

# Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755–1828)

Because he portrayed virtually all the notable men and women of the Federal period in the United States, Gilbert Stuart was declared the “Father of American Portraiture” by his contemporaries. Born in Rhode Island, the artist trained and worked in London, England, and Dublin, Ireland, from 1775 to 1793. He then returned to America with the specific intention of painting President Washington’s portrait.

Stuart resided in New York (1793–1795); Philadelphia (1795–1803), where he did his first portrait of George Washington; and the new capital at Washington, D.C. (1803–1805). In 1805 he settled in Boston and painted the Gibbs-Coolidge Set, the only surviving depiction of all five first presidents. Before his death at seventy-two, Stuart also taught many followers.

A charming conversationalist, Stuart entertained his sitters during long hours of posing to sustain the fresh spontaneity of their expressions. To emphasize facial characterization, he eliminated unnecessary accessories and preferred dark, neutral backgrounds and simple, bust- or half-length formats.

**The National Gallery frequently changes the selection of its forty-one portraits by Gilbert Stuart. Some paintings discussed in this guide are displayed nearby in other American or British rooms.**

## Stuart in England and Ireland

Stuart received his earliest artistic training in his native Rhode Island from an itinerant Scottish painter. After sailing to London in 1775 he studied under Benjamin West, a Pennsylvanian who had been the first American artist to achieve renown in Europe. (West’s paintings hang nearby in the American and British galleries).

Stuart’s own fame took hold when he exhibited *The Skater (Portrait of William Grant)* at London’s Royal Academy of art in 1782. The work is now on view in the National Gallery’s British rooms. The painting enlivened England’s “Grand Manner” tradition of formal portraiture by depicting Grant in vigorous activity rather than in a static, formal pose. Stuart soon commanded prices higher than any portraitist in London except for the court painters Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

When Stuart’s *Sir Joshua Reynolds* was shown at the Royal Academy in 1784, the portrait annoyed the sitter who, as president of that cultural institution, was jealous of the young American’s rising reputation. It depicts Reynolds taking a pinch of snuff, which was simply too undignified for that gentleman’s strict, idealizing taste. Nonetheless, Stuart multiplied his successes in Dublin, where he moved in 1787 and gained a monopoly over Irish portraiture before sailing for the new United States in 1793.

TOP: *The Skater (Portrait of William Grant)*, 1782. Oil on canvas, 2.455 x 1.476 m (96 5/8 x 58 3/8 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1950.18.1; BOTTOM: *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 1784. Oil on canvas, .916 x .764 m (36 1/16 x 30 1/16 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1942.8.21



**Mrs. Richard Yates,**  
1793/1794

This portrait of a New York businessman’s wife is considered one of the finest characterizations produced by an American artist. Mrs. Yates sewed while she posed, leaving little doubt about her industriousness. As she turns to appraise the viewer, her skeptical gaze and tightly pressed lips also reveal her uncompromising rectitude.

British sitters had expected flattery, but Americans desired factual accuracy. Once in the United States, Stuart complained, “In England my efforts were compared with those of Van Dyck, Titian, and other great painters—here they are compared with the works of the Almighty!” The Almighty had given Mrs. Yates a bony face, and that is precisely what Stuart had to portray.

Stuart employed the stiff, angular lines of her silhouette to communicate Mrs. Yates’ capability and astuteness. Even though the image is stark, the paint surfaces demonstrate Stuart’s virtuosity at its best. Reflections from the coral upholstery, for instance, dance onto her silk dress in rapidly dashed brushstrokes.

Mrs. Yates, born Catherine Bras, married the senior partner in the New York firm of Yates & Pollock, importers of East Indian and European goods. The National Gallery collection includes four other portraits of members of her family commissioned from Stuart at the same time: Richard Yates, her husband; Lawrence Reid Yates, her brother-in-law; Mrs. George Pollock, her daughter; and George Pollock, her son-in-law.

Oil on canvas, .762 x .635 m (30 x 25 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.1.4



**John Jay,** 1794

The classical column, crimson drapery, legal tome, and robes of state in this impressive portrait recall the “Grand Manner” tradition Stuart had used to emphasize the social status of British aristocrats.

As a framer of the Constitution and the first Chief Justice of the United States from 1789 to 1795, John Jay was the first American statesman of international reputation whom Stuart ever painted. The success of this likeness of the chief justice, painted in New York in 1794, introduced Stuart to an appreciative clientele in America.

