

Martin Van Buren

(1782–1862)

The eighth president of the United States, Martin Van Buren also served as a U.S. senator from New York and as the eighth vice president. Born in Kinderhook, New York, Van Buren was an important organizer and leader of the Albany Regency, which controlled New York state politics for two decades. In 1821 he was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he supported tariff legislation and advocated states' rights. He resigned in 1828 after being elected governor of New York, a post he would hold for less than a year.

President Andrew Jackson named Van Buren his secretary of state in 1829, and the New Yorker became a key White House advisor. When Jackson ran for reelection in 1832, Van Buren ran for vice president on the ticket with him. Following the election, the victorious Jackson relied upon Van Buren as a confidant and counselor. In 1836 Van Buren was himself elected president and almost immediately was forced to deal with the financial Panic of 1837. Despite well-intentioned but unsuccessful efforts to remedy the nation's economic crisis, Van Buren lost popular support. He was defeated in his reelection bid, and in 1848 he again ran unsuccessfully for president, this time on the Free Soil ticket. Van Buren lived in retirement at his home on the Hudson River, until his death in 1862.

Ulric Dunbar used this 1840 bust of Martin Van Buren by Hiram Powers as a model for his own work.

(The White House collection, © White House Historical Association)

The Joint Committee on the Library commissioned a bust of Vice President Martin Van Buren for the Senate Chamber gallery in February 1893. The committee acted under a Senate resolution dated May 13, 1886, which authorized acquisition of marble busts of vice presidents “from time to time.” Sculptor Ulric S.J. Dunbar received the commission for the posthumous bust of Van Buren, and he completed the piece in 1894.

Dunbar depended on existing images of the deceased Van Buren as reference for his modeling. In July 1893, writing from a “studio room” at the Corcoran building, Dunbar asked Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark to borrow “the Van Buren bust in the White House.” That would have been the Hiram Powers bust (modeled 1836, carved 1840), which was bequeathed to the White House in 1890 and would certainly have substantially assisted the sculptor in fulfilling his just-received commission. However, the Powers bust, despite the many carefully observed details it exhibits, is generalized in the restrained neoclassical manner. For the greater particularity of Dunbar's portrait, he would probably have needed another source, and the splendid 1857 painted portrait by George P.A. Healy, then as now, was in the Corcoran Gallery of Art.



Dunbar's response to these two sources was so fresh and vigorous that it is difficult to think of his portrait as a posthumous work. The 31-year-old artist, with his Senate commission for a bust of Vice President Thomas Hendricks (p. 186) already completed, approached his re-creative task with directness. The torso (coat, shirt, and cravat) is treated with simplicity, without frills, elaboration, or deep carving, so that it is a good foil for the broad head with its forward-sweeping hair and muttonchops.

Martin Van Buren

Ulric Stonewall Jackson Dunbar (1862-1927)

