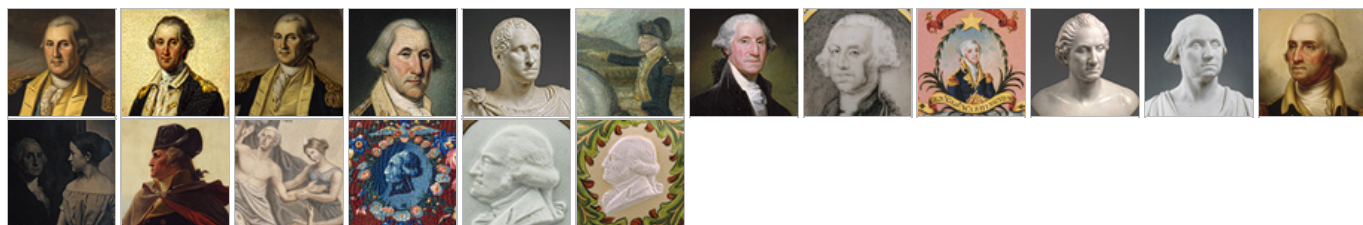


Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

George Washington: Man, Myth, Monument



The multiplicity of depictions of George Washington (1732–1799) testifies to his persistence in **American life** and myth. During his lifetime, his very image, whether presented as a Revolutionary War hero or as chief executive of the United States, exemplified the ideal leader: authoritative, victorious, strong, moral, and compassionate. Over the course of the **nineteenth century**, American and European popular culture elaborated on Washington's iconic persona and adapted it to patriotic and sentimental purposes.

Two major bequests to the Metropolitan ensured that the museum would be rich in images of Washington in various media. In 1883, William Henry Huntington bequeathed more than 2,000 **American portraits**, primarily of Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and the marquis de Lafayette. For much of his life, Huntington was a **Paris** correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. An inveterate seeker of Americana at **shops** and flea markets, he purchased an array of medals, porcelains, textiles, and other works of art while abroad. The second gift to the Museum came in 1924 from Charles Allen Munn, editor and publisher of *Scientific American* for forty-three years. By the time of his death, Munn had assembled a notable collection of portraits of Washington. Among the highlights of his bequest are portraits by the American artists for whom Washington actually sat, including **Gilbert Stuart (07.160)**, **Charles Willson Peale (97.33)**, and **John Trumbull (24.109.88)**.

General George Washington

A gentleman farmer from Virginia, Washington began his **military** career at the age of twenty, when he was commissioned as a major in the state's militia; within three years, he had risen through the ranks to be appointed commander in chief of those troops. Twenty years later, in 1775, he was named commander in chief of the Continental Forces of North America, and he led his army to victory over Great Britain. He was admired for his ability to inspire and lead a disparate group of men into battle. After his retirement from service at the war's end, he was venerated by his contemporaries and by subsequent generations of military men. Washington's image in uniform, portrayed by so many artists in a variety of media, became a symbol not only of military prowess but also of national unity and **American liberty**.

President George Washington

During Washington's two terms as **president** (1789–97), his image was modeled almost exclusively on portraits by Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), the premier painter of the new nation. Stuart executed three different portraits from life sittings with the president, but it was the so-called Athenaeum portrait that became the most popular. Stuart himself painted at least seventy replicas of it, and, because it was exhibited in the Boston Athenaeum after Stuart's death, **many other artists** were able to use it as the basis for their work. Stuart's portrayal of Washington became so pervasive that, as the artist's biographer, the critic William Dunlap, put it in 1832, "if George Washington should appear on earth, . . . he would be treated as an imposter, when compared to Stuart's likeness of him, unless he produced his credentials."

The Myth of George Washington

The extraordinary outpouring of emotion after Washington's death on December 14, 1799, reverberated worldwide, as mourners grieved not merely for the man himself but for the hero he had become and, still more warmly, for the father of the country. Washington's role in American life had been of long duration and great depth. His image symbolized the power and legitimacy of the newly independent nation, which was still very much in the formative stages during the nineteenth century. His imposing figure as president embodied ideals of honesty, virtue, and patriotism (62.256.7). Nineteenth-century images of Washington ranged from his **godlike apotheosis (52.585.66)** to **scenes of his personal life**. His home, **Mount Vernon**, on the Potomac River in northern Virginia, became a shrine to

his mythic celebrity. In 1853, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was founded, mostly through the efforts of women, in order to save the **historic property** and honor Washington's legacy.

George Washington and the American Centennials

In 1876, the United States observed the centennial of its founding, and 1889 marked the 100th anniversary of George Washington's first inauguration as president. Nearing the **turn of the twentieth century**, at a time when Americans clamored for reassurance that their leaders were trustworthy and the country secure, both celebrations featured commemorative images of Washington—the epitome of an honorable head of state—in his varied roles as public servant and private individual.

In Philadelphia, the Centennial Exposition of 1876 featured new developments in art, design, and technology from an international group of exhibitors and attracted more than 8 million visitors. Washington's portrait on **plates (69.194.1)**, **handkerchiefs (1985.347)**, glassware, and **prints** provided a nostalgic foil to **burgeoning technological developments** and made the country's progress seem a natural continuum, from the American Revolution to the Industrial Revolution.

In 1889, grand celebrations were mounted in honor of the centennial of Washington's inauguration. New York City officials erected a great arch at the foot of Fifth Avenue (in Washington Square), held a parade, launched a naval flotilla, and reenacted the swearing-in ceremony that had taken place in New York when it was briefly the nation's capital. The Metropolitan **Opera** House hosted a gala ball and mounted an exhibition of Washington's personal belongings and related memorabilia—pieces of history that established an authentic link to the country's past and gave promise for the future.

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These related Museum *Bulletin* or *Journal* articles may or may not represent the most current scholarship.

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