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On: 19 June 2013, At: 07:44

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Perspectives on Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vpps20>

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Published online: 18 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Alison D. Howard & Donna R. Hoffman (2013): A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Building American National Identity Through Art, Perspectives on Political Science, 42:3, 142-151

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2013.793517>

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A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Building American National Identity Through Art

ALISON D. HOWARD and DONNA R. HOFFMAN

Abstract: With the adoption of the Constitution, the government of the United States took on a new role. Unlike other governments of the time, the United States was primarily founded on ideas, and, as a result, there were many challenges at the beginning of the newly-created republic. One of the biggest challenges was establishing credibility and legitimacy. In addition, republics require the support of the people; thus, to support the new political system, people needed to believe in the principles and ideals of the nascent government. As one form of communication, art has the capacity to reflect social contexts, depict specific events, and provide a visual link that makes words memorable, lasting, and compelling. Following this idea, we seek to examine the role the visual arts played in the early decades of the newly formed republic. What were the artists who worked during these years seeking to convey to their audiences? We argue that through art, a foundation for a national identity and a secular American civil religion was laid. We find that the art of the early republic with its clear symbolic meanings provided the necessary visual images to help turn abstract political concepts into something more concrete. We examine selected pieces of art from the early republic, including depictions of the Founders in portraiture and sculpture, with a particular emphasis on George Washington, as well as historical paintings available to the public. These works reveal how “visual rhetoric” helped to illustrate the republican ideals and values the Founders articulated for the new government. Art contributed to creating the necessary shared identity, civil re-

ligion, and national narrative that allowed the United States to keep its republic in its formative years.

Keywords: art, social contexts, portraiture, sculpture, visual rhetoric

Establishing a vision is an important component of persuading people to follow a particular path. Just as speeches are seen as being an avenue of persuading an audience, images may be as persuasive as spoken rhetoric. While we are accustomed to thinking of political speech or rhetoric as offering audiences pictures with words, we are less accustomed to thinking about art as what might be termed visual rhetoric. As Edelman argues, “works of art generate . . . ideas about leadership, bravery, cowardice, altruism, dangers, authority, and fantasies about the future.”¹ Visual rhetoric has the ability to help “constitute the ways we know, think, and behave.”² Examining the art from the early years of the newly-formed American Republic is important for understanding how the Founders, their supporters, and those they inspired sought to forward and communicate the values and ideals of their unique and revolutionary approach to governing.

Historian Gordon S. Wood asserts that “the American Revolution saw the birth of our modern assumption about culture: that the culture is man-made and capable of manipulation.”³ Even the creation of the capital city itself was manipulated. As James Sterling Young put it, “the capital was to be, as the national government had originally been, created where nothing was before.”⁴ Furthermore, we know from his work that the design of Washington, DC, mirrored the design of government as laid forth in the federal Constitution. We are interested in examining the role the visual

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arts played in the early decades after the Republic's formation. Rhetoric, whether of the visual, written, or oral variety, seeks to persuade. It can serve to reflect the values and principles of a particular form of government, policy, or program. Furthermore, "our understanding of politically relevant human thought and actions is often enhanced by works of art."⁵

What were the artists of the early republic seeking to convey to their audiences? We look for evidence of artists assisting in the creation and furthering of a national identity that would support republican principles of government. We find many examples in portraiture, sculpture, and historical paintings; images of President Washington play a particularly important role. These images contribute to the notion of American civil religion, but a decidedly secular one in the earliest years of the republic.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH ART

Edelman believed that art was "an essential and fundamental element in the shaping of political ideas and political action."⁶ Art also performs a rhetorical function by making the viewer believe in the reality of what is being represented. Social and cultural values and prominent historical events are often reflected in works of art. Viewing art that reflects life experiences, values, or ideals may "prompt viewers to consider a reality they might otherwise have ignored. Such art at least moves people to confront larger social issues and thus increases the probability of responsive social action."⁷ The communicative function of art can work in two ways. Art seeks to persuade its contemporary audiences with messages it hopes will resonate in the time period in which it is created. In addition, art when viewed by audiences from outside the time of its creation, can give an important glimpse into that time period. Works of art during the Founding period provided an important visual link that made the words and abstract ideals of the new republic memorable, meaningful, and compelling. Today, when we examine these works, they can help us come to an understanding of how artists assisted with nation building and furthered what initially was a secular civil religion.

