



Stuart painted this portrait in 1797, but Washington is not known to have sat for it. It hangs in New York Public Library.

Washington's Portrait Painter: **GILBERT STUART, Artist**

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AN 18TH-CENTURY acquaintance of Gilbert Stuart gave this earthy description of the artist: "He has the appearance of a man who is attached to drinking, as his face is bloated and red. But he possesses a good deal of humor and related several interesting anecdotes about some of his fellow artists." He added, "As a portrait painter, Stuart is not excelled, I believe, by any man living."

These two observations tell us much about the artist who painted our most famous portraits of George Washington. Gilbert Stuart was indeed one of the greatest American artists, leaving us a rich legacy of likenesses of famous men of the late 18th and early 19th century. Yet Stuart was also a practical man, caught up in the sometimes unpleasant business of making a living, and his high artistic ideals were often contrasted by some of the methods he used, including subterfuge.

Although he portrayed many of the great men of the early Republic, Stuart's popular fame rests to a great extent on his

portraits of George Washington, and his relations with our first President paint an adequate portrait of Gilbert Stuart himself—the artist and the "businessman."

To begin with, Stuart painted more than 100 portraits of Washington. The question is—how many of these portraits did our busy first President actually pose for? Only five, I'm afraid. And for all practical purposes, three of these are the same picture.

Where, then, did all the other portraits come from? Stuart simply made numerous copies. And he sold them readily.

It was not unusual for an artist in those days to copy his own work—or, for that matter, for another artist to plagiarize it. There were no copyright laws nor royalties on resales. An artist was paid only once, and his only chance for extra profit was to make extra copies. Stuart's methods, however, were sometimes highly "original."

The first Washington pose, commonly referred to as the Vaughn type (the original was ordered by a man named Vaughn), shows the right side of Washington's face



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