

## Liberty Pole (1792)

### Abstract

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In 1792, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) accompanied his patron, Duke Karl August of Saxe-Weimar, on the German campaign against revolutionary France. In his appointed role as campaign historian, Goethe witnessed many battles, not least the historic Battle of Valmy. During the campaign, he also executed this famous watercolor, a depiction of a so-called liberty pole in the town of Schengen, which lies in the Mosel region at the border between the Duchy of Luxemburg and the French Republic. The inscription reads “*Passans, cette terre est libre*” [“Passers-by, this land is free”]. Like many of his contemporaries, Goethe had accepted the revolution in its initial moderate, constitutional-monarchical phase but rejected its subsequent development. He recognized, however, that it was an event of momentous consequence. After returning from the campaign, Goethe gave this watercolor to his friend Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), a writer and philosopher who was critical of Enlightenment rationalism. The two had corresponded during Goethe’s absence. In one oft-quoted letter to Jacobi from August 18, 1792, Goethe suggested that he had grown weary of the whole affair and had reached the point where he cared very little about the outcome.

### Source

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Source: Watercolor on pen and ink drawing by J.W. Goethe, 1792.

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