

Topless Femen Activist Inspires New French Stamp

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French President Francois Hollande unveils the new official stamp during Bastille Day celebrations in Paris, July 14. **Francois Mori**

PARIS — A postage stamp depicting France's cultural symbol, Marianne, has touched off a flurry of controversy after one of its creators revealed it was inspired by a topless feminist activist who hacked down a Christian cross in Kiev last year with a chainsaw.

The new stamp depicts a youthful Marianne, a symbol of the French republic, wearing a Phrygian conical cap but does not show her topless. It was unveiled by French President Francois Hollande on Sunday as part of Bastille Day celebrations.

Photographer and designer Olivier Ciappa said on Twitter that he was inspired by a number of women but most of all by Inna Shevchenko, a veteran member of the Femen group of feminist activists, who often stage bare-breasted protests.

"Feminism is an integral part of the values [of the French Republic]. And Marianne, at the time of the revolution, was bare-breasted, so why not pay homage to this fabulous Femen,"

he said in an op-ed piece on the Huffington Post website.

Ciappa's comments triggered many reactions — for and against — on Twitter and Facebook. The small right-wing Christian Democrat party called for a boycott of the stamp, which will be used for sending letters throughout the country.

Ukrainian activist Shevchenko, who welcomed the news with a provocative message on her Twitter account, announced last week that she had been granted asylum in France.

The new stamp design was chosen by high-school students.

In 1830, painter Eugene Delacroix depicted a bare-breasted Marianne brandishing a tricolor flag and leading her people over the bodies of the fallen in his famous painting "Liberty Leading the People."

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