Symbols of the French Revolution

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During the French Revolution, France as a nation did not exist yet. There were many different ethnic and linguistic groups that had to be united in order to form the France that we know today. To bridge the divide between the different regions of France and the different classes involved in the Revolution, symbols were used to convey certain ideals. The liberty cap, the tricolor flag, Marianne, and other symbols became important in the spread of Revolutionary ideas. Our research aims to show that these symbols served an important role in creating a national identity in France.

Music in the French Revolution
Music has always had an important role to play in political and revolutionary movements. Music can come from a great composer and inspire and enlighten or it can come from the common people in the taverns and cheap theaters with the intention of enraging the masses to some violent deed. During the French Revolution music became an important tool because of its “ability to circulate political information and opinions through a society that was only partly literate.” Catchy tunes helped listeners remember instructive or polemical lyrics as they inspired political passions and military fervor. During the French Revolution hymns by great composers or common bar songs were both used in this manner. One of the songs that invoked great emotion for the French people and inspired feelings of unity among some and division among others was La Marseillaise. The French hymn La Marseillaise (originally entitled The War Song of the Army of the Rhine) was written by Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle after he learned that France had declared war with Austria in the spring of 1792 and it became one of the most influential songs of the revolutionary period. The song gained its current name from the revolutionary enthusiastic soldiers of Marseilles who popularized the song on their march into Paris. The song urged the French people to defend the motherland against a foe that would return them to their slavery under a monarchy. It assured them that glory and liberty were on their side and that their fight was a righteous one. La Marseillaise enjoyed unusual lasting popularity and was sung at both official revolutionary events and in the streets and taverns of the time. The hymn would eventually become the national anthem of the new Republic and is the national anthem of France today.

As evidenced by these examples, the symbols of the French Revolution took many forms, ranging from clothing to masterpiece paintings. French history had not yet known nationalistic ideals until the advent of the revolution. In a time when literacy was uncommon among the lower classes, these symbols served as a way to unite a people divided by culture, tradition, and long distances. Not only did these symbols serve to unify otherwise diverse groups of people, they helped educate other members of the lowest classes of society.

Our research has led to the conclusion that besides appealing to the working class’ passion for change in the government, these symbols evolved into an open invitation to all struggling members of society to join their cause. Numerous regions throughout France housed thousands of people who had little inclination to consider themselves “French” because their loyalties did not often extend far beyond their cities. The symbols of the French Revolution greatly aided in the overall construction of a French identity, and the nationalistic feelings borne during this time are still largely evident today in French culture.