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Emma Williams, University of Idaho, undergraduate student, “Portraiture, Patriotism, and Politicking: The Political Effect of Visual Histories”

Abstract: The use of iconography to remember and honor military and political heroes has been in place since cave paintings. John Singleton Copley, Emanuel Leutze, Gilbert Stuart, and John Trumbull all used their talents to honor many of American Founding Fathers. Honored during and after their time, their work gives us a better understanding of what was valued and how these men were identified. The use of material culture allows for more portraiture, and the use of displaying socioeconomic standing. Copley, Leutze, Stuart, and Trumbull all had works used in political propaganda, and manipulation for years after. The images on today’s currency can trace their origin back to portraits completed by Copley. The way a person is arranged in a portrait, what they wear, what the background displays all show the artist is attempting to honor them. Whether it was one person or 50, an image from the Revolutionary era helps to solidify how the war was viewed by the artists.

Portraiture, Patriotism, and Politicking - The political effect of visual histories

In 1789, George Washington was inaugurated in a simple, Connecticut made suit with eagles carved into the wooden buttons.¹ This simple gesture showed the importance of material culture in the early stages of the country; the eagles symbolized freedom and liberty. The painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*,² was completed in 1851 by Emanuel Leutze. In the foreground of the image, George Washington is standing proudly near the bow of the small rowboat. He is wearing a large cloak and even carrying a decorated sword. In his right hand he is holding a brass telescope, and, behind him, two men struggle to hold up the flag of the colonies. The flag being held so closely to him is meant to draw the focus to the center. Traditionally in battle, the highest-ranking officer is followed closely by a standard bearer. Decades after an event, there are still powerful images of leaders like George Washington, showing them in literal and metaphorical positions of power. Leutze shows that President George Washington was still a highly regarded soldier, more than 50 years after his passing. He also can show the full military might that General Washington had carried with him.

John Singleton Copley was born in Boston in 1738 and was an established artist by 1750, first trained his stepfather, Peter Copley. As the political situation in Boston became dangerous for merchants who still traded British goods, such as Copley's father in law, he left the colonies in 1774. In England, he continued to paint and began to be recognized by the higher-class members of British society. While he did leave the colonies just before the war began, he was still regarded highly as an American born painter. His actions of continuing to paint American political leaders in a positive manner while in London made the American people view him with a great deal of respect and honor. The only plausible political statement he made was by standing with his family and moving away from the conflict for safety.

¹JEANNE E. ABRAMS, *FIRST LADIES OF THE REPUBLIC: Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, and the Creation ... of an Iconic American Role* (Place of publication not identified: NEW YORK University Press, 2019).

² Fig. 1 Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Oil on canvas, 1851, 149 x 255 in, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Privately, he shared support for Boston and his native country with his brother Henry Pelham; writing once, “poor America! I hope the best, but I fear the worst.”³

His wife’s family were the Clarkes, merchants with a strong tie to the British East India Trading Company. The crates thrown overboard during the Boston Tea Party was the majority of his father-in-law’s tea stock that was thrown in the Boston Harbor. He, by association, was considered a possible Loyalist. Copley attended a few Sons of Liberty meetings, painting both Whigs and Tories in a positive manner. He also supported and was respected by more boisterous revolutionary artists such as Gilbert Stuart.

While Copley never painted George Washington, he painted several other important Founding Fathers. John Adams, America’s second president had several done by Copley. Adams is most well-known for his efforts with his cousin Samuel during the war and not for his presidency. As he had substantial shoes to fill from his predecessor, he worked to stabilize the economy and developed the powerful reputation of the United States Navy. Adams was still highly respected as the president and Copley captured this in his portraits.

In *John Adams*, painted in 1783, Copley shows the proud Adams standing by a table of maps.⁴ While this was completed before his presidential term, it shows the political and intellectual power the man already had developed, having him studying maps. Another significant aspect of this image is the statue in the background. The statue is that of a woman, who is raised on a pedestal and dressed in the style of Ancient Roman women. In her right hand she has lowered a torch symbolizing liberty, and, in her left, she has raised an olive branch representing peace.

