

What Makes a Patriot?

Patriot Jug, Michelle Erickson

Do you recognize the man on this ceramic vessel? He is Colin Kaepernick (born 1987), a football player and activist. Michelle Erickson's *Patriot Jug* connects to an 18th-century practice of celebrating influential figures on ceramics. While traditional patriot jugs featured war heroes, kings, and sea captains, this jug commemorates the link between a modern-day activist and a centuries-old fight for freedom.

In 2016, while Colin was a quarterback for the NFL's San Francisco 49ers, he knelt on the field during the American national anthem as an act of protest against racism and police brutality. His actions prompted community backlash as well as support. Michelle paired the image of Colin with the word EQUALITY on the opposite side of the vessel. The logo for the Nike company both serves as a reminder of Colin's role as brand ambassador and calls upon the corporation to uphold equal rights.

On the front of the jug, Michelle included an image of an enslaved woman kneeling. This woman references a symbol used by early 19th-century abolitionists, people who fought to end slavery, to encourage individuals to boycott products that were made with slave labor. Both the historical female figure and the 21st-century athlete illustrate an ongoing struggle to combat racism and inequality. These themes continue inside the jug, where Michelle wrote passages from the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which protects freedoms of speech, press, and religion, as well as the right to peaceably protest the government. Above the image of the kneeling enslaved woman are the Arabic word for liberty and the Hebrew word for justice, emphasizing that these ideas and the struggle for equality are global.



Michelle Erickson. *Patriot Jug*. 2018. Earthenware, transfer-printed and luster decoration. Overall: 9 1/4 x 6 x 10 1/4 in. (23.5 x 15.2 x 26 cm). Collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art; Museum purchase. © Michelle Erickson. Photo: Robert Hunter

Classroom Activities

Invite students to research figures (historical or contemporary) they think would make good subjects for a patriot jug. Have them brainstorm whom they would choose to represent and what symbols or words they would include with their figure. Ask them to design their own jug using pencil and paper. Students can share with the class and discuss who they chose and why.

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"Am I Not a Man and a Brother" Jug, Unidentified Artist

The enslaved man on this jug represents another symbol abolitionists used to protest slavery, similar to the kneeling woman Michelle included on *Patriot Jug*.

"Am I Not a Man and a Brother" jug. c. 1820. Glazed earthenware, transfer printing, copper luster. 4 3/8 x 5 1/2 x 4 in (11.1 x 14 x 10.2cm). Gift of Mrs. Arthur J. Gutman, Baltimore. 2000.189