KEEPING THE REPUBLIC

From the beginning of the establishment of the United States, it was clear that for the republic to be maintained, the public would have to be educated about the new government and involved with it. Benjamin Franklin was reported to have stated, when asked whether the Constitutional Convention had produced a monarchy or a republic, "a republic, if you can keep it."⁸ It was by no means a certainty that the fledgling country would be able to keep it. How would new abstract republican issues and concepts be understood, applied, and supported? Unlike other governments of the time, the United States was primarily founded on ideas, and, as a result, there were many challenges at the beginning of the newly created republic. One of the biggest challenges was establishing credibility and legitimacy. "Having only recently divested themselves of a long monarchical tradition, many Americans

longed for a tangible model of republican ideals, something that could transform them from abstractions into a dramatic and active reality."⁹ Staiti argues that during the tumultuous times after the Constitution's adoption, works of art provided "soothing clichés" for the new nation.¹⁰ Could art be used as a vehicle to illustrate and instill the republican values necessary to secure and ground this new system? Given the active role played by some of the Founders in commissioning works of art and architecture, it is clear that there was some recognition that art could be used as a tool to communicate the values, ideals, and identity of the new republic.

Sandra Moats argues that ceremonies and celebrations were instrumental in making the new government a presence in people's lives and aided in the success of the new Constitution.¹¹ We argue that art played a similar function by forwarding a national identity and representing leaders in such a way that was the antithesis of monarchical renderings. Furthermore, these images, roughly from the time after the revolution, to the 1820s, contribute to the notion of civil religion in the United States, but a secular one.

Some of the Founders were influenced by the power and ability of art to both reflect a nation's values and its ability to help inculcate those values. For example, during his time in Paris, "Jefferson came to understand the power of art and architecture for signifying nationhood and for securing the nation's status in the world."¹² Both Washington and Jefferson were intimately involved in the plans for the U.S. Capitol and believed that there were "pragmatic and symbolic functions of the Capitol."¹³ In promoting designs for the Capitol, they believed specific features of the new government should be displayed. It should foster national union, illustrate the bicameral legislature, and be accessible to all Americans. "The notion that architecture could be the palpable, visual expression of abstract concepts was an Enlightenment idea that Jefferson wholeheartedly embraced and attempted to transmit to the American populace in general."¹⁴ Not only was there a belief in the importance of the architecture, as Young notes, the plan for the capital city mirrored the plan for government (as well as prevailing attitudes about power).¹⁵ In addition, "Jefferson was attentive to crafting the public person and image of the new leaders of the United States as men defined not by markers of royalty, nobility, or status, but instead as simple citizens, all equal."¹⁶ Yet, not all of the Founders believed that art would be of any use in the new republic. For example, John Adams still clung to "the old utilitarian attitude that art was an extravagant frill of the idle Old World aristocracy: 'It is not indeed the fine arts which our country requires; the useful, the mechanic arts are those we have occasion for in a young country.'"¹⁷ Adams even responded to John Trumbull's lobbying in 1815 for a commission to create historical paintings for the Capitol by stating "I see no disposition to celebrate or remember, or even Curiosity to enquire into the Characters Actions or Events of the Revolution. I am therefore more inclined to despair, than to hope for your success in Congress."¹⁸ Trumbull was, however, successful in obtaining a commission in 1817. Despite Adams' seemingly negative view of art for the young country, he is known as viewing a proper representative assembly as being like a miniature portrait of the people.¹⁹

