Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America (Early American Studies)

Catherine E. Kelly
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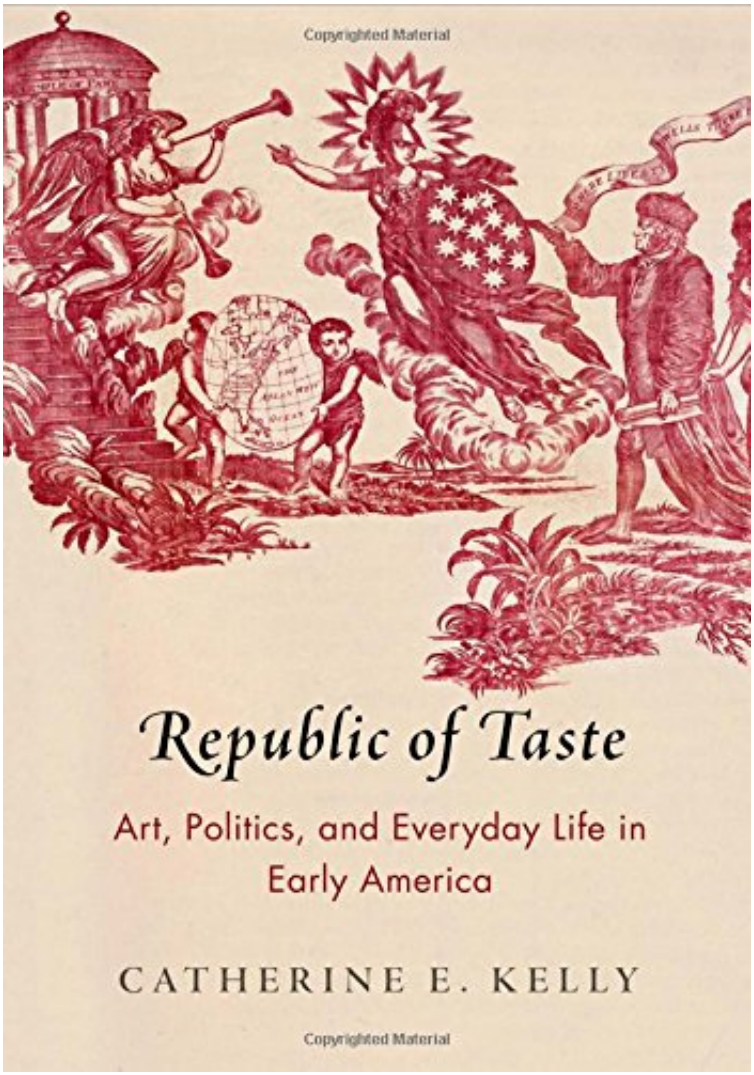

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Catherine E. Kelly : Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America (Early American Studies) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America (Early American Studies):

Since the early decades of the eighteenth century, European, and especially British, thinkers were preoccupied with questions of taste. Whether Americans believed that taste was innateand therefore a marker of breeding and stationor

acquiredand thus the product of application and studyall could appreciate that taste was grounded in, demonstrated through, and confirmed by reading, writing, and looking. It was widely believed that shared aesthetic sensibilities connected like-minded individuals and that shared affinities advanced the public good and held great promise for the American republic.Exploring the intersection of the early republic's material, visual, literary, and political cultures, Catherine E. Kelly demonstrates how American thinkers acknowledged the similarities between aesthetics and politics in order to wrestle with questions about power and authority. Judgments about art, architecture, literature, poetry, and the theater became an arena for considering political issues ranging from government structures and legislative representation to qualifications for citizenship and the meaning of liberty itself. Additionally, if taste prompted political debate, it also encouraged affinity grounded in a shared national identity. In the years following independence, ordinary women and men reassured themselves that taste revealed larger truths about an individual's character and potential for republican citizenship.Did an early national vocabulary of taste, then, with its privileged visuality, register beyond the debates over the ratification of the Constitution? Did it truly extend beyond political and politicized discourse to inform the imaginative structures and material forms of everyday life? Republic of Taste affirms that it did, although not in ways that anyone could have predicted at the conclusion of the American Revolution.

