



December 19, 2005
Exhibitions Review

Knowing a Man (Ben Franklin), but Not Melons

By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

PHILADELPHIA, Dec. 14 - There was something insufferable about Benjamin Franklin, and many of his contemporaries knew it. John Adams wrote, "Had he been an ordinary man, I should never have taken the trouble to expose the turpitude of his intrigues, or to vindicate my reputation against his vilifications and calumnies."

Franklin could change positions when they seemed unpopular, compromise on principles and turn statecraft into a matter of personality. When he achieved any post of power, he stuffed relatives into remunerative positions while proclaiming that public servants should expect no payment at all.

In other contexts, Franklin's treatment of family could have made Poor Richard blush through his almanack: He began a three-generation tradition of siring illegitimate children; he made sure to spend 15 of the last 17 years of his marriage away from his wife in foreign lands, making no effort to see her in her final years; to his children and heirs he was capable of stunning callousness mixed with bouts of devotion.

Nor was his later reputation sterling among literary figures. Melville referred to Franklin's "primeval orientalness." Mark Twain, only partly in jest, accused him of "animosity toward boys" with his pert maxims about propriety. D. H. Lawrence, who could have been Franklin in a fun-house mirror, called him a "dry, moral, utilitarian little democrat."

No, Franklin, the middle-class materialist and moralist, has not had an easy time of it, particularly during much of the 20th century when he was often considered annoyingly bourgeois. It is even difficult to clearly define his contribution to the founding of the United States. Unlike Jefferson, he was not a devotee of high principle and a practitioner of high prose. Unlike Washington, he could not have led an army through adversity or channeled a fledgling country through birth pangs. Unlike Madison or even Hamilton, he was no theoretician.

But none of this really matters compared with what Franklin did achieve. Nor can it dampen the celebratory impact of an exciting new exhibition about Franklin's life and achievements at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, or slight the imposing sobriety of the 10 display cases stocked with Franklin documents at the Library of Congress in Washington.

On Jan. 17, the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth will be celebrated, notably in Philadelphia, which he was instrumental in establishing as a modern city by helping to found its major institutions: America's first nonsectarian college (ancestor to the University of Pennsylvania), its first public hospital, its first subscription library and its first property-insurance company. He will also be celebrated for his exploration of electricity (saving cities with his invention of the lightning rod); for slyly courting the French during the Revolutionary War (yielding a treaty that helped turn the tide against the British); and for spurring a stalled Constitutional Convention toward compromise and a bicameral legislature.

In fact, the difficulty we find in placing Franklin or in defining him is inseparable from the complexity of his achievements. In the last five years he has been the subject of at least four biographies - a gracefully intelligent survey by Walter Isaacson, a forceful and meticulous re-creation of his French years by Stacy Schiff, major scholarly books by H. W. Brands and Edmund S. Morgan. Franklin emerges in these reconstructions as a founder of not only American institutions but of an idea of America itself.

Like Whitman, he contained multitudes. And in his refusal to devote himself to a single dominating theory, in his skepticism about sweeping universals, in his devotion to compromise, in his forthright embrace of material prosperity, in his belief in community organization, and in his distinctive mixture of cynicism and idealism about humanity, he shaped a pragmatic temperament that can still be associated with the country

he helped create.

If Franklin were to mount a museum exhibition about himself, it might very well resemble - in its variety, intelligence and pleasures - "Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World"; the curator of this Philadelphia show is Page Talbott, a specialist in decorative and fine arts. It contains more than 250 artifacts, ranging from one of Jefferson's drafts of the Declaration of Independence (his originally held truths to be "sacred and undeniable"; Franklin transformed them into truths held to be "self-evident") to Franklin's fossilized mastodon tooth (found near the ruins of his Market Street home) to important paintings portraying the senior statesman.

Almost no aspect of Franklin's enterprise is left untouched: printer (the only surviving copy of Franklin's first Poor Richard's Almanack from 1733), civic leader (a suggestion box from the subscription library), scientist (a modern version of his electrical apparatus, producing sparks by turning a handle), diplomat (including a life-size diorama of Franklin facing British parliamentary accusations of fomenting American rebellion), inventor (of bifocals, for instance, or the glass armonica, in which spinning bowls dampened by water created ethereal sounds that inspired compositions by [Mozart](#) and Beethoven). And scattered throughout the exhibition are usable replicas of an armchair Franklin invented; slight pressure on a foot pedal waves a fan above one's head.

In creating such a show, Franklin might have also done as this one does, and elide the shadows of his life and temperament, leaving behind only slight hints. "Did Franklin himself listen to Poor Richard's advice?" the exhibition asks about Franklin's proverbs. "Sometimes. Sometimes not."

There is also a tendency here at times to seek a kind of sensation that Franklin would have looked askance at, simply because it adds so little to understanding. One example is a giant model of a tree veined with colored fibers meant to symbolize Franklin's Junto Society, made up of 12 citizens who met weekly for debate and civic planning. Press a button next to each member's name and the tree's fibers light up, leading to hanging signs displaying the Philadelphia institutions that that member helped establish.

But one walks through the 8,000 square feet of this exhibition astonished at the fecundity of Franklin's imagination and the range of his inventions. Something is reproduced, too, of his practical and playful spirit. Visitors will be challenged to flip numbers on a giant magic square to make all rows add to 15 - the kind of puzzle that Franklin turned into a specialty. And just as Franklin was remarkably attentive to younger children (though he tended to become almost cavalier about their needs as they aged), the displays aimed at the younger set are whimsical without a hint of condescension. ("Men and melons" is the first half of a maxim displayed in a participatory exhibit about Poor Richard; visitors try to match the second half: "stink in three days," "are hard to know" or "should not go barefoot.")

Missing in this chronological survey, though, is the kind of complication that accompanies darker shadows. We learn, for example, that Franklin's initial support of the British Stamp Act in 1765 led to serious problems with his American reputation, and we learn too that he hoped for some sort of reconciliation with the British Empire when many of his compatriots had already committed to independence.

But it is at the Library of Congress that visitors can see one of the bald propaganda exercises Franklin used to rescue his reputation when he returned to Philadelphia from England in 1775: a furious letter to a British friend ("You are now my enemy") that he never sent, but just showed around town. (The Washington exhibition also shows the handwritten "personal liturgy" that Franklin wrote for himself at the age of 22 as a substitute for attending church.

There could be more explanation in the Philadelphia show, too, of what was at stake when Franklin spent eight years in France as a representative of the Continental Congress, and of how difficult his task was - persuading the Continent's most tradition-bound court that this creditless assemblage of colonies should be taken seriously, while also persuading representatives of the colonies that the court in Paris could not simply be arm-wrestled into a treaty. Franklin used a chess metaphor, echoed in the Philadelphia exhibition, to explain his actions, but we don't really learn enough of the moves to understand.

Toward the end, this extraordinary exhibition almost peters out into generalities and gimmicky display. A real exploration of Franklin's impact would have meant showing just how controversial a character he had become, partly because of his long tenure in France; even the newly formed United States Senate (as one of its number reported) refused to wear "crape on their arms for a Month" as the House did after Franklin's death in 1790.

"Upon the whole," Franklin wrote in 1771, "I am much disposed to like the World as I find it, and to doubt

my own Judgment as to what would mend it." That made him a pragmatist and a compromiser, a nonutopian, a man with bifocals. But what could he hope for? "The greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected." That made him a visionary. He is celebrated for being both.

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