

Recent Supreme Court decisions such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) have stirred much debate about the United States’ claim to being “the land of the free.” Every judicial action is measured against the U.S. Constitution, our Nation’s founding document that was written over two hundred years ago. This is why we have a “conversation” around Constitution Day knowing that the application of this document is fluid depending on interpretation. While we typically understand that judges and scholars are the primary interpreters of the Constitution, in fact “we the people” are the intended audience and the ultimate arbiters of this document – either in its reading or through who we elect or invite to interpret on our behalf. People from multiple with various perspectives and lived experiences test the ideals of the Constitution to the interpretation of its highly debated “intended meaning” in everyday life; this includes not only judges and scholars but artists as well. There is a long tradition of artists using their art to critique American founding documents and iconography alongside their contemporary political climate.

The infamous ‘Join or Die’ political cartoon depicting a dead snake cut into eight sections, representing the eight American colonies, was created by Benjamin Franklin. His purpose in this artwork was to unify the then British American colonies against the French during the French and Indian War.<sup>1</sup> It was published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1754, and still lives on today as a frequently used image for various political groups. Similar to Franklin, artists in the contemporary era have continued to engage with the Constitution acknowledging both its historical significance and its shortcomings. They recognize that there continues to be a gap between the lived realities of everyday citizens and the ideals espoused within this seminal text.

Artists featured in the *Picturing the Constitution* exhibition at the Old Stone House in New York address exactly these concerns.<sup>2</sup> Iconography such as the American flag are repurposed to show how it has excluded marginalized groups then and now. Certain art forms with revolutionary history, such as photography and zine-making, are employed reflecting their critiques in both content and form. Many of the pieces have unconventional creation processes in that they were made not by a single artist but rather amongst community, fighting the

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant, Mark. "The first American political cartoon." *History Today*, December 2007, 58+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed September 4, 2024).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A172687100/AONE?u=carl22017&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=b52267dc>.

<sup>2</sup> Old Stone House & Washington Park. “Picturing the Constitution Virtual Tour” The Old Stone House. Accessed September 11, 2024. <https://theoldstonehouse.org/picturing-the-constitution-virtual-tour/>.

epistemology of individualism so deeply ingrained into American society. The artworks thoughtfully curated into this exhibition all share the goal of critically interpreting the U.S. Constitution with multiple themes including liberty, justice, and freedom. Ultimately, the works on display raise questions, prompt concerns, and offer abstract viewpoints for viewers about this consequential document's efficacy throughout time, and in the here and now.