

Son of a Scottish-born artisan, Gilbert Stuart was born in Rhode Island during 1755. After taking some painting lessons from an itinerant Scottish artist, Cosmo Alexander, Stuart accompanied the artist as apprentice through the South and then to Edinburgh in 1771. Returning to Newport, he worked in a conscientious style based upon little training but a clear vision, achieving a primitive realism. In September 1775, soon after the outbreak of the Revolution, he left for London, where the inadequacies of his technique brought him to impoverishment. In his need he wrote in 1777 to his fellow American Benjamin West, then just recently appointed history painter to the king. Stuart spent the next five years in West's large home, where he mastered the most fluent technique and the most current style, learning both from West and the works of other leading artists, such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Romney. In the Royal Academy exhibition of 1782 he exhibited *The Skater*, and on the strength of that great success set up his own studio. He soon became one of the most fashionable portraitists in London. In 1786 he married Charlotte Coates, a physician's daughter who bore him a large family. During this period he lived so extravagantly that he was obliged to move to Ireland in the late summer of 1787 to escape his debts. In Dublin, too, he became a highly successful portraitist, but by the end of five years he was again heavily in debt and so left in early 1793 for America. He worked first in New York, moved to Philadelphia in late 1794, to Washington in 1803, and in 1805 to Boston, where he died in 1828. He was by far the best and most admired portraitist of his period in this country and exerted considerable influence on the development of portraiture in America.

The painting known as *The Skater* is a portrait of William Grant, a gentleman from Congalton, East Lothian, near Edinburgh. Little else is known about him. It appeared in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1782

under the title *Portrait of a Gentleman Skating* and was such a success that it established Stuart as one of the leading portraitists of the day. More than just proving Stuart's competence with the full-length figure, however, *The Skater* demonstrated his complete mastery of portraiture "in the Grand Manner" as established and defined by Reynolds. The striding figure that turns itself recalls the *Apollo Belvedere* that Copley had also referred to in his portrait of *Hugh Montgomerie* (fig. 22, p. 19). Although only participating in a fashionable sport, the active, alert subject is dramatized to the point of the heroic. Most importantly, the painting is attractive and interesting enough to succeed as a picture, even aside from the question of resemblance. Portraiture thus enters the highest reaches of creativity and ideality. It is indeed a beautiful piece of picture-making, with its background of other skaters and distant view of Westminster, precariously balanced main figure, bold silhouette, and elegant range of silvery greys. It is a painting that meets the highest standards of eighteenth-century portraiture.

Since deciding to return to America in 1793, the idea had never been far from Stuart's mind that he should paint the definitive portrait of Washington and enjoy the large income from replicas and engravings of the beloved leader. Stuart was able to obtain a sitting from Washington in late 1795, producing a bust portrait known as the Vaughan type. His second attempt was prompted by a commission from the Marquis of Lansdowne, an admirer of Washington who had supported recognition of the United States. The wife of the wealthy Philadelphia politician William Bingham insisted on presenting the portrait to Lord Lansdowne as a gift and persuaded the much-painted Washington to submit to further sittings. Lord Lansdowne acknowledged receipt of the portrait on March 5, 1797. It was greatly admired in London and in this country, and three full-size replicas were commissioned from Stuart. The related life study became the basis for a great many bust-length and half-length portraits that supplied a steady income to Stuart for the rest of his life. The pose and background of the portrait are based upon an engraving by Pierre Drévet of Rigaud's portrait of Bishop Bossuet. It is conceived as a portrait

of Washington the statesman, rather than the general, showing him at a table with papers of state. The scale and baroque movement of the print source balance the remote idealization of the head, the very quality of distant nobility that made this interpretation of Washington the icon and standard image of the first American president.

William Smith (1727-1803) was born near Aberdeen and graduated from the University of Aberdeen in 1747. He came to New York in 1751 as a private tutor. In 1753 he was invited to head the newly founded College Academy and Charitable School of Philadelphia but first returned to England to take holy orders. He became first provost of the school after his return in 1754. In 1758 he married Rebecca Moore. His growing differences with the Quakers caused him to return in 1759 for a visit to England, where his defense of the Church of England won him degrees of doctor of divinity from the universities of Oxford and Aberdeen and from Trinity College, Dublin. Charges of Toryism against him and the trustees led to the revocation of the academy's charter in 1779. The same year he moved to Chestertown, Maryland, where he served as rector of the parish and founded Washington College in 1782, becoming its first president. When his former academy in Philadelphia was rechartered as the University of the State of Pennsylvania in 1789, Smith became its provost, retiring after two years. His vigorous leadership had made the University a prominent educational institution.

His portrait of about 1800 is an exceptionally large and elaborate one for Stuart, containing references to Smith's numerous accomplishments. He is presented in the robes of a doctor of divinity of Oxford, seated in a large, somewhat Gothic chair that may refer to his academic offices. The books on his writing table represent his many publications in the fields of politics, history, literature, and theology. The theodolite recalls his participation in a notable observation of the transit of Venus in 1769. The landscape, unusual for Stuart, shows the Falls of the Schuylkill, where the wealthy Smith had an estate and extensive landholdings.

Michael Quick, et al.
*American Portraiture in the
Grand Manner: 1720-1920*
(Los Angeles County Museum
of Art, 1981)



JACOBUS BENIGNUS

Melitenis, Comes Cisterciensis, antea Crenensis Delphinus
superioris Italiae apud diplomatas an. 1642. obiit 22. Aprilis 1704.

Huius & Illustrius Antecessoris Imagines in Bibliotheca Regia Lipsiensi.



BOSSUET EPISCOPUS

praecipuus, et primus Serenissimae Ducis Burgundiae Censor

Jacobus Benignus Bossuet Episcopus Trecentis et fere supra