



The National Gallery of Art is home to forty-three paintings by American artist Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828). Best known for his portraits of George Washington, Stuart made a career painting children, women, businessmen, politicians, and fellow artists. This spring and summer, you'll have a rare opportunity to see many of the people he painted in the exhibition *Gilbert Stuart*, on view in the West Building from March 27 through July 31, 2005.

Gilbert Stuart, *The Skater (William Grant)* (detail), 1782, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

who? what? how?

1

Painter of Faces

Gilbert Stuart was the most sought-after American portraitist of his time. A portraitist is someone who paints pictures of people. Because at this time there were no cameras to record what people looked like, portraitists like Stuart were hired to capture a person's appearance and personality.

Stuart lived during an important period in American history. Born in 1755, when America was still a British colony, he grew up in Newport, Rhode Island. In 1775, when he was twenty, Stuart left home to study in London. For eighteen years Stuart remained across the Atlantic, painting portraits in England and Ireland. These were years of great change in America: the Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the British army was defeated in the American Revolution, and in 1789, George Washington was inaugurated as the first president. In 1793, Gilbert Stuart returned to the United States eager to paint the president's portrait. He spent the rest of his career in America, painting prominent men and women in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and Boston.



Gilbert Stuart, *Self-Portrait* (detail), 1778, oil on canvas, Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island, Bequest of Louisa Lee Waterhouse (Mrs. Benjamin Waterhouse) of Cambridge, Massachusetts

Gilbert Stuart, *The Skater* (William Grant), 1782, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection



2

The Skater

When it was first exhibited in 1782, this painting surprised people and won Stuart a lot of attention. Why? It was very unusual at the time to paint a portrait of a person in motion. The man is William Grant, a young lawyer who lived in London. When he came to Stuart's studio, he declared that the day was better suited for skating than for sitting for a portrait. So the two men went skating together on the Serpentine pond in Hyde Park. You can see the towers of Westminster Abbey in the distance. Although Stuart was a good skater, Grant was not. In fact, after hitting a crack in the ice he had to hang onto Stuart's coat and be pulled to shore! Nevertheless, Stuart decided to portray Grant as a graceful athlete.

The portrait shows Grant from head to toe. He is dressed in the best sports fashion of the day. His state-of-the-art, iron-bladed skates attach to his fine shoes with leather toe straps. The black silk velvet garments and hat make Grant stand out against the pale winter sky.

Try to imitate Grant's pose: fold your arms across your chest, lift your right foot back, and lean your body forward balancing your weight on your left leg. Is this a comfortable stance? Probably not! It's a position of motion and not one of rest.

3

Unfinished Business

This portrait is of John Bill Ricketts, an Irishman who owned America's first circus. Performing on horseback, Ricketts was the star attraction. George Washington attended Ricketts' Circus four times and admired Ricketts' horsemanship so much that he sold his white horse, named Jack, to Ricketts.

Whenever Gilbert Stuart created a portrait, he painted the face first. It was the part Stuart found the most challenging. Sometimes after he had finished the face, he became so bored with painting the background and clothing that he simply didn't do it! Other times, he became annoyed with his sitters—like Ricketts, who was often late—and abandoned their portraits. After painting Ricketts' face, Stuart sketched in the head of a horse with Ricketts' hand around its muzzle. When he began to paint the dark background, Stuart playfully added a second horse's head, which would have been covered if the painting was completed.

Gilbert Stuart, *John Bill Ricketts*, c. 1795–1799, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Robert B. Noyes in memory of Elisha Riggs

