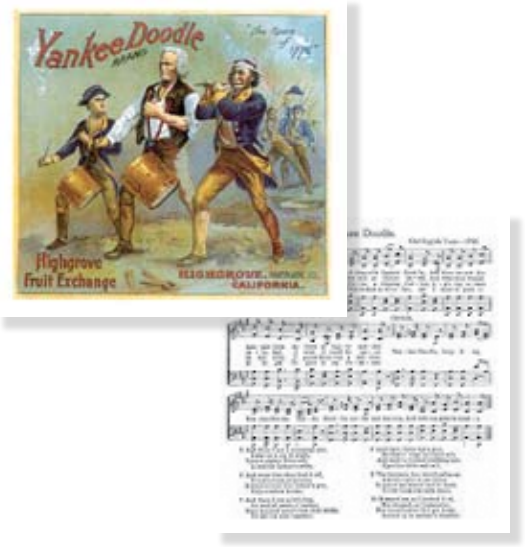
Literature Relevant to the Art and Historical Period

"Everybody knows the popular Revolutionary song originally called 'The Farmer and His Son's Return from a Visit to the Camp' that is today called 'Yankee Doodle.' The history of 'Yankee Doodle' is obscure but the tune was probably at first a British march. Most of the words as we know them were probably written around 1775, just after the forming of the American army. In the Revolutionary version, the speaker is a young boy visiting Washington's camp. The first of the fifteen stanzas and the chorus are:

Father and I went down to camp,
Along with Captain Gooding,
And there we see the men and boys
As thick as hasty pudding.
Yankey doodle keep it up, yankey doodle dandy
Mind the music and the step,
And with the girls be handy.



(Yankee Doodle)

18th Century line art drawing

Whatever the origins of 'Yankee Doodle,' its youthful, naïve, and exuberant hero has become an enduring symbol of the American character. Although 'Yankee Doodle' now ranks almost as a second national anthem, it was not the most popular song of the Revolution. Credit for writing the most popular song belongs to a lame, one-eyed, sometime garbage collector who also was the first American composer -- William Billings of Boston. The tune 'Chester' recalls New England church music; the words argue stubbornly that righteousness can overcome oppression. Sung throughout America during the Revolution, 'Chester' begins:

Let tyrants shake their iron rod,
And slavery clak her galling chains;
We fear them not; we trust in God—
New England's God forever reigns.

Because they could compress complicated ideas and create feelings of unity and determination, political songs became enormously popular during the Revolution. An old saying has it that 'whoever writes a nation's songs need not care who writes its laws'." (Adventures)