"Republic of Taste plunges readers into the crowded and contested visual culture of the early American republic, from schoolrooms to coffeehouses to museums. With lucid prose and wide-ranging erudition, Catherine E. Kelly invites us literally to see the dazzling multiplicity of the newly United States with fresh eyes."Jane Kamensky, Harvard University"Republic of Taste introduces a dazzling array of materials, which Catherine Kelly interprets with wonderful flair and great insight. Our sense of culture and politics in the Early American Republic will never be quite the same."Ann Vincent Fabian, Rutgers University-New Brunswick"Republic of Taste is a provocative exploration of the complex interplay of reading, writing, and looking in the republican culture of taste."Karen Halttunen, University of Southern CaliforniaAbout the AuthorCatherine E. Kelly is Associate Professor and L. R. Brammer Jr. Presidential Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma. She is author of In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.IntroductionThe American Republic of TasteHenry Cheever, an academy student in Massachusetts, was determined to hone his prose, molding it to meet the standards laid out by Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres and by Henry Home, Lord Kames's Elements of Criticism. He filled his commonplace book with epigrams culled from the works of Milton, Goldsmith, Dryden, and Pope. Keen to demonstrate his mastery of the fine style prescribed by the rhetoricians and exemplified by the poets, he set out to describe the summer sunset he had just witnessed. In July 1829, after beseeching the "Omniscient Potentiate" for guidance, he wrote that the "borders of the western horizon" glowed "like a golden flame," their light punctuated by "blue pyramidial mounts like [a] sudden flash of spirit in raging roaring flames." In crafting his tortured summer sunset, Cheever marked himself not just as a reader and writer but also as a looker, as an active and engaged spectator whose "golden flames" and "blue pyramidial mounts" derived not just from a particular way of reading and writing but also from a particular way of seeing.* * *Lucy Sumner, newly married and intent on embodying the virtues that spelled republican womanhood, had fallen into the habit of visiting Daniel Bowen's Columbian Museum. The paintings, taxidermied birds, wax figures, and curiosities provided her circle with "rational and refined amusement," especially when compared to the risqu and "disgusting" circus that had been attracting far more patronage than she thought proper. But Sumner valued the Columbian for more than its admirable collection. The museum encouraged a distinctand distinctly rewardingsort of spectatorship. When one spent time at the Columbian, she explained to her friend Eliza Wharton, "the eye is gratified, the imagination charmed, and the understanding improved." Far from "palling on the taste," the interplay of familiar exhibits and novel additions had an animating effect on intellect and imagination. At the Columbian, she declared, "I am never a weary spectator."* * *Sometime in the late 1780s, Samuel Powel, one of the wealthiest and most influential men in Philadelphia, paid tribute to his friend and fellow revolutionary, George Washington, by tracing his silhouette and inscribing "General Washington" on its back. We have no information about the circumstances under which Powel made the profile, although family lore held that he used a recently invented Argand lamp to project Washington's profile on the wall. We know only that the Powel family took pains to save it, passing the memento from one generation to the next until it finally found a home upstairs in their elegant townhouse, now a museum. The impromptu likeness testifies to the so-called Patriot Mayor's close personal and political relationship with the pater patriae. Its preservation testifies to his family's lasting pride in that association. But behind this all-too-predictable story about prestige and personal connection is another set of stories, even if we cannot recover them. What impulses led one powerful and cosmopolitan man to amuse himself by drawing the rough silhouette of another? What impulses led a revolutionary hero known for his reserve to amuse himself and his friends in this way?A teenaged academy student. A minor character in the United States' first best-selling novel. One man of affairs nearing the end of his life and another already securing his place in history. At first glance, the individuals at the center of these three vignettes seem to have little in common with one another. But in describing a sunset, touting the moral benefits of museum attendance, or

creating a profile, each claimed citizenship in the republic of taste. To situate Henry Cheever, Lucy Sumner, Samuel Powel, and George Washington in the republic of taste is to place them at the intersection of the early republic's material, visual, literary, and political cultures. They knew that the exercise of their taste was caught up in the material world. It depended on taxidermied animals and Argand lamps. It demanded both beautiful vistas and books that contained a vocabulary capable of describing those vistas. Whether they believed that their distinguishing taste was inborn (and therefore a marker of breeding and station) or acquired (and thus the product of application and study), they understood that it was predicated upon, demonstrated through, and confirmed by reading, writing, and lookingprocesses that they believed to be inextricably bound together. Cheever, Sumner, Powel, and Washington also believed that their shared aesthetic sensibilities connected them to other like-minded individuals. They trusted that these shared affinities, which provided so much personal pleasure, also advanced the public good and thus held out great promise in the American republic. Never mind that the newly formed United States lacked the Old World's aesthetic infrastructure. In their eyes, the nation itself constituted a kind of gallery, a series of real and imagined spaces in which republican citizens could display and affirm their sensibility, their taste, and their virtue.