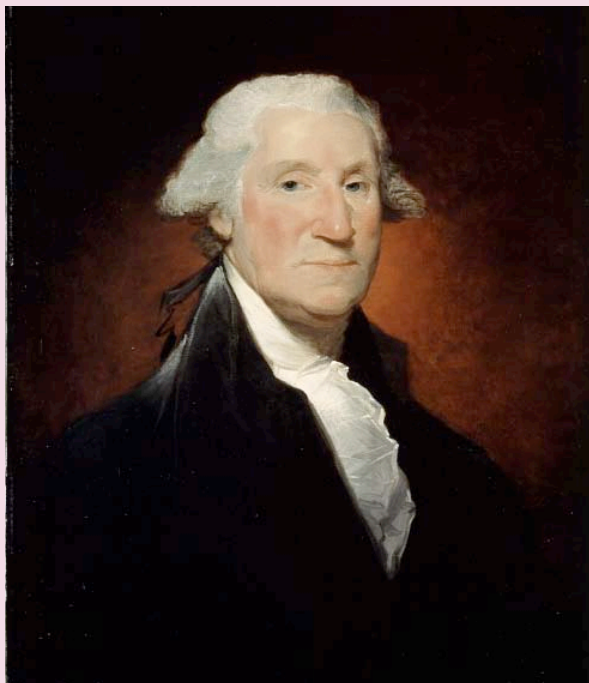


4

A Familiar Face

George Washington posed for Gilbert Stuart three times. Stuart used these three portraits to re-create Washington's image over and over again. Though Stuart made at least one hundred portraits of George Washington, the president didn't own a single one!

Why were portraits of Washington so popular? Many people admired George Washington because he led American armies to victory during the Revolutionary War. When he had the choice to become king, he declined and became the first president instead. Washington was a symbol of the new country, and people in both Europe and the United States wanted to own his portrait.



Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Vaughan Portrait)*, 1795, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection

book nook

These books about George Washington can be found at your local library or bookstore.

The Joke's on George

By Michael O. Tunnell, illustrated by Kathy Osborn | ages 4 and up

An entertaining story about Washington's visit to the museum founded by American portrait painter Charles Willson Peale

George Washington's Teeth

By Deborah Chandra and Madeleine Comora, illustrated by Brock Cole | ages 4 and up

Informative and amusing, this book tracks the life and achievements of Washington through his dental history.

So You Want to Be President?

By Judith St. George, illustrated by David Small | ages 6 and up

This celebration of forty-one presidents tells backroom facts and comical anecdotes.

George Washington's Breakfast

By Jean Fritz, illustrated by Paul Galdone | ages 8 and up

In addition to learning fun facts about Washington, this book teaches children how to search for historical information.

George Washington's World

By Genevieve Foster | ages 8 and up

Presenting a slice of what life was like during Washington's lifetime, this classic provides a carefully researched biography and vivid illustrations.

1



2



3



4



A = 2. Thomas Jefferson, third president; B = 4. James Monroe, fifth president; C = 1. John Adams, second president; D = 3. James Madison, fourth president.

try this!

activity

Presidential Portraits

Gilbert Stuart painted portraits of the first five presidents—George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. You can see them all in the National Gallery's West Building. Thanks to Gilbert Stuart, we know what the nation's early leaders looked like.

You may have seen a presidential portrait outside of an art museum: at school, in a book, even in your wallet. George Washington appears on the one-dollar bill, as you know. Did you also know that the dollar portrait is based on a painting by Gilbert Stuart?

Match these facts with the correct presidential portrait.

A: Who bought the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, doubling the size of the United States during his presidency? (*Hint: He appears on the nickel and the two-dollar bill.*)

B: Who was the first president to ride a steamboat? (*Hint: His foreign affairs policy became known as the Monroe Doctrine.*)

C: Who was the first president to live in the White House? (*Hint: He was the country's first vice president, and his son became the sixth president.*)

D: Which president appears on the five-thousand-dollar bill, no longer in circulation, and helped form the Bill of Rights? (*Hint: He was president during the War of 1812, when the British set fire to the White House. His wife Dolley rescued Gilbert Stuart's full-length portrait of George Washington from the flames!*)

1. Gilbert Stuart, *John Adams* (detail), c. 1800–1815, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Robert Homans

2. Gilbert Stuart, *Thomas Jefferson* (detail), c. 1821, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Thomas Jefferson Coolidge IV in memory of his great-grandfather, Thomas Jefferson Coolidge, his grandfather,

Thomas Jefferson Coolidge II, and his father, Thomas Jefferson Coolidge III

3. Gilbert Stuart, *James Madison* (detail), c. 1821, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

4. Gilbert Stuart, *James Monroe* (detail), c. 1817, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund