

GEORGE WASHINGTON (LANSDOWNE PORTRAIT): A NATIONAL TREASURE



George Washington stands before you in a full-length portrait (97 ½ x 62 ½ in.) by prominent artist Gilbert Stuart. Here is Stuart at his best, painting a Washington for the ages, grand not as a king but as a stalwart representative of democracy. The painting, done in 1796, has not spent many of its 200+ years in this county. Better known as the “Lansdowne Portrait,” Gilbert’s painting was a gift to William Petty, the first Marquis of Lansdowne, a British supporter of American independence in Parliament, which led to his isolation by his fellow British politicians. Gilbert was commissioned to paint another portrait of Washington by Senator and Mrs. William Bingham of Pennsylvania. Bingham earned his fortune through trade and privateering and served as Pennsylvania’s U.S. Senator from 1795 to 1801.

Bingham paid Stuart one thousand dollars for the commission, which came about as the result of Bingham’s correspondence with Lansdowne about their mutual admiration for Washington and their interest in open transatlantic trade. The portrait’s iconography includes a nod to Washington’s ratification of the Jay Treaty, and the resulting transatlantic political alliance garnered during Washington’s second term.

The painting was on display at Lansdowne’s London mansion until he died in 1805. After that, it was held privately and became part of the 5th Earl of Rosebery’s collection around 1890. It later moved farther north, to Dalmeny House, in West Lothian, Scotland. The painting traveled to the United States three times, the latest time when it went on loan to the National Portrait Gallery in 1968. The portrait remained on loan until 2000, when its owner decided to sell it and the Gallery was in danger of losing the painting. The Donald W. Reynolds Foundation donated \$30 million to help purchase the painting as a gift to the nation, and it has remained on display ever since.

Before this commission, Stuart had already painted Washington a number of times, and his subject was getting tired of sitting for so many portraits. Bingham’s wife, Anne, persuaded the president to sit one

more time. Washington sent a note to Stuart on April 11, confirming his participation: “Sir: I am under promise to Mrs. Bingham, to set for you to-morrow at nine o’clock, and wishing to know if it be convenient to you that I should do so, and whether it shall be at your own house, (as she talked of the State House), I send this note to you, to ask information.” Washington’s grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, wrote later: “It is notorious that it was only by hard begging that Mrs. Bingham obtained the sittings for the Marquis of Lansdowne’s picture.”

Explore the portrait for its symbolic meanings and interpretations of objects in the portrait. Many of the objects in the painting never really existed, but were chosen by the artist to convey specific ideas to viewers.

He is surrounded with allegorical emblems 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.

—Advertisement for the first exhibition of the Lansdowne portrait in 1798

1. Gesture and Figure:



Some think that Washington is pointing toward the future, foreseeing bright prospects for his nation. Others believe that Washington is saying farewell. When this portrait was painted, he was about to leave office after having served two terms as President. Viewing the portrait, an observer saw him “bestowing his good advice to his countrymen.” Others have inferred that the painting commemorates the recent signing and ratification of Jay’s Treaty.

Washington is, by one appraisal, a “paragon of virtue and, as such, a source of national pride and inspiration.” His dignified stance lends a regal air to the portrait, calling to mind contemporary portraits of royal and noble figures of the day in England and Europe but also a strength and simplicity fit for a leader of a new republic.

2. Face:



Stuart, like many of his contemporaries, believed in physiognomy, the theory that a person's appearance reflected temperament and character. Thus Stuart wanted to depict Washington so that his sterling character would be conveyed. An engraving of Stuart's first portrait of Washington was used as an illustration for a book, *Essays on Physiognomy*. In the book, a writer comments that "every thing in this face announces the good man, a man upright, of simple manners, sincere, firm, reflecting and generous."

A description of the Lansdowne painting in a London newspaper in 1797 observed that "The countenance is mild and yet forcible. The eye, of a light grey, is rendered marking by a brow to which physiognomy attaches the sign of power. The forehead is ample, the nose aquiline, the mouth regular and persuasive. The face is distinguishable for muscle rather than flesh, and this may be said of the whole person."

Contemporaries who gazed upon Washington seemed to see more than a man. Descriptions of him bordered on mythical. His head, said an observer, was "well shaped . . . gracefully poised on a superb neck," with "a large and straight" nose, "blue grey penetrating eyes," high cheek bones, and a large mouth.

3. Clothing:



Washington was well aware of the symbolism of personal attire. When the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia in 1775, he was the only delegate in military uniform, for he wished to demonstrate Virginia's willingness to aid Massachusetts, already fighting British troops.

For a portrait of Washington, who was so frequently painted in military uniform, the depiction in a suit symbolized a switch in his public role from general to President. At his first inauguration in 1789, he had worn a brown suit of broadcloth from Hartford, Connecticut, with eagle-adorned buttons. The attire reflected the complexity of the new idea of an American President.

He chose to wear American-made clothing, rather than attire made in Britain. The eagle was a symbol of the new nation. In the Lansdowne portrait, he wears, as a second-term President, a formal black suit more suitable to his station.

The decision to portray Washington in a formal black suit emphasized his status as a citizen-leader, as opposed to a monarch. Citizens of the new nation, once subjects of a king dressed in royal robes, needed to see that Washington was a different kind of leader. Washington's plain attire—reflecting his own beliefs about the Presidency—gave his fellow citizens a visual representation of this new form of leadership: one who is elected of, by, and for the people.

4. Sword:



The sheathed sword, held in Washington's left hand, is ceremonial. Although a sword with a suit (rather than with a uniform) was going out of style, it was "the grand distinguishing mark of a fine Gentleman." It is also a symbolic reference to Washington as head of state.

In portraits of Washington in military uniform, the sword is a natural part of the uniform. And for General Washington, who often wielded a sword in battle, it is a weapon of war.

5. Table (Leg):



The table and chair in the portrait probably never existed; they serve only as symbols. The furniture's neoclassical decorative elements are derived from the Great Seal of the United States, authorized by Congress in 1782. Like the eagle on the Seal, the two eagles at the top of the table leg are posed upright. Each holds in one claw a bundle of arrows, a symbol of war. But unlike the eagle on the Great Seal, neither holds an olive branch, the symbol of peace, in the other claw.

The wooden mace in the House of Representatives may have inspired the design for the table leg. That mace (destroyed when the British set the city of Washington afire in 1814) was described as a bundle of reeds tied together and topped by an eagle. A similar object was carried by officials in ancient Rome as a sign of power. A version of it, looking more like a torch, appears on today's dime.

6. Chair:



The oval medallion on the back of the armchair is draped with laurel, a symbol of victory. The medallion's stars and stripes imitate those on the Great Seal, in which an eagle bears a shield with a blue horizontal field with 13 stars above 13 red-and-white vertical stripes. William Barton, one of the designers of the Seal, said the stars and the stripes represented the 13 original states, individually and as a confederation.

The chair is also decorated with five pointed stars and acanthus leaves, reflective of classical Greek and Roman ornamentation.

7. Books on Table:



On the table are two books: *Federalist*, a reference to the Federalist Papers—essays published to support ratification of the Constitution—and *Journal Of Congress*. Here, and with the books under the table, Stuart chooses symbols of Washington's work in the world of ideas and the world of politics, where his integrity and sense of purpose shaped the American presidency.

8. Books on Floor:



The books under the table include **General Orders, American Revolution and Constitution and Bylaws**; they symbolize Washington's roles as commander of the American army, and as President of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, during the debates over the structure of the new government.

9. Inkwell:



Dogs standing guard at the corners of the inkwell would remind classically educated viewers of Plutarch's observation: They symbolize “the conservative watchful, philosophical principle of life.” Washington would certainly have endorsed those sentiments.

The inkwell displays the Washington family coat of arms, the crest of which George Washington changed from a raven to a griffin (a mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head of a hawk).

10. Rainbow:



The rainbow, closely connected with the story of Noah, evolved into a symbol of purity, because it appears after rain has purified the air. Also, it is a symbol of hope, recalling the Biblical story of the deliverance of humankind from the great flood. And because it is white light split into its parts, a rainbow symbolized unity in diversity for a new nation.

Washington was an active Mason, the rituals of which were rich in symbolism. In that symbolism, the rainbow is sometimes associated with the Royal Arch, which tradition links with Solomon's Temple. The Masonic rainbow is sometimes interpreted as the Arch of Heaven, supported by the pillars of Wisdom and Strength. A rainbow appears in the ritual apron given to Washington by Marquis de Lafayette, his comrade-in-arms in the Revolutionary War.

11. Dark Clouds:



An advertisement about this portrait says that “the appearance of the rainbow is introduced in the background as a sign” that storms have passed. Not all Americans had expected the nation to survive under a federal government. Debates over states’ rights still simmered. But, as Washington said in his First Inaugural Address, “the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people” had thus far succeeded.

Designers of the Great Seal used storm and light as similar symbols. They said “glory,” a heraldic term for a circle of rays, is “breaking through a cloud.” Stuart depicts the glory in a more natural form—rays of sunlight. Shining through breaks in the clouds, the rays light up dust particles in the air.

12. Portico:



The portrait follows the European tradition of so-called “state” portraits: a portico-like space with a wall, columns, a curtain, and an open sky behind the figure. The foreground, an ambiguous space that is often furnished and carpeted, repeats compositions used for portraits of monarchs, bishops, admirals, or other public figures.

Source: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, <http://www.npg.si.edu>.