* * *The intellectual underpinnings of the American republic of taste stretched back a century and spanned the Atlantic. European, and especially British, thinkers had been preoccupied with questions about taste, visuality, and aesthetics since the early decades of the eighteenth century. Whatever their differences, David Hume, Edmund Burke, and Hugh Blair all linked aesthetic dilemmas to political ones by the middle of the eighteenth century. Moreover, they did so in terms that invited the engagement of a growing middle class. Around the same time, prominent and well-connected painters-turned-theorists like Sir Joshua Reynolds insisted upon art's broadly didactic purpose, imbuing it with civic value. This wide-ranging body of thought, which encompassed philosophy, belles lettres, and the fine arts, contributed to a new understanding of the world. It simultaneously helped shift authority from the state to society and defined a terrain on which society could define and organize itself. Its high-minded aesthetic ideas were distilled and popularized through Britain's flourishing periodical press, starting with the Spectator (1711-1712), whose essays, published daily, titled simply by number, and reproduced widely, would influence aesthetic theory and literary culture on both sides of the Atlantic well into the nineteenth century.Before the American Revolution, educated and affluent Anglo-Americans sought access to the tasteful world that emerged from the pages of these texts in order to strengthen their ties to the metropole, in order to become more Anglo and less American. During and after the American Revolution, however, they invested this transatlantic discourse with enormous and explicitly republican significance. Exploiting the similarities between aesthetic and political dilemmas, American thinkers explored questions about taste and beauty in order to wrestle with questions about power and authority. Thus, in 1776, John Adams imagined representative assembly as "in miniature, an exact portrait at large"; more than ten years later, Anti-Federalists repurposed Adams's metaphor to attack the proposed Constitution, which failed to provide a legislative body that could serve as a "likeness" of the people. Indeed, Federalists and Anti-Federalists explicitly invoked debates over the relative importance of uniformity and variety as components of beauty in arguments over issues including representation and the separation of powers. In much the same way, debates over the nature of taste (Was it innate or learned? Was there a single standard or were there as many standards as there were individuals?) directly informed debates over political and social authority. Precisely because the imagination posited by eighteenth-century aesthetic theory demanded both creative freedom and critical restraint, it provided Americans with an intellectual framework for considering the limits of liberty. Thinking about art, architecture, literature, poetry, or the theater thus became vehicles for thinking about and thinking through political issues ranging from government structures, to legislative representation, to qualifications for citizenship, to the meaning of liberty itself.If taste accommodated social aspiration and encouraged political debate, it also suggested the possibility of affinity grounded in a shared national identity. Putatively free from the Old World's decadence, taste promised to be a vehicle for discovering and exercising a distinctly American genius. And putatively free from sectional prejudice and partisan strife, taste provided a platform that would encourage men and women to rise above their differences. Like "manners" and "sensibility," the period's other shibboleths, taste promised to bind the disparate citizens of a republic together while setting them apart from Europeans. Thinkers as different as Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Dennie, whose views extended across the early national political spectrum, clung to the hope that a republic could be forged at least partly out of taste. With so much at stake, it is small wonder that aesthetic preoccupations peppered the pages of the U.S. periodical press and turned up in speeches given to mark everything from college graduations to July 4th celebrations. Thus did a transatlantic republic of taste distill into an American republic of taste.This is by now a familiar story; its narrative outlines have emerged over the past thirty years from the work of literary and cultural historians, including Jay Fliegelman, David S. Shields, Eric Slauter, and Edward Cahill. But despite all that we have recovered about the resonance of taste for American political discourse, for all that we now know about the centrality of aesthetics more generally to American intellectual life, we have scarcely paused to ask whether, much less how, the eighteenth century's aesthetic turn figured in the lives of women and men who were not intellectuals in any canonical sense of the word. Did the early national vocabulary of taste, with its privileged visuality, register beyond the debates over the ratification of the Constitution or outside the pages of the Port Folio? Did it extend past political and politicized discourse to inform the imaginative structures and material

