



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

## or Knave?

and is probably the most widely distributed of the three distinct poses. Stuart himself, however, disliked it and said that he had destroyed it.

Most experts dispute this, believing that Stuart merely used this as a subterfuge to get Washington to pose again. The original is believed to be in the National Gallery in Washington, and many variations of the Vaughn type, painted by Stuart himself, are known to exist. Two should be familiar to every American. One is reproduced on the dollar bill and another on the two-cent stamp.

The second pose, or Lansdowne type (also named for the first owner), involves three originals simply because Stuart painted all three of them at once. He set up three easels and alternately worked on each, mass-production style.

The third pose, called the Athenaeum type, is probably Stuart's best picture of Washington, although it brought him into direct conflict with his subject. Washington himself ordered this portrait for his wife Martha. Stuart, however, liked it so well that he kept it. We have several versions of what happened. Stuart's daughter wrote the most charitable account.

She said that Washington called at the Stuart home to pick up the picture, but when Stuart explained that it was invaluable to him in making extra copies which he could sell, Washington conceded that Stuart could keep it "at your pleasure, if it be of any consequence to you, sir."

A MORE SALTY VERSION was offered by a visitor to Mount Vernon who heard the picture referred to rather angrily. It seems that both Washington and Mrs. Washington each had made several visits to Stuart's home, hoping to have the picture delivered. Each time Stuart put them off, claiming that it wasn't ready. On the final visit, the President became so ruffled he stormed out, rasping, "Very well, sir, deliver it when you will, for I will not call again."

Both versions have an element of truth. The fact is that Stuart was quite right when he said the painting was not finished—it still isn't! But it is unfinished because Stuart did not wish it to be. The portrait was a good one, so good that Stuart wanted it handy to make copies. So he left the foreground and background blank as an excuse, although Washington's visage was completed admirably. Before he was through with it, Stuart made more than 70 copies of this version. The original, which now hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, is still the best of the group.

Despite his mild—perhaps excusable—deceptions, Stuart's worth as an artist should not be minimized. As one observer commented, "Stuart's portraits of Washington are so implanted in our minds that if Washington were to return to earth today and stand beside one of them and not resemble it, he would be declared an impostor."



One of three Lansdowne portraits Washington actually posed for now hangs in Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.



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