conducted through a host of mutual improvement societies founded by Franklin, including the Junto, a philosophical discussion group; the Society for Political Enquiries, devoted to the study of the "arduous and complicated science of government"; and, most importantly, the American Philosophical Society. The discussions of the American Philosophical Society were based on practical knowledge and involved subjects as "all new discovered plants, herbs, trees, roots and their uses and

methods of propagating them; new and useful improvements in any branch of mathematics; new methods of caring or preventing diseases; new improvements in planting, gardening and clearing the land; new mechanist inventions for saving labor; and all philosophical experiments that let light into the nature of things, tend to increase the power of man over matter and multiply the conveniences or pleasures of life."

The impressive list suggests that the membership of the Society was inclusive—and it was. The Society was open to "ingenious men of all trades and professions residing in the several colonies." Although the institution was headquartered in Philadelphia, where a core of seven members—a physician, a botanist, a mathematician, a chemist, a mechanic, a geographer and a general philosopher—regularly met, the larger membership communicated their ideas through "a constant correspondence." The three soci-



Franklin carefully cultivated distinctive—often distinguished—images of himself which he projected to specific audiences in both the United States and in Europe. The subject of many portraits, even caricatures, Franklin's likenesses were created by Joseph Siffred Duplessis (top, left) in 1778, by Robert Feke (left) and by Charles A.P. Van Loo (right). A cartoon, "Franklin and the Quakers," showed him clutching a bag of "Pensilvania Money" (top, right).



Franklin, a founder of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, in 1743, projected his "ideal citizen" image by wearing a fur cap (right). In addition to his scientific discoveries—idealized by Benjamin West's dramatic 1805 painting, Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky (bottom, right)—Franklin made a number of marine discoveries and was a prolific writer, as captured by a painting by George Dunlop Leslie (bottom, left) after artist Mason Chamberlin.



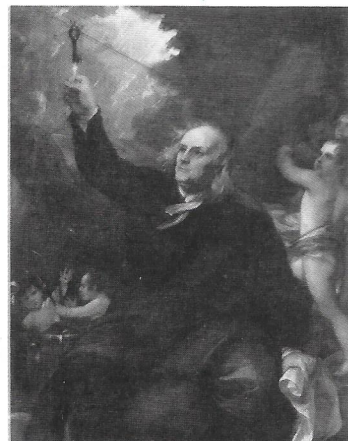
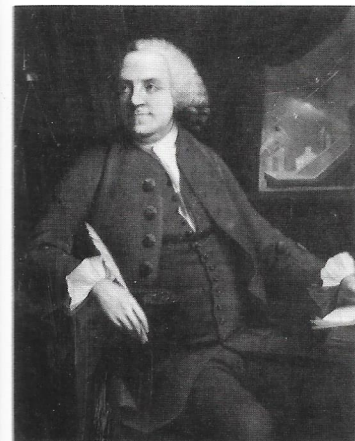
eties, together with the establishment of a subscription library, encouraged members of Pennsylvania's middle class to continue their education through self-instruction.

Not only did this host of educational institutions serve to fill a void in the educational arrangements of colonial Pennsylvania, but it represented the secularization of education itself. No longer would education be the exclusive realm of the clergy or the affluent members of society, but it became directed to the advancement of the ordinary person and provided useful knowledge for the daily business of life. More importantly, these institutions provided a loose network for a system of education that began in childhood and continued through adulthood. Aimed at nurturing civic virtue among middle-class Pennsylvanians, Franklin's system had done more than reinforce the "Scholar" image he so greatly cherished; it laid the foundations for the universal system of education the Common-

wealth would establish in the nineteenth century.

Franklin was also adept at image-making in his approach to foreign policy. He viewed the self-promotion of two images—"World-renown Scientist" and the prototypical "American"—as necessary for protecting the interests of the nation he represented by 1776. After separation from Great Britain, the United States was pitifully weak and vulnerable to the interests of international politics. Americans needed to form an association with another great nation in order to replace the cultural and psychological ties they once had with England. This connection was necessary if Americans were to remain in the mainstream of western civilization. More importantly, in 1776 Americans needed the military and financial aid of another powerful nation in the war against their former sovereign, King George III. Franklin realized that neither of these goals could be achieved with-

Franklin captured the attention of the public and the artists of his day. Among those who portrayed him were Charles Willson Peale in what is known as the "Thumb Portrait" (below) and Juste Chevillet (above).



secure such a Franco-American alliance would not be an easy task for the great Pennsylvanian either.