The forty-nine-year-old Jay could spare time to pose only for the head. His nephew modeled the judicial robe so that Stuart could complete the body. Broadly painted strokes suggest the robe’s gleaming scarlet, black, and white satin, setting off by contrast the careful execution of Jay’s handsome features.

Stuart rendered Jay’s complexion with deftly executed highlights in opaque paint on top of translucent glazes of thinned oils. Later the artist explained his methods for painting such lively skin tones: “Good flesh color partook of all colors, not mixed so as to combine in one tint, but shining through each other, like blood through natural skin.”

Oil on canvas, 1.309 x 1.019 m (51 1/2 x 40 1/8 in.). Lent by Peter A. Jay



**George Washington**  
(Vaughan portrait), 1795

With a letter of introduction from Chief Justice John Jay, Stuart was granted his first sittings from George Washington at Philadelphia, then the capital, in March 1795. The president, then sixty-three years old, grumbled about the drudgery of posing, and all of Stuart’s wit and wisdom failed to interest him. The artist claimed that “an apathy seemed to seize him, and a vacuity spread over his countenance, most appalling to paint.”

Nevertheless, this canvas has spontaneity because of its relatively quick, sketchy technique. The warm tan underpainting shows through the thinly brushed hair, while slashes of pigment model the black queue ribbon and form the highlights on collar and cravat. To impart Washington’s imposing six-foot, two-inch stature, Stuart placed his head high in the design, as though the president towered above the viewer. Finally, he surrounded the president with a fiery glow like a halo.

Stuart made 104 or more likenesses of George Washington, who was president from 1789 to 1797. The pictures are grouped in categories named after the first owners of the original portraits from which Stuart made his own replicas: *Vaughan* (facing to his left), *Athenaeum* (facing to his right), and *Lansdowne* (full-length). Because this work was purchased by Samuel Vaughan, an American merchant living in London and a close friend of the president, Vaughan’s name became associated with seventeen versions.

Oil on canvas, .735 x .605 m (29 x 23 3/4 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1942.8.27



**Mrs. John Adams, 1815**

Mrs. John Adams felt that “if we mean to have heroes, statesmen and philosophers, we should have learned women.” Stuart’s portrait, begun when the first lady was fifty-four, captures the patrician beauty of her straight nose and arched brows. The forthright painting also leaves little doubt about the force of character, intellect, and principles of this daughter of a Massachusetts minister.

This likeness was Stuart’s only completed picture of Abigail Smith Adams. It and its companion piece of her husband, John Adams, were started in 1798 but not delivered until 1815. The Adams’ eldest son and the future sixth president, John Quincy Adams, politely stated his family’s attitude toward the artist’s procrastination: “Mr. Stuart thinks it the prerogative of genius to disdain the performance of his engagements.”

Stuart often was irritatingly slow in completing commissions, in spite of his swift, bravura brushwork. Though he inevitably commanded high prices, Stuart lived on the verge of bankruptcy throughout his career because of his extravagant lifestyle and inept business dealings. In London, for instance, he had owned a carriage, an unheard-of presumption for a commoner. And Stuart’s years in Ireland, both coming and going, had been ploys to escape debtors’ prison.

Oil on canvas, .737 x .603 m (29 x 23¾ in.). Gift of Mrs. Robert Homans 1954.7.2



**John Adams, 1815**

John Adams was vice president during both of George Washington’s terms and served as chief executive himself from 1797 to 1801. This likeness was begun in Philadelphia during his presidency, and shows Adams at sixty-three years of age; however, like its companion portrait of Mrs. John Adams, it was not finished until seventeen years after the couple sat for Stuart.

Although the second president was a patient sitter, the impish painter later delighted in telling a friend, “Isn’t it like? Do you know what he is about to do? He is about to sneeze!” (Both the artist and the sitter habitually used snuff.)

In this sketch from life, soft brushstrokes merely suggest rustling movement and indistinct contours in the hair and lace. The portrait subtly expresses the inquisitive, analytic aspects of Adams’ character; seated low in the composition, he confronts the viewer directly.

The pose of this first study of Adams inspired Stuart’s replica in the Gibbs-Coolidge Set of the first five presidents. Adams, wearing a charcoal gray coat in this life portrait, wears a crimson jacket in the more carefully finished replica.