This contrast between the sword and the olive branch shows how the war was just ending in the same year. The torch lowered also shows that liberty and freedom is within the near future as she is also wearing the symbol of a victor, the crown of laurels. The way Copley illustrates the sword Adams is

³ Copley-Pelham letters, 1776 p. 301

⁴ Fig. 6 John Singleton Copley, *John Adams*, 1783, Oil on Canvas, Massachusetts, Harvard Art Museums.

wearing exhibits a heavily decorated weapon, which demonstrates more wealth and power, rather than military experience. The sword's blue and gold hilt also emblemizes the colors for freedom.

The three main symbols in Copley's image of President Adams seem to almost prophesize what is to come for the country. Liberty from the stronghold of the British crown, a period of peace where the country can form a government and rebuild from the war, and an expansion of the American Military. We can see how President Adams was viewed before he became president, and how his work before and during the war was honored by colonists. His education and leadership were valued and displayed in the typical way to memorialize someone in the era.

Looking at Copley's work from the material culture perspective, we can see several of the most well remembered pieces were done to honor the sitter or create a matched set for a family. Many portraits of a married couple would be hung side by side; however, on occasion, one would be made to match that of a late spouse. These could later be displayed in the house of their children as a sign of respect. For example, the *Portrait of Colonel George Watson*, was commissioned by the Colonel a year after his late wife's death to be hung beside hers⁵.

In the Colonel's portrait, he is wearing a simpler civilian version of his military uniform. The brown fabric is decorated with gold buttons and embroidered button loops from the top of the jacket, to the bottom, and includes three across each of the pocket flaps. This embroidery detail subtly brings attention to his military career as this design is very similar to the one found on most British officer uniforms.

George Watson was a loyalist for a significant amount of time into the war. Outside of his military career, Watson was a successful merchant and trader in New England. Copley's display of a loyalist calmly going about his work shows how unbothered nonrevolutionaries felt. He had to provide for his family and continued with his work. It is important to recognize that while many individuals became involved in the war, they still had businesses to run. The personal nature of this portrait, as well as Watson

⁵ Mrs. George Watson's portrait is not available for public view or has been destroyed. There are no clear records as to what happened to the painting after it was handed down to the Watson children.

Fig. 7 John Singleton Copley, *Colonel George Watson, 1768, Oil on Canvas, New Orleans, LA < New Orleans Museum of Art.*

commissioning his image to be hung beside his late wife's portrait, reaffirms the value of material culture in the era.

Samuel Adams is depicted the day after the Boston Massacre.⁶ In what Adams considered his proudest moment, he argues with the Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson to have the British troops pulled from Boston. Adams, known for being an obsessively hard-working individual, is depicted in a ruffled suit with two buttons undone and gesturing to the papers before him. He clearly lacked a sense of vanity, caring little for the way he looked, and more for the petition in his hand for the angry people of Boston. Adams would eventually become the Governor of Massachusetts in 1794.⁷ He was known as a modest man but he was also a very skilled politician and wrote letters, essays, and pamphlets in support of the Revolution. The use of a desk covered in papers and letters is another example of displaying the sitter with a notable skill. To remind the viewer of the subject's training, Copley again added these details as another way to honor the subject and remember their most noteworthy skill

To honor the one-time President of the Continental Congress, Copley created *John Hancock*, completed in 1775 and reprinted by William Smith the same year. In the image we only see Hancock from the waist up; the hands of the man famous for his signature are hidden from view. The exactly repeated flowered pattern on Hancock's jacket and waistcoat show the time put into creating the perfect look. The dark shadow across Hancock's jaw shows that like Adams, he has ignored vanity and has not shaved in some time. This was painted in Copley's first year in London after fleeing the colonies. Each small detail shows the respect he still held for those arguing for freedom in the colonies and especially for another man of Boston.

Another political gamble taken by Copley was his decision to paint a flattering portrait of Henry Laurens⁸. Completing the portrait in 1782, Laurens had been held in the Tower of London for fifteen

⁶ Fig. 8 John Singleton Copley, *Samuel Adams*, 1772, Oil on Canvas, 125 x 100 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Art.