European art of the time generally portrayed those in power in elaborate and grand attire with all the trappings of monarchy and often imbued with religious symbolism. For example, Napoleon did not break from being represented in works of art as a traditional monarch even though he was not one. He commissioned Jacques-Louis David's *The Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and the Coronation of Empress Joséphine on December 2, 1804*, housed at the Louvre.²⁰ This large canvas depicts the lavish ceremony, which took place in the presence of a pope, multiple clergy, and in the Notre Dame Cathedral. Portraits of European aristocrats often included depictions of their wealth. American art, however, was developing as an art that in many respects would be provincial, utilitarian, empirical, and sentimental.²¹ This is not art that provokes or that challenges, but it did seek to present images around which Americans could unite.²² In its simplicity, it contributes to creating a sense of the United States as a nation. Furthermore, as noted by Wood, by 1820 there were many portrait painters roaming the countryside, enabling "countless numbers of middling Americans to possess what earlier had been an exclusive luxury of the aristocracy."²³ This is a factor in what Wood documents as America becoming a middle class order, and the democratization of the Founders' early ideas about the republic they were creating.

BUILDING NATIONAL WALLS

In his essay, "A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity," John Murrin argues that the Constitution would help solve a cultural problem; "in a word the Constitution became a substitute for any deeper kind of national identity" because the United States "had erected their constitutional roof before they put up the national walls."²⁴ Murrin hints at, but does not articulate, the importance of the Constitution to what has been termed America's civil religion.²⁵ The art of the era also assisted in the establishing of this civil religion, in particular the way in which the Founding Fathers were represented, and the way in which significant American historical episodes were depicted. In this sense, the art produced in the early years could not only hang on the walls but also help to build those much needed metaphorical walls.

Political socialization is the process through which people learn the values, beliefs, and habits necessary to support the political system in which they live. Because the United States was founded as a new nation and the system of government created was unique, the need for a process of political socialization was essential. This was especially true given that the republican form of government established required a particular type of participation by the public if it were to endure. Wood argues that "In the Americans' efforts to explain the difference of their experience in the New World and ultimately to justify their Revolution and their new government, they were pressed to speak and write both originally and extensively about politics, using a wide variety of eighteenth century instruments, newspapers, pamphlets, state papers, poetry, plays, satire, and, of course, letters."²⁶ A variety of written works were produced that praised the

new American union.²⁷ Mary Stuckey argues that "nations require certain elements for their sustenance and growth and a certain sort of language with which to maintain and perpetuate themselves."²⁸ Many recognized the need to support the fragile Republic that was created and that "a republican political culture would require symbols, rituals, and practices that animated and illustrated abstract principles such as the government's authority, legitimacy, and scope."²⁹ Karen Hoffman explains how communication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was different in that it needed to establish a relationship with the public and that "The first four presidents played a very important role in personalizing the national government and attracting the attention, and ultimately allegiance of the populace."³⁰ Stuckey goes on to argue that "a people's identity, much like that of their nation, is largely imagined, based less on historical or geographical inevitability and more on the power of rhetoric to inform and focus allegiances."³¹ If art is thought of as visual rhetoric (and not just art for art's sake) it can inform identity. In the visual arts, Paul Staiti argues that:

in the 1790s, images in every kind of medium, from painting to ceramic to embroidery, were being hailed onto the communal stage as seductive 'voices' that had the power to explain the new United States to its new citizens, who were understandably perplexed by, or outright resistant to, the urgent demands of a singular national identity that requested they set aside entrenched local allegiances, or at least allow regional identities to perforate enough as to let the national enter.³²

Staiti examines how visual images contributed to the idea of nation or president.³³ We can further develop this by examining how art in the early republic helped establish not only a national identity, but also contributed to cementing the necessary values and ideals associated with the new republican form of government. Works of art that included references to republican values and principles could symbolically reinforce the written and verbal messages being used in the early decades of the republic.