forms of everyday life? Republic of Taste affirms that it did, although not in ways that anyone could have predicted at the conclusion of the American Revolution.In the years following independence, ordinary women and men sought membership in the republic of taste because it afforded them cultural capital and personal pleasure in equal measure. They assured themselves that taste revealed larger truths about an individual's character, about his or her potential for republican citizenship. The man (or woman) of taste was disinterested, capable of seeing past particulars to grasp universal truths. At the same time, he was sensitive to the feelings and experiences of others. He was sensitive, indeed, to the world that surrounded him. Although his taste was to some degree innate, it was also the product of careful and sustained cultivation. He was thus knowledgeable, for in fostering his own taste he had become familiar with things that were appreciated by other people of taste. This familiarity with the texts, objects, and images that signaled taste was not only intellectual. It was also material. The tasteful life was graced by exquisitely bound books and mass-produced engraved prints, by decorated ceramics and schoolgirls' needlework. It was expressed in the graceful curves and swoops of penmanship and in the serenely composed faces that looked out from oil portraits and ivory miniatures. Taste conjured soft fabrics and polished surfaces just as it conjured intellectual and imaginative aspiration.The valorization of taste was thus well suited to the early republic's Janus-faced culture of class, which simultaneously promised opportunity and reinforced distinction. In theory, taste operated freely, unconstrained by either hereditary status or financial net worth. By and large, Americans preferred thinkers who treated taste as a capacity that responded to careful cultivation over those who believed it to be an absolute. But however taste was theorized, it operated within a constellation of texts, images, objects, and persons that placed it well beyond the grasp of people whose occupations, wealth, or race excluded them from the ranks of an emerging middle class. Lack of money and standing did not necessarily signal a lack of taste. Indeed, the laboring men and women who created refinement's props often insisted that the quality of the goods they produced reflected their taste as well as their skill. That said, one was far more likely to discover a capacity for taste in a young woman whose once-respectable family had been rendered destitute by hard times than in a young man bent on clawing his way out of hardscrabble poverty.Broad as taste's compass might have been, when Anglo-Americans attempted to define or to account for it, they turned time and again to metaphors and examples that hinged on sight and seeing. For Americans as for their British counterparts, taste and its cognate wordsimagination, fancy, discretion, and, to a lesser extent, connoisseurshipwere grounded in the eye. The countless Americans schooled in taste by the rhetorician Hugh Blair, for example, learned that taste was "ultimately founded on a certain natural and instinctive sensibility to beauty" and that beauty was first encountered visually. Those who read the Spectator knew that Joseph Addison had singled out sight, "the most perfect and most delightful of the senses," as the critical component of his "Pleasures of the Imagination"; they understood that discretion was like a "well-formed Eye" capable of commanding "large and extended Views." The logic connecting taste to vision was reiterated in the pages of the American periodical press. Writers and editors regularly reminded readers that the "finer organs" of a tasteful person could see beauty that was "hidden from a vulgar eye"; that taste turned a "nicer eye" on the works of nature; and that tasteful objects were those that "please[d] the eye." The same set of associations appeared in the formal speeches made by college students like John Wales, who promised listeners that they could improve their taste while taking their daily strolls simply by noting which things appeared "pleasing and beautiful" and which did not. In no time, he assured them, they would establish a standard by which "everything was easily and readily ajudged." Whether imagined as a badge of genteel discernment, an avenue to personal pleasure, or both, taste was imbricated in visuality. It depended equally on the perception of the subject and on the appearance of the objects and images within the field of vision.Opportunities to exercise one's tasteto scan the surroundings with a knowing and receptive eyeincreased in variety and quantity during the early republic. As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, bourgeois Americans acquired access to more books and magazines, more paintings and prints, more museums and galleries. They encountered a visual field that was increasingly crowded, courtesy of an expanding consumer market. The language that women and men used to describe their aesthetic experiences offers one register of the growing influence of commerce, commodities, and consumer capitalism. Consider the word "taste" itself. A key word in the eighteenth-century British aesthetic lexicon, "taste" appeared in political treatises, oratory, and children's books. It also made regular appearances in letters written by and to the nation's founders: Jefferson urged the design of a capitol that would "form the taste of our young men," and he fretted over how John Adams's "want of taste" would be received in Europe. For his part, Adams took pains to distinguish between the artificial "Amuzements" and the "higher Taste" displayed in England's romantic country gardens. Even George Washington hailed Julius Caesar as a "man of highly cultivated understanding and taste." These men, like their counterparts on both sides of the Atlantic, invoked "taste" in reference to physical sensations as well as to individual preferences and predilections; they used it to describe the appreciation of beauty in nature, art, and literature. "Taste" was an elastic word, conjuring an individual's reactions to endless external stimuli. But for all its value as an index of the external world, taste was also deeply and intrinsically internalized. This, in fact, was precisely what made taste so potent for men like Jefferson, Madison, and Washington: it simultaneously summoned gentility and moral character.Not so the word "connoisseurship." If taste depended upon fundamentally internalized qualities and abilities, connoisseurship derived solely from a familiarity with objects outside the self. Connoisseurs were distinguished by their knowledge of category and quality, by their expertise in a