Oil on canvas, .737 x .610 m (29 x 24 in.). Gift of Mrs. Robert Homans 1954.7.1

## The Gibbs-Coolidge Set of the First Five Presidents

The Gibbs-Coolidge paintings are the only surviving complete set of portraits depicting the first five presidents of the United States.

Commissioned by Colonel George Gibbs of Rhode Island, the group was painted in Boston during the last phase of Stuart’s career. In 1833, Colonel Gibbs’ heirs sold the paintings to Joseph Coolidge of Boston, and the set descended through four generations of the Coolidge family.

To distinguish among the presidents’ personalities, Stuart employed a different expression, pose, and background for each portrait. Painted on hardwood panels, all five pictures have smooth surfaces that lend flattering luminosity to the sitters’ complexions. The suite is unified by its original Federal frames.

Stuart did paint another set of the first five presidents. However, while that group was on loan to the Capitol in 1851, three of the portraits burned during a fire in the congressional library. Engraved prints of that set were enormously popular during the Federal period, earning the nickname “The American Kings.”



**George Washington (Athenaeum portrait), c. 1810/1815**

Oil on wood, .670 x .546 m (26¾ x 21½ in.). 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 1979.5.1

This version is among the best of the seventy-two copies Stuart made of his Athenaeum format for the first president. Painted from life in April 1796, the unfinished original is now shared at three-year intervals between the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the National Portrait Gallery, Washington.

**John Adams, c. 1825**

Oil on wood, .660 x .545 m (26 x 21½ in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1979.4.1



This likeness was painted when the second president was in his nineties. However, Stuart copied it from a much earlier National Gallery picture, the portrait of Adams he began from life studies in 1798.

**Thomas Jefferson, c. 1810/1815**

Oil on wood, .659 x .545 m (26 x 21⅞ in.). 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 1986.71.1

Stuart painted the third president from life three times during his administration of 1801 to 1809. Jefferson may have posed again for this Gibbs-Coolidge rendition after he completed his two terms in office.



**James Madison, c. 1810/1815**

Oil on wood, .652 x .539 m (25⅞ x 21⅜ in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1979.4.2

Stuart first portrayed James Madison when he was Jefferson’s secretary of state.

The Gibbs-Coolidge likeness may have been painted from life during Madison’s two terms as president from 1809 to 1817. The deep green curtain accents the color of Madison’s eyes.



**James Monroe, c. 1817**

Oil on wood, .648 x .550 m (25½ x 21⅝ in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1979.4.3

Monroe’s likeness, a replica of one done from life in 1817, is the only picture in the

## Alphabetical Selection of Stuart’s Sitters

The National Gallery of Art lends many of its forty-one portraits by Stuart to government agencies and other institutions. For example, *William Thornton* and *Mrs. William Thornton*, a pair of portraits of the Capitol’s architect and his wife painted in 1804, are on display at The Octagon House in Washington because that historic building was designed by Thornton. Other Stuarts alternate on view in our American or British rooms, including:

*Horace Binney*, 1800, Stuart’s close friend, a Philadelphia lawyer

*Sir John Dick*, 1783, Scottish naval officer wearing a medal awarded by Catherine the Great of Russia

*Counselor John Dunn*, about 1798, member of the Irish parliament, painted at Philadelphia while in America studying Indian languages

*Mrs. Lawrence Lewis*, about 1805, George Washington’s step-granddaughter, born Nellie Parke Custis, mistress of Woodlawn Plantation outside Alexandria, Virginia; she also posed in 1789–1790 for the National Gallery’s *Washington Family* by Edward Savage

*Robert Liston* and *Mrs. Robert Liston*, 1800, British minister to the United States during Washington’s administration and his wife, a well-liked Scottish couple who posed in Philadelphia

*Commodore Thomas Macdonough*, about 1818, naval hero in the War of 1812 who captured the British fleet on Lake Champlain

*Samuel Alleyne Otis*, 1809, Boston merchant who became first secretary of the United States Senate; in 1764 his had bride posed for a wedding portrait by John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Samuel Alleyne Otis (Elizabeth Gray)*, also in the National Gallery

*John Randolph*, 1805, thirty-two-year-old Virginia orator whose remarkably youthful appearance belied his position as the most forceful member of the federal Congress

*Mrs. William Robinson*, about 1812, born Anne