

George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait) by Gilbert Stuart

Permanent installation: Second floor



The "Lansdowne" portrait of George Washington is an American treasure, an iconic painting whose historical and cultural importance has been compared to that of the Liberty Bell and the Declaration of Independence. Painted by Gilbert Stuart, the most prestigious portraitist of his day, the 205-year-old painting has a storied past.

The commonly used title—"Lansdowne"—is derived from the name of the person for whom it was painted, the first Marquis of Lansdowne. It was commissioned in 1796 by one of America's wealthiest men, Sen. William Bingham, and his wife Anne, for the marquis, a British supporter of the American cause in Parliament during the American Revolution. The gift was a remarkable gesture of gratitude and a symbol of reconciliation between America and Great Britain. The painting was displayed in Lansdowne's London mansion until his death in 1805, after which it remained in private hands and was eventually incorporated into the collection of the 5th Earl of

Rosebery around 1890. The portrait was later hung in Dalmeny House, in West Lothian, Scotland. It has traveled to America only three times since its creation, the last time when it was loaned to the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in 1968.

Painted from life, the 8-foot-by-5-foot portrait shows Washington in a black velvet suit, with an oratorical gesture of the outstretched hand, the way he would appear at state occasions during his presidency. The composition and background originated with Stuart's portfolio of European engravings, but was much altered to reflect the symbolism of the American republic. Iconic symbols in the painting include the oval medallion decorating the back of the armchair, on which is seen a blue horizontal field with thirteen red and white vertical stripes, the table leg designed to resemble an ancient Roman symbol of political unity, and the rainbow in the upper-right corner represents the end of the stormy days of the American Revolution.



Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828) was the preeminent portraitist in the United States in the early 19th century. He recorded likenesses of American lawyers, politicians, landowners and diplomats, and their wives and children, painting nearly 1,000 portraits in his lifetime. His subjects included numerous presidents and other well-known figures, including Paul Revere, Abigail Adams, and Mohawk Chief Joseph Brandt. In preparation for the 1968 opening of the National Portrait Gallery, Charles Nagel, the first director, sought out "a picture of the father of our country from which the collection would flow forward and back in the point of time." Such was the Lansdowne portrait, which became the central attraction of the Gallery. In spring 2001, the National Portrait Gallery rescued the portrait

from potential auction, thanks to a generous \$30 million gift from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation of Las Vegas, Nevada. By making the National Portrait Gallery the painting's permanent home, the foundation has preserved this American artifact for generations to come.

Images:

George Washington (Lansdowne portrait)

by Gilbert Stuart

oil on canvas, 1796

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Acquired as a gift to the nation through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

Gilbert Stuart

by an unidentified artist after Anson Dickinson

oil on canvas, circa 1825

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.