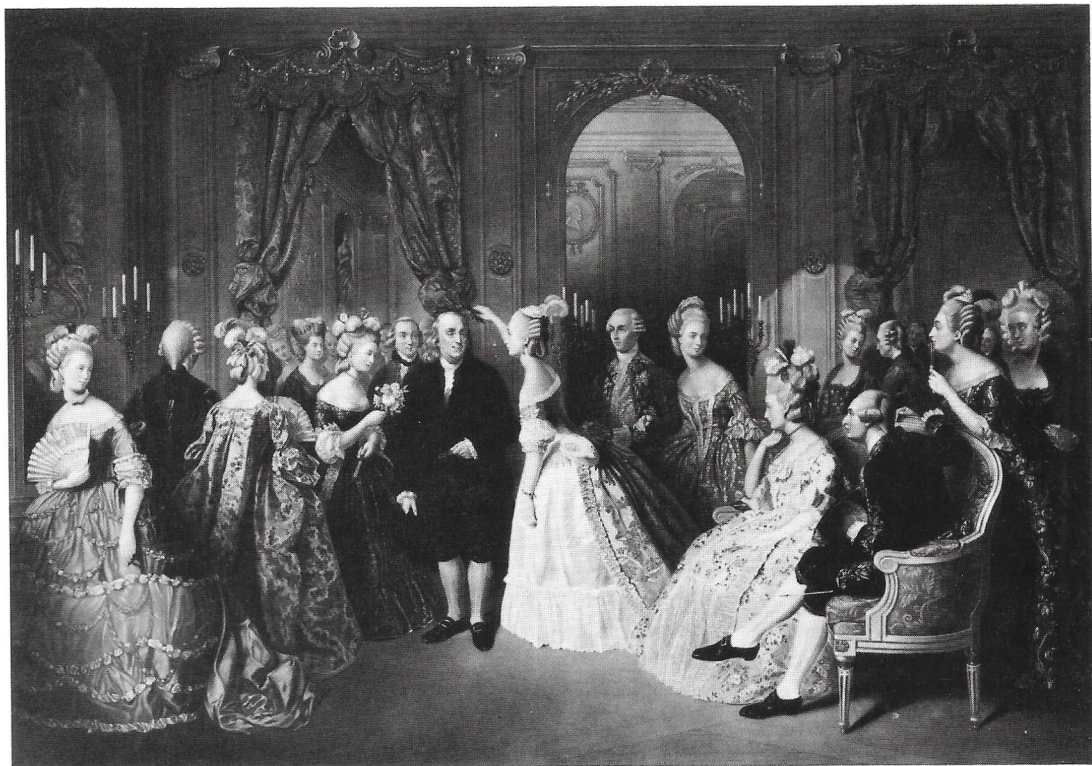
Acting as an emissary of an independent United States, Franklin would have to abandon the aspirations he once held for a grand British empire, one that would have included the North American colonies. He would have to devise a new plan that would work to benefit an autonomous nation, and yet one that would be consistent with the realities of international power politics. Franklin would have to exploit the traditional animosity France held for Great Britain, one that had clashed over control of the one-time American colonies during the French-Indian war. Such an objective was surrounded by suspicion. After all, Franklin was representing a fledgling republic which had recently overthrown its king and one that had, by its association with Great Britain, bred a long hatred for France. And now he would be attempting to bring the republic into an alliance with French monarch Louis XVI, who despised republicanism. Personal diplomacy would be essential to Franklin's success, as the international prestige he commanded went unmatched by any American. To a large degree, his success would rest with the images he cultivated for himself among the French people.

Franklin's reputation as a scientist was well known to the French. In addition to inventing useful everyday items, including bifocals and the Franklin stove, the American statesman had also charted the Gulf Stream in order to provide for a more rapid passage of mail between America and Europe. But, Franklin's greatest contributions to science came through his experiments with—and theory of—electricity. Franklin's theory of electricity explained basic postulates about nature and the composition of matter that had only been suggested

by the experiments of European scientists. He proposed an entirely new dimension for matter, assuming that all matter had a certain electrical property and could be measured. Moreover, Franklin proved that lightning was a discharge of static electricity produced by the natural movements of air and not an awesome manifestation of God's arbitrary powers, popularly believed at the time. By doing so, the Philadelphia scientist

Franklin introduced the lightning rod to Paris and made it a point to share his theories and experiments on electricity with several French scientists. He even went so far as to suggest that he might help the French in a "mutually advantageous enterprise" involving experimentation with electricity. Within months of his arrival in France, Franklin, the American diplomat in Paris, was being placed on the

interests in securing a Franco-American alliance. Whenever he mingled with the French aristocracy, Franklin wore a coonskin cap and made sure to speak the French language in a lively, ungrammatical tone. Although the cap served a practical purpose by concealing his eczema of the scalp, Franklin also wore it for its propaganda value. Together with his plain, fur-collared coat, Franklin gave the appear-



had fixed electricity as one of the greatest cosmic forces of the universe, along with heat, light and gravity. His subsequent invention of the lightning rod allowed him to harness a powerful force, preventing extensive damage to some of the highest buildings in Philadelphia.