⁷ "Samuel Adams," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., n.d.), accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Adams>.

⁸ Fig. 9 John Singleton Copley, *Henry Laurens*, 1782, Oil on canvas, 54 x 40 in, Washington, DC, National Portrait Gallery.

months until he was exchanged for General Charles Cornwallis. Before being captured at sea, Laurens sat as the President of the Continental Congress. Laurens was also a successful merchant from South Carolina and his wealth is clearly shown. From the lavish, gilded, throne like chair and footstool to the crushed velvet of his suit, Laurens shows a substantial wealth and power in his portrait. He also displays a completely relaxed figure, the sword beside him lying in the chair, papers on the desk piled under scrolls, and his arm resting on the table. Laurens has a large pile of documents beside him on the covered table. Through the eyes of John Singleton Copley, we can see how the revolution progressed and the nation was created in an unbiased manner. Copley's departure from the colonies early in the war and his final arrival in London caused him to be an uninvolved member of the war. He portrayed members of both sides of the war and of the developing American political system in a positive manner. Copley understood the dangers that many of the military members faced and respected the level of intelligence the political leaders displayed. Because of the culture of the era, Copley also profited greatly from the demand for portraits. Considered to be one of, if not the first American master, Copley was a groundbreaking artist. He created his own style of images, focusing more on the sitter and not the background, commonly leaving them monochromatic. The images he created showed that each of the men fighting on and off of the battle fields were still just men. While these men differed in their careers, with some being inventors and merchants, as well as lawyers and professional soldiers, Copley made sure to depict them as the men they were.

Gilbert Stuart was born in Newport in the Rhode Island colony in 1755 and would go on to be one of the most notable portrait artists of his time. Although he was American born and raised, he was professionally trained in London by British and Scottish masters and spent some time painting in Ireland before returning to America in 1793. One of Stuart's most well remembered works, *George Washington (The Athenaeum Portrait)*⁹, is the image used on the one-dollar bill. He completed respected portraits of the first six presidents and now has works residing in museums around the world. Stuart commonly

⁹ Fig. 10 Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Athenaeum Portrait)*, Oil on canvas, 1796, 94 x 121.9 cm, Washington DC, National Portrait Gallery - Smithsonian Institution.

portrayed founding fathers along with their best-known skill. George Washington depicted with a sword, James Monroe painted with books and papers¹⁰, and John Quincy Adams with a stack of pamphlets¹¹. He is also known for recording the physical changes in George Washington as Washington struggled through the war. He also famously painted a few First Ladies, including Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. Many of Stuart's paintings were reproduced for early newsprint and pamphlets during the Revolution. He supported this, as he is repeatedly cited speaking out against the British Crown and its control. The *Athenaeum Portraits* of the Washington's were originally commissioned by Martha Washington. On both portraits, the only completed section is the face and the shape of the shoulders. The details of the clothing are not clear. Stuart appreciated his own work enough to make him refuse to give these away to Mrs. Washington. They were purchased from Stuart's estate after his death. Throughout his career he would create at least eight portraits of President George Washington. Stuart was one of the loudest artists in speaking against the Stamp Act of 1765 because the tax significantly affected his ability to work. As loud as his protests against the British were, there are ideas that Stuart was beginning to adapt to his surroundings. The name he was baptized with was spelled "Stewart," which would become known as the American way. In England, he used the professional name "Gilbert Charles Stuart," spelling it in the English tradition.¹²

These artists had the ability to sway the image many American colonists had of their leaders. Because of transportation, the war, and the limits for recreating portraits, many colonists never saw the leaders. Artists had the ability to create strong, powerful, and symbolism laden images to distribute throughout the colonies. Like later slavery photography, the way that an individual is posed, what they are holding, and what is featured in the background can tell the viewer everything that they could need to know about the individual. Stuart's images of Washington became highly coveted, and he had dozens of commissioned

¹⁰ Fig. 11 Gilbert Stuart, *James Monroe*, Oil on canvas, 1822, 40.25 x 32 in, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹¹ Fig. 12 Gilbert Stuart, *John Quincy Adams*, Oil on canvas, 1830, 151.8 x 241.3 cm, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Portrait Collection.