Marble, 1894

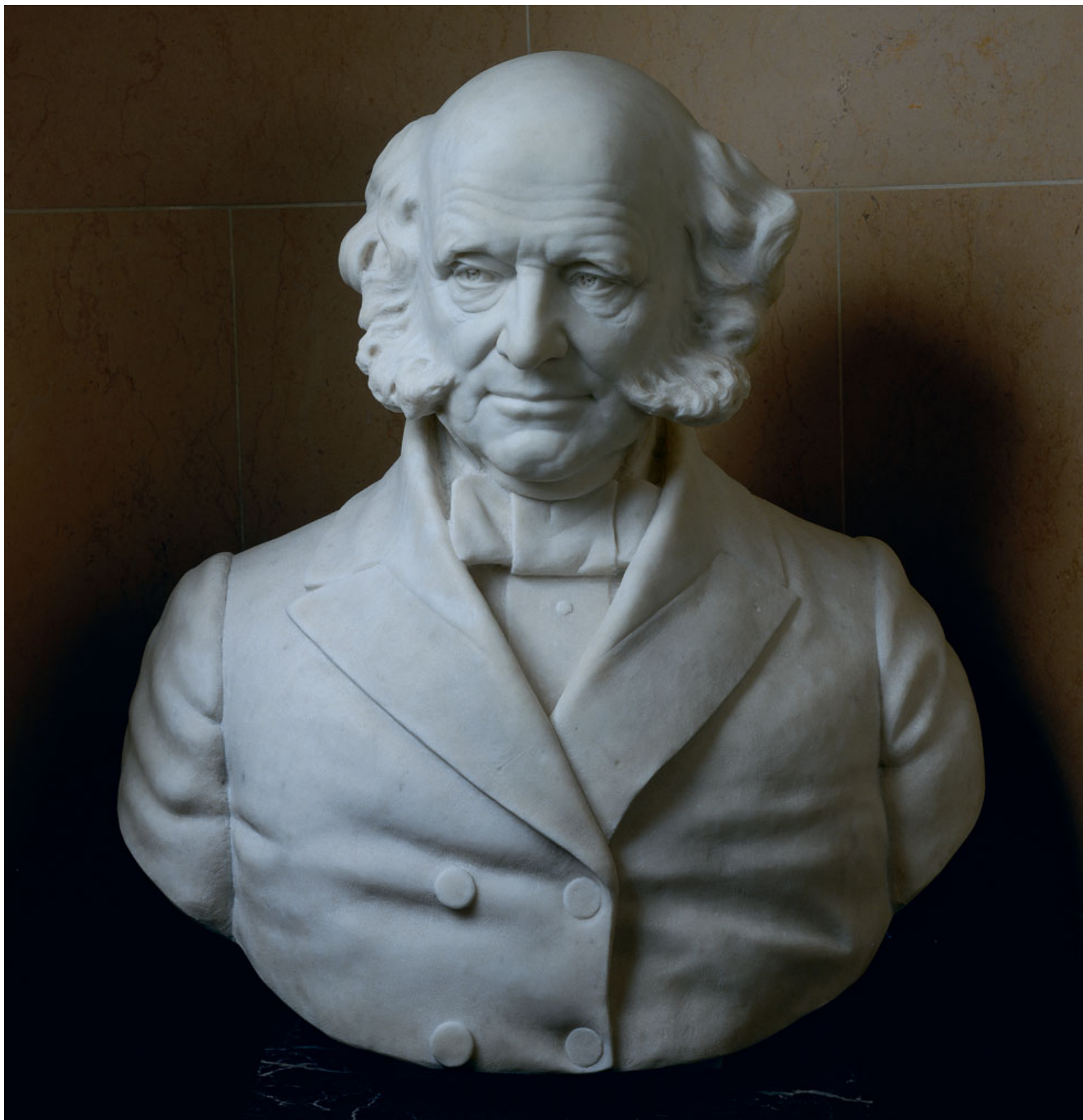
30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches (78.1 x 69.2 x 38.4 cm)

Signed and dated (centered on front of base): U S J DUNBAR Sc 1894

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1893

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1894

Cat. no. 22.00008

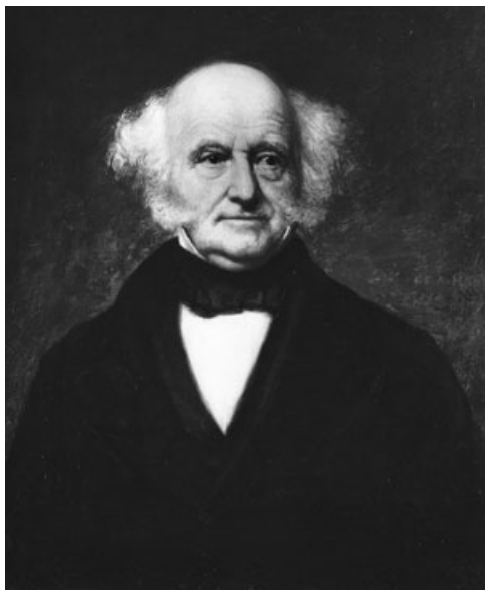


The subtly modeled features—a wide firm-set mouth, large eye sockets with elaborately drilled eyes, pouches below them, and a strong projecting brow above—are detailed but splendidly integrated. Van Buren’s furrowed brow suggests a reaction to what he hears, not simply a pattern of wrinkles. The bust is a first-rate achievement.

Ulric Dunbar was born in London, Ontario, and studied at the Art School of Toronto with his brother, Frederick A.T. Dunbar. Ulric Dunbar became a professional sculptor in 1880, left Canada for the United States, and spent five years in Philadelphia before moving to Washington, D.C., where he lived and worked until his death in 1927.

In 1893 Dunbar was awarded a bronze medal at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and later won a silver medal in 1915 at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Dunbar’s other portrait works include a bronze sculpture of naval engineer Benjamin F. Isherwood at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland; a posthumous portrait of Wayne Parker, Jr., son of U.S. Representative Richard Wayne Parker, at the Newark Museum in New Jersey; and a sculpture of writer and reformer Frederick Douglass (location unknown). A number of Dunbar’s sculptures are in Washington, D.C., including a life-size marble portrait of banker William Wilson Corcoran

at the Hillcrest Children’s Center; a marble bust of Civil War General Francis Preston Blair at the Blair-Lee House; and sculptures of three Native Americans—Chief Lodge Pole, Two Gun White Calf, and Sitting Bull—at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History. In addition, several of his relief sculptures are located at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.



George P.A. Healy’s painting of Martin Van Buren was also a source of inspiration for Ulric S.J. Dunbar.

(Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund)

Right:

The niches in the third floor gallery of the Senate Chamber contain marble busts of the earliest vice presidents, including Martin Van Buren, second from right.

(2000 photograph)