world of goods. Defined by his or her relationship to particular things, the connoisseur was a creature of the market. It is telling that the same founders who never hesitated to appeal to taste rarely invoked connoisseurship; when they did, it was usually to declare that they lacked it. Thus Washington confessed that he was "not much of a connoisseur" of dinner plates and "profess[ed] not to be a connoisseur" of poetry. Jefferson was "so little of a connoisseur" that he found the paintings of Adriaen van der Werff and Carlo Dolci superior to those of Peter Paul Rubens. To be sure, there was always the whiff of gamesmanship in disavowals like these. A preference for Dolci over Rubens might have ruffled the feathers of connoisseurs, but it also trumpeted a far deeper knowledge of art history than most Americans or Britons could claim. But by pointedly distancing themselves from connoisseurs, Jefferson and Washington implicitly juxtaposed connoisseurship's studied pretense against taste's authentic simplicity in order to announce themselves as republicans and to lay claim to an aesthetic and moral high ground.Suspect in the eighteenth century, "connoisseur" and its variations triumphed in the nineteenth. Americans seized on the word to describe their connection to the material world. The early national periodical press provides a rough index of the ascent of the connoisseur. Initially, the word was associated solely with high culture and the fine arts. Connoisseurs judged painting, sculpture, and (much less frequently) literature; their approbation was invoked in announcements for gallery exhibitions and essays on Benjamin West's oeuvre and Henry Fuseli's lectures on painting. But the range of objects that commanded the connoisseur's attention quickly expanded beyond the exquisite and the rare to include the everyday and the accessible. Newspaper and magazine advertisements invited connoisseurs to peruse engraved prints, perfumes, and wines or to enjoy mechanical panoramas, philosophical experiments, and turtle soup. Arkansas land, merino sheep, cream cheese, and a special shade of red that could be produced only with a dye made from sheep's dungall provided fodder for connoisseurs. "Connoisseurship" never eclipsed "taste." Indeed, the two words were often linked. Eventually, they became all but synonymous. Nor was the exercise of taste ever entirely divorced from the material world. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century ascendance of "connoisseur," a word that appeared only rarely in eighteenth-century Anglo-America, should alert us to the increasingly active and volatile presence of the market in the republic of taste.The market ensured that the very visual and material cultures that helped materialize the United States' republic of taste also served to undermine it. The republic of taste had always been an abstraction, an idea. Like all theories, it proved vulnerable to praxis. Yet as it was imagined and constituted in the United States, this particular abstraction proved to be especially vulnerable to the material forms that were meant to embody and to shape it. For one thing, most of the texts and objects that structured the world of taste, even in its most allegedly American iterations, were European or, more likely, British in origin. An exclusively "American taste" was an oxymoron. Sovereignty produced neither cultural nor economic autonomy. Most Anglo-Americans did a very good job of overlooking the extent to which their tasteful texts and things derived from English originals. That said, Englishness (and the recent history of political rupture and economic dependency it implied) popped up more than anyone might have liked. Put simply, U.S. citizens' continued reliance on British texts, objects, images, and styles complicated their narratives about national distinctiveness and disrupted their claims about a singularly American republic of taste.More to the point, regardless of provenance, most of the objects and images constituting the American republic of taste were commodities. Circulating across the Atlantic and within the United States, taste's props were part of a protean consumer market that was both a source and a symbol of political, economic, and social change. Commodification undermined the lofty promises held out by the abstraction of taste not because it produced tawdry, tacky goods (although it assuredly did) or because it extended taste's compass across all sectors of society, thereby democratizing national culture (which it did not). Instead, commodification created the space for an imaginary that transgressed the unifying, disciplinary logic that undergirded the republic of taste.Painters, museum keepers, printers, and producers of aestheticized objects more generally might have aspired to serve the republic by elevating citizens' taste. But they were also entrepreneurs who needed to make a living and tried to make a good one. Competing in increasingly crowded markets, they clamored to attract new clients by catering to a growing range of preferences and budgets. They angled to attract repeat business by catering to the public's desire for novelty. The resulting variety of goods ran the gamut from the ephemeral to the substantial. Promising only to suit the particular taste of individual patrons, producers made no claim to advancing a single standard of taste, much less yoking consumers to a particular form of collective identity or action. The commodification of taste was by no means unique to the United States. But precisely because Anglo-Americans had endeavored to situate taste near the heart of the republican project, its commodification bore different and more urgent implications in the United States than it did in Britain. This was especially true when the commodities in question were intended to instill national spirit, cultivate republican sensibilities, or commemorate the Revolution. It was one thing for women's gowns to fall victim to the caprices of fashion, another for the same fate to befall likenesses of George Washington.* * *This book weaves together two related lines of inquiry in order to explore Americans' contradictory attempts to create and inhabit a republic of taste. The first explores the process of translating aesthetic ideals into everyday practice. How could a transatlantic culture of taste be rendered American? How could it be refined to meet the pressing needs of the republic? Just as important, how could women and men secure their claims to inclusion in this American republic of taste? And how could they use that status to consolidate their authority in the American republic writ large? As urgent as they were unresolved, these questions dogged attempts to create a culture

capable of securing the republic. To forge an American republic of taste, individuals reinvested older ideas, imaginative structures, and material forms with new meanings. Capitalizing on taste's promises to identify and elevate the worthy few, women and men projected their aspirations for themselves onto their aspirations for the republic, thereby collapsing the personal and the national. Capitalizing on taste's penchant for distinction, they guarded the boundaries that elevated them above those who lacked their fine eyes and genteel sensibilities. To be sure, Anglo-Americans had been using taste (along with gentility and sensibility) as an instrument of social calibration since at least the early eighteenth century. But following the Revolution, they also used it as a barometer of civic and political capacity. During the same decades, the expansion of the market guaranteed that there were more producers and more consumers, more images, objects, and texts jockeying for recognition and precedence. Americans thus sought to materialize their republic of taste in a social, economic, and cultural context that was inherently unstable, a context that all but guaranteed that attempts to create a republic of taste would ultimately undermine it.The book's second line of inquiry focuses on the connections that early national Americans drew between visual and material cultures, on the one hand, and literary cultures, on the other. Republic of Taste is as concerned with texts, and texts that refer to things, as it is with things in and of themselves. This is intentional. Recent years have witnessed exciting work both on visual and material cultures and on literary culture. That said, we have a remarkably underdeveloped sense of how the textual, the visual, and the material operated together. This is unfortunate, for in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the visual and the textual were interwoven in distinct and specific ways.An expansive, transatlantic literary culture provided educated women and men with structures for organizing visual perception, structures that operated much like the carefully mapped sight lines in a theater, which simultaneously ensure that audiences see the action on the stage and discourage them from peering into the spaces around them. These structures were as disciplinary as they were enabling. Belles lettres endowed readers with far more than the vocabulary necessary to translate a sweeping field of vision into words. The rich textual world elaborated in manuscript and print, in private exchange and public academies, showed women and men where and how to look and then helped them anchor what they saw in the things they read and wrote. The densely knit web of associations that emerged from all this reading, writing, and lookingthe particular form of subjectivity it createdwas hardly a natural effect of human nature. Instead, it was historically specific, grounded both in ideas about perception and selfhood and in an expansive world of images, objects, and texts. This dynamic, triangular process was central to the ways in which individuals experienced, understood, and valued texts, images, and objects. It proved crucial to attempts to imagine the United States as a republic of taste.The chapters that follow sketch the history of the American republic of taste. The story they tell does not aim to be comprehensive, as if such a story could be told comprehensively. Instead, its trajectory unfolds through a series of roughly chronological, topical chapters. Chapter 1 examines pedagogy and curriculum at postrevolutionary academies and seminaries to consider how ideas about taste, aesthetics, and seeing were introduced into the discursive and social practices of young women and men. Very little of this aesthetic education was new, and perhaps even less of it was unique to the United States. What was new in the years following the Revolution was the scale of the enterprise on the one hand and its political resonance on the other. Young men and young women, especially, increasingly pursued educations that injected ideas about aesthetics, habits of observation, and particular kinds of objects and images with an explicitly republican, explicitly national significance. Academy students, with their carefully schooled taste and their heightened sense of visuality, became newly visible to their fellow citizens as aestheticized embodiments of republican taste and virtue. The academy movement, as it is often called, produced several generations of students whose educations had imparted appetites as well as taste. Their desire to indulge their taste and exercise their eyes, a desire that continued long after they left school, was satisfied by growing numbers of painters, museum operators, and art teachers. These aesthetic entrepreneurs, the subject of Chapter 2, were eager to profit from the growing market for taste. But they were just as eager to claim some of their patrons' respectabilitysome of their polishfor themselves. Eager to qualify for membership in the republic of taste, they celebrated their visual discernment rather than their technical skill. Setting themselves up as arbiters of their patrons' taste, they were nonetheless vulnerable to patrons' whims and pocketbooks.Aesthetics, both as theory and praxis, thus served as a vehicle for people of different genders and ranks to consolidate their social, cultural, and even economic power in the early republic. But what kinds of authority, precisely, could taste enhance? What kinds of visibility could it engender? Chapter 3 focuses on miniature portraits of two women, one black and one white, to explore these questions. Portraits were, by a large margin, the most popular form of painting in early America. By the turn of the nineteenth century, ivory miniatures were arguably the most common form of likeness among members of a growing middle class. This extraordinarily successful medium was celebrated not least for its capacity to depict complexion. It was governed by aesthetic principles that put the ideals celebrated in the republic of taste in the service of visualizing and maintaining categories of race, gender, and class. The portraits of Elizabeth Freeman, a former slave, and Betsey Way Champlain, a working artist, illuminate how ubiquitous ivory miniatures helped shore up the hierarchies that structured the early republic. And yet the images in question were only partly successful in this regard. Read alongside an unusually rich documentary record, these portraits gesture both toward the fundamentally aspirational nature of an exclusionary American republic of taste and toward the challenges that could be leveled against it.Ironically, the kinds of images,

objects, and practices sketched in the book's first half worked to undermine republican authority as often as they worked to shore it up. British originals gave the lie to fantasies about American exceptionalism, while the logic of the capitalist market made the meanings of goods as well as the uses to which they were put especially malleable. The timeless truths commemorated in the republic of taste were ultimately no match for the solvent of commodification. The chapters in the second half of the book trace the open-ended, unstable result of efforts to create an American republic of taste. In Chapter 4, a country villa opens up questions about the persistence of Anglophilia, the continued appeal of British commodities, and the problems posed by the reintegration of loyalists in the years following the war. The Woodlands, located just outside Philadelphia on a bluff overlooking the Schuylkill River, was the lifework of William Hamilton, a loyalist and confirmed Anglophile. By the 1790s, Hamilton had eased himself back into elite society, using his exquisite house and gardens to clear the path. Less than twenty years later, Hamilton's estate was widely celebrated in paintings, prints, and published texts and manuscripts as proof that taste could and would flourish in a republic. The same visual, material, and literary cultures that secured The Woodlands a prominent place in a national, nationalist imaginary demonstrate how deeply contradictory that imaginary could be.Yet even institutions that were, from the outset, conceived and executed as vehicles for republican knowledge and taste were vulnerable to the logic of the market and the illogic of consumer desire. Early national museums, for example, were explicitly didactic. They claimed to serve the republic by connecting the right kind of observation and the right kind of reading to the right kinds of objects. In fact, museumsthe subject of Chapter 5generated forms of looking and reading that defied republican protocols and gestured toward a political imaginary that was every bit as likely to undermine republican pieties as to reinforce them. Not even George Washington, the ur-founder, was insulated from the contradictory effects that aesthetic practices had on political culture, a political imaginary, and on politics proper. Chapter 6 traces the multiple contexts in which Anglo-Americans and others produced and viewed representations of Washington from the Revolutionary War into the nineteenth century. Washington himself leveraged both his likenesses and his person, creating a visual politics calculated to secure his political position and his place in history. His efforts were almost immediately dwarfed by the endless work of painters and engravers, sculptors and metalworkers, who saturated the market with depictions of his face. The relentless reproduction of Washingtoniana underscores the promise held out both by the republic of taste and the intersection of aesthetics, on the one hand, and by the market, on the other. Washingtonas man, as myth, and as commoditywas both the product and the culmination of the American republic of taste. This book concludes with a brief epilogue that uses the Marquis de Lafayette's triumphal return to the United States in 1824 as an opportunity to take stock of the American republic of taste.