Because of his experimentation with lightning, Franklin was considered to be "god-like" by the French, since they held superstitions about lightning's dramatic effects. He realized this, too, and never failed to capitalize on the opportunity to advance American interests through his

same pedestal with Isaac Newton, who was considered to have been the world's greatest scientist.

Benjamin Franklin's scientific genius was all the more intriguing to the French because he was an American. He came from a country which was considered by most Frenchmen to be the home of only backwoodsmen and not scholars. The prototype of an American was, for the French, the frontiersman who was uncorrupted by the Old World civilization. Indeed, the French were charmed by the rusticity and innocence of this image. Franklin realized this and exploited the "American"

ance of simple rusticity that characterized the American frontiersman the French imagined. They were simply charmed by him. Franklin was rather amused by this obsession, as he later recalled that he cut a "distinctive appearance among all the powdered heads of Paris."

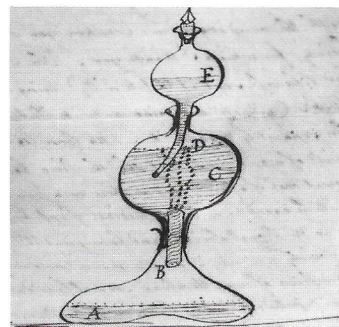
The French became so infatuated with Franklin and the rare mixture of scholar and frontiersman he represented that they painted several portraits of him, sculpted even more busts, and made rings, bracelets and snuff boxes all emblazoned with his likeness. Canes similar to the one

items among the gentlemen of Paris, while in the city of Nantes, women began to wear wigs in the shape of Franklin's coonskin cap—a fashion known as doing one's hair *a la Franklin*. This obsession with the "American" image as cast by Franklin greatly amused him. "These medallions, pictures, busts, and prints," he wrote to his daughter Sally in June 1779, "have made your father's face as well known as

addresses to the French. After signing the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which ended the American Revolution, Franklin rejoiced to his French counterparts. "Americans are now free to pursue their interests peaceably. They are cultivators of Land and have delighted only in their peaceable occupation, which must, considering the extent of their uncultivated territory, find them employment still for

has blurred the reality of Benjamin Franklin, the common man. There is something almost sacrilegious in suggesting that he acted in his own self-interest, even when Franklin himself would admit to it in his *Autobiography*. And to be sure, Franklin's personal prosperity was closely tied to that of the fledgling United States. If Benjamin Franklin seems so human, so similar to contemporary politicians, it is because

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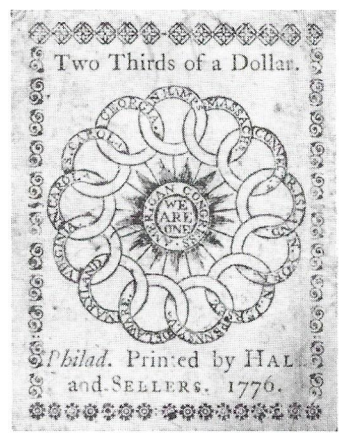
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Le Magnetisme dévoile (above) was engraved about 1764-1765, while Franklin at the Court of France (facing page) was engraved in 1830 by W.O. Geller. Franklin's design (right) for Continental Currency and his sketch for the "Pyrmont Water" apparatus.



that of the moon so that he durst not do anything that would oblige him to run away as he would be discovered wherever he should venture in France to show it."

While he might have found this infatuation amusing, Franklin manipulated it to his own advantage. He never attempted to discourage the commercialization of his "American" image, but rather promoted it by sending busts and portraits of himself to French officials as a means of *entre* into the highest diplomatic circles in the country. Even after the alliance had been secured, Franklin continued to evoke the "American"

ages." Today, many Americans would be inclined to agree with Carl Van Doren, biographer of Benjamin Franklin, who characterized the founding father as "a harmonious human multitude." Two hundred years after his death, Americans remain awed by Franklin for the wide diversity of his abilities. However, most fail to acknowledge the one quality that enabled him to surpass the other founding fathers in the hearts of the American people: Franklin's talent for marketing his own image.

The American penchant for

he really was. And yet, it was his ability to make his propaganda work so effectively for the benefit of the nation that he is celebrated as an "Ideal Citizen," a "Scholar," a "World-renown Scientist" and the prototype of a heroic "American." ❖

William C. Kashatus III of Philadelphia is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage. His most recent article, "Philadelphia's Mr. Baseball and His Amazing Athletics," appeared in the summer edition.

FOR FURTHER READING
 Aldridge, Alfred Owen. *Benjamin Franklin, Philosopher*