¹² Miles, 1995, p. 161.

replicas from the few originals. Many of these were commissioned by members of the political and social elite; because of those commissions, paintings by Stuart became a status symbol.

Stuart's best known, completed, portrait of President Washington is the Lansdowne Portrait of 1796, now displayed in the White House.¹³ In it, Washington is seen standing and gesturing to the right with his hand. In his left hand is the symbol for being the Commander in Chief of the new nation's military, a large gold hilted rapier. In a portrait created by Trumbull for the Capitol Rotunda, Washington resigned his commission and was then able to be President. He was still the Commander-in-Chief. The table to his right has specific details also denoting his office. Carved into the leg of the table are eagles clutching arrows in their talons. The chair behind him has olive patterns carved into the legs to match; the chair back also has a shield shaped version of the American flag. Lastly, the books on the table and resting on the floor. Titles include "Federalist," "Constitutional Law of the United States," "Rulers of Great Britain," and "The American Revolution." President Washington was also known for his thorough understanding of the law he fought to create. He also created several detailed historiographies covering the military history of the revolution. As this is one of the few full-body portraits Stuart painted, it shows the strength that the president carried with him. He is depicted tall and proud, just as he was seen in his day. This portrait showed the power of Washington's military leadership, his extensive political knowledge, and the potential of the country that he carried with him.

Another in his series of Washington paintings is *George Washington*.¹⁴ Originally commissioned by William Constable for Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, it was completed in 1797. Arranging Washington with a sword and a document signed "G. Washington" shows not only his military experience and power, but also his position as a diplomat and political leader. A similarity between this image and the *Lansdowne* image is the chair and the sword are identical. There are a few theories that this was the chair from Washington's office, where he conducted official presidential affairs and

¹³ Fig. 13 Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796, Oil on canvas, 97 x 62, Washington, DC, National Portrait Gallery.

¹⁴ Fig. 14, Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Constable-Hamilton Portrait)*, 1797, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in, Arkansas, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Washington's sword he wore in the war. This was handed down in the Hamilton family for generations until being endowed to the New York Public Library System. As a postwar image, this portrait shows the different positions the new president found himself filling. It is also significant that Stuart does not depict Washington on the battlefield or in a full military uniform. After the war, there was a substantial push to honor the political work that many of these founding fathers were doing. Honoring the work being done outside of the military was a way to support the creation of the country. These founding fathers had fought a war and won; however, they now had to develop a republic and create a system of government and law.

Another President Stuart captured was James Monroe in 1822.¹⁵ Monroe is shown sitting at a desk, surrounded by books and papers, hard at work. One of the more significant parts of this image is the total lack of iconography. This draws the attention to the face of the sitter and to the object in his hand. Monroe looks incredibly calm with a small hint of a smile. The desk is also very small, appearing as though all the man needed was enough room for his parchment and ink. It is also significant because of the artist. In the majority of Stuart's works, he adds many small iconographic details such as a sword or detailed buttons. Monroe as the 5th president, would release the Monroe Doctrine. This is one of the first examples of the United States policing the actions of European powers.¹⁶

A second is *John Quincy Adams*, completed in 1818. In the image, Adams is looking towards the viewer, yet angled slightly to the right. He is wearing a simple black jacket and white collared shirt and the background fades from light brown to black. Like his father, John Quincy Adams was a skilled writer and lawyer however, there is nothing to show this skill in the portrait. As this was completed several years before his presidential term and during the time he was still acting as a diplomatic agent for America,

¹⁵ Fig. 11 *James Monroe*

¹⁶ "Monroe Doctrine," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., November 25, 2020), last modified November 25, 2020, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Monroe-Doctrine>.

The Monroe Doctrine called for no further colonization in the Western Hemisphere by European powers with the understanding the United States would in the future stay out of the wars between said European powers. First declared in a speech to congress by President James Monroe on December 2, 1823.

there are many things that would not have been known about the man yet. An image painted later could have added things such as the Erie Canal, however this project was not completed until he was in office. Gilbert Stuart was a groundbreaking artist that created portraits memorializing moments and people. He helped to create one of the most recognizable images in currency; the face of George Washington on the \$1 USD with the help of John Dogget.

