GILBERT STUART [1755–1828]

3b George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait), 1796

Although George Washington sat for the most prominent artists of his day, Gilbert Stuart's images of the first president and hero of the American Revolution have been so widely reproduced that it is almost impossible for Americans to conceive of Washington in any other way. Less than a quarter-century after his death, the writer John Neal had already proclaimed, "The only idea we now have of George Washington is associated with Stuart's Washington."

Stuart was born in Newport, Rhode Island, to an immigrant Scotsman who made his living grinding tobacco snuff, an important commodity in colonial America. Apprenticed to a limner—an artisan painter without formal training—his innate talent soon brought him commissions from prominent clients. On the eve of the Revolution, he sailed for England to learn art in the European tradition. During his eighteen years abroad, Stuart achieved reknown as a portrait painter who worked best from the living model, laying down his colors carefully one over the other—"not mixed," he explained, "but shining through each other, like blood through natural skin."

His ability to charm clients and set them at ease allowed him to capture their inner character, which (following a popular theory called physiognomy) he believed was reflected in their physical features. For Stuart, Washington's features indicated a man of great passions. The painter's daughter, interviewed in 1867, recalled that her father had mentioned this to a mutual friend of Washington, adding however, that the president kept his temper under wonderful control. When the same friend related the remark to the Washingtons, Martha was taken aback, but the president simply smiled and said, "He is right."

3-B Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), *George Washington*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 97½ x 62½ in. (247.6 x 158.7 cm.). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; acquired as a gift to the nation through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

When Gilbert Stuart returned to his native land in 1793, he soon set out for Philadelphia, the largest city and the temporary capital of the new nation, with the intention of seeking a commission to paint the president. A portrait of such a revered individual would bring the artist fame and more sitters. Before the age of mass reproduction, a painter could make hefty sums through copies of original works, either by his own hand or through engravings to which he would hold copyright. Stuart knew that people, both in America and abroad, desired to have a portrait of George Washington.

By 1795, Stuart had the first of three portraits of the president completed. It was immediately successful. Washington sat for Stuart at least once more, in April 1796; and the president and his wife visited the artist in 1797, perhaps in reference to an unfinished bust-length portrait now at the Boston Athenaeum. An engraved version of the Athenaeum portrait is the one people see every time they pull a dollar bill out of their pocket.

The full-length Lansdowne portrait reproduced here summarizes Washington's role as leader and father of his country and is one of Stuart's most impressive works. It was painted in 1796 for William Petty, the first marquis of Lansdowne, a great admirer of Washington. The work is conceived in the grand European manner used to depict nobility: The president stands in the classical pose of an orator before a background of draperies, columns, and a glimpse of landscape. Yet the details are distinctly American. Washington wears the black velvet suit he used for formal occasions. On the table, volumes of the *Federalist* and the *Journal of Congress* refer to the foundations of government and Washington's role as head of state. The medallion emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes on the back of the chair is part of the Great Seal of the United States. When the portrait was displayed in New York City two years later, an advertisement noted that Stuart had painted Washington, "surrounded with allegorical elements of his public life in the service of his country, which are highly illustrative of the great and tremendous storms which have frequently prevailed. These storms have abated and the appearance of the rainbow is introduced in the background as a sign."

Many anecdotes relate the difficulty Stuart had in breaking through Washington's public manner. It took all of the painter's considerable conversational talents to draw out the inner man. He was apparently successful, for Washington's grandson noted that the Lansdowne portrait was "the best likeness of the chief in his latter days."

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting and observe its many details.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Ask students to describe Washington's facial features, hairstyle, and clothes.

He has rosy cheeks; a large, straight nose; a closed, thin mouth; a strong jaw; and dark eyes. His wavy hair is powdered; it is pulled back into a ponytail. He wears a black velvet suit, white ruffled shirt, black stockings, and black shoes with silver buckles.

E | M | S

How old do students think Washington appears in this painting? Why? *Explain that he was in his sixties.*

E | M | S

Gilbert Stuart wanted to reflect his sitters' inner character through their faces and outward appearance. From this portrait how would you describe Washington's inner character?

Students may suggest terms such as serene, intelligent, dignified, or calm.

Stuart saw great passion in Washington's features. Ask students if they also see this. Why or why not?

E | M | S

Ask students to find these objects and tell what they might represent.

Rainbow: *Located in the top right corner; it may signify the promise of better times.*

Medallion with stars and stripes: *The medallion, located on the top of the chair, is part of the Great Seal of the United States.*

Ink stand with quill: *Found on the table and engraved with Washington's family coat of arms, it was used for writing—possibly signing papers such as bills passed by Congress.*

Books (on and below the table): *They concern the government and founding of the United States.*

Saber: *During the Revolution, Washington commanded the American army, and as president, he was commander in chief of the military.*

E | M | S

Compare this portrait to the one on a dollar bill.

They are very similar, but do not face the same direction.

(Explain that the dollar-bill image was engraved—the portrait engraved on the metal faced the same direction as in the painting—but when the inked plate was pressed on paper, the image was reversed.)

M | S

Encourage students to notice the details of the background: the drapery, columns on a plain wall, clouds in the sky, and the rainbow. Explain that this type of background was often used in European portraits of nobles and that Gilbert Stuart had studied painting in Europe.

INTERPRET

M | S

Ask students why they think Stuart painted Washington with his arm outstretched.

This pose was oratorical and used by people making speeches.

S

Ask students how Washington's appearance reflects how he wanted people to see him. Remind them that contemporary European rulers wore ornate wigs and brightly colored clothes.

Washington wears a plain black suit and no wig. He showed that the United States president was a citizen, not a king. This emphasized his belief that all men are created equal.

S

Ask students why Stuart made copies of this painting. Why did so many people want portraits of George Washington?

Americans respected Washington as their great leader. They wanted portraits of him in civic buildings as well as in their own homes. Even an English nobleman who had supported the American cause wanted Washington's portrait.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: French and Indian War; U.S. presidents; Constitutional Convention

Historical Figures: George Washington; John Jay; Alexander Hamilton; the Marquis de Lafayette

Civics: U.S. Constitution; powers and duties of the three branches of government

Geography: cities of colonial and Revolutionary America (Boston, Philadelphia, etc.)

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *George Washington's Birthday: Wondering,* Bobbie Katz (elementary); "Occasioned by General Washington's Arrival in Philadelphia, On His Way to His Residence in Virginia," Phillip Freneau (middle, secondary); Washington's Farewell Address (1796); *Federalist Papers* (1787–1788); Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776); Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641); Mayflower Compact (1620); John Locke's *Treatise of Civil Government* (1690); English Bill of Rights (1689)

Arts: portraiture; Roman Republican and Iroquois images (eagle and clutched arrows)