John Trumbull was the only one of the artists to have fought in the war. He was born into a wealthy family in Connecticut and would graduate from Harvard College in 1773. Trumbull served for a short time as an officer in the Revolutionary Army and as Washington's aide-de-camp before resigning his commission as colonel in 1777.¹⁷ His experience in the war changes how his art should be viewed. He saw the Battle of Bunker Hill from the eyes of a soldier rather than an artist just creating the scene for a painting. Unlike Stuart's series of Washington portraits, Trumbull had no reservation painting the general in battle. In *George Washington before the Battle of Trenton*, Stuart captures the General the day after the historic crossing of the Delaware. Washington is depicted standing beside his horse and amongst the pieces of a broken canon. In the background of the full-length portrait is the battle raging on and the Colonies' flag waving in the background. The only calm piece of this image appears to be General Washington. As a leader, this shows him in a very positive manner; he is leading a pivotal battle and is remaining calm despite the chaos that surrounds him. The artist also adds a threat of danger with the dark and stormy skyline. Just as the war was beginning and at one of the first major battles, John Trumbull fought, at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Later, with the assistance of Johann Gotthard von Muller, Trumbull would create a print depicting the final moments of the battle.¹⁸

Trumbull depicts British and Prussian troops pushing past and occasionally over colonial forces. In the background, several men hold up flags, seemingly leading a charge against a wall of the enemy. In the foreground, there are men lying across the ground, some already dead, others lay dying with the enemy standing over them. The central figures are a British officer, a Prussian soldier, and two colonists. The

¹⁷ Fig. 3 *Declaration of Independence*

¹⁸ Fig. 4 *Battle of Bunker Hill*

two colonists are on the ground, one holding the other on his lap, seemingly injured. The Prussian soldier has his bayonet pointed down towards the injured colonist. At this point, it appears the British officer steps over a fallen Prussian to take control over the weapon. Sword drawn and leaned back over his own shoulder; the officer appears to push the bayonet blade down towards the already injured colonist as the one holding him tries to push back. Because of shading, the two colonists on the ground and the one standing just behind him seem to be the lightest or even pure white in clothing and skin tone. The sense of purity and innocence of the men the viewer can easily perceive elicits a sense of pity or sympathy. Neither colonists on the ground are armed and one is missing footwear.

The colonies wanted to separate themselves from the control of the British Parliament as stated in the Declaration of Independence and later memorialized by Trumbull.¹⁹ The most noteworthy detail in the image is not the members of the Council of Five presenting the Declaration of Independence to John Hancock.²⁰ Rather, the noteworthy detail, hanging just above center, is the hanging flags of Great Britain and England. Displayed on a wall in the background hangs three of the Great Britain flags, and one of the English flags showing the red cross of St. Gregory. Also hung is a drum and two crossed trumpets. This can leave the viewer to wonder why, when they wanted desperately to be separated from the British Crown and their power, did the flags still fly in the back of the room. The answer can be found in the actions in the image and in the intent of the document they held. In the foreground of the image, Thomas Jefferson is placing the Declaration of Independence on the desk of John Hancock. This document is occasionally referred to as a gentleman's declaration of war. The phrasing in the document asserts that they understand they are speaking directly to the King and Members of Parliament, however, with respect they must fight to separate.

¹⁹ Fig 3 *Declaration of Independence*

²⁰ The Council of Five included Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin. They were tasked by the American Congress (commonly known as the Continental Congress) to create a statement of intent to separate. On the day they presented it, June 28th, 1776, John Hancock resided as President of the Congress.

Because a portrait its origin, and design held so much power, it would be viewed as a statement as strong as a speech or essay. Artists before, during, and just after the American Revolution, had the ability to manipulate the public opinion of the war. The portraiture of Copley, Stuart, and Trumbull from 1740-1850 positively affected public opinion of the American Revolution and how it is remembered today.

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