One aspect of American art that does not receive much positive attention is "sentimental art." Despite the fact that reason is an integral component of Enlightenment thought, there were writers and philosophers of the time who believed in the power of sentiment. For example, as Bedell points out, "David Hume—looked to sentiment as a means of transforming the social and political order. Feelings were essential . . . because they—not reason—impel us to action."³⁴ The idea of sentiment was used to describe "works of art capable of moving the observer and inspiring communal feelings, especially patriotic feelings."³⁵ In the early years of the United States, the public's support and involvement was needed to keep the great experiment of republican government from failing. Forming an attachment to their government was essential. It was not only the Founders and those holding political office who knew that political socialization was important, but also artists. John Trumbull, in particular, "sought to use his art to foster the people's sentimental attachment to the new nation."³⁶ Sentimental art could be used to emotionally tie people together and arrive at a "national sentiment." While the Founders reasonably feared popular leaders using rhetoric to appeal to the passions of the

public, thus becoming demagogues,³⁷ emotional appeals could triumph in the sentimental art of the day.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FOUNDERS AND HISTORICAL EVENTS

While this article is not intended to be a review of works of art in the vein of an art historian, it is still important to point out that there was a conscious move away from many of the traditional aspects associated with European art of the times. The elements that were different connect to the fact that much of the art and architecture in the United States came to reflect a style that was “less grand, and less rooted in European traditions.”³⁸ This style reflected the values associated with the republican form of government that was established with the adoption of the Constitution, signifying a clear break with European tradition in politics, as well as in social and cultural patterns. In addition, we focus on works of art that would have been somewhat accessible to the public; in particular we confine ourselves to the way in which the Founding Fathers were represented (particularly George Washington) and depictions of historical events to be on display in the new Capitol. The following selection of portraits, sculptures, and historical paintings provide examples of how

art, in the early years of the republic, represented key values and ideals that contributed not only to political socialization but also to the establishment of a culturally and aesthetically unique American genre of art that fostered the building of a national identity and also furthered what would become America’s civic religion.

DEPICTIONS OF THE FOUNDERS

We concentrate on looking at depictions of the men generally referred to as the Founding Fathers, and particularly ones tied to the early years of new republic, especially George Washington. We begin with a portrait of Roger Sherman of Connecticut, one of six men who signed both the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution (Figure 1). Ralph Earl’s portrait of Roger Sherman was done in approximately 1775 and is the earliest portrait we discuss. It is typical of the realism that one finds in the new American style of portraiture. Seated in a Windsor chair, the plain clothes, isolated subject, and the lack of elaborate embellishment all signal a style grounded in realism. Art historian Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser says of Earl, “At a time when Americans were struggling with their identity as citizens of the new American republic, Earl moved away from British aristocratic imagery, developing a style and technique that was suited to the restrained tastes, republican virtues, and pious values of the Connecticut inhabitants.”³⁹

If there was a “court painter” of the new Republic, it could reasonably be said to be Gilbert Stuart. Indeed, Stuart even maintained a studio in Washington, DC, from 1803 to 1805.⁴⁰ Examples of Stuart’s work are numerous and contrast with the portrait of Roger Sherman from the eve of the Revolution. Stuart’s work tended to have some elements of European style combined with a realism that was uniquely American. His portraits of John Jay,⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson,⁴² and James Madison⁴³ are very similar. Each contains a neoclassical column, red drapery, and images of books, depicting each of these men as learned gentlemen in the new republican age. While the use of red often served as a symbol of religion, power, and importance dating back to the Medieval period where it was used in much Christian art, Stuart’s use of red is not coupled with religious symbolism but with elements of neoclassicism. As a contrast, one can see in John Trumbull’s portrait of Alexander Hamilton, an austere portrayal of the man devoid of any background or props, leaving viewers to come to their own conclusions about the man.⁴⁴ These examples from both Trumbull and Stuart are images devoid of the trappings of many aristocratic and certainly monarchical portraits from Europe at the time. For example, one can compare two portraits of George III, both by Benjamin West, in which crowns with crosses and ermine are prominently featured.⁴⁵ Furthermore, we note that in the examples of American portraiture, there are no religious symbols incorporated.

Washington in portraiture

Part of the challenge of the new Constitution’s adoption was that it would vest some power in a single individual in the form of the president, unlike the very decentralized



FIGURE 1. Artist Ralph Earl Roger Sherman (1721–1793), M.A. (Hon.) 1768 ca. 1775. Oil on canvas; 164.1 × 126 cm (64 5/8 × 49 5/8 in.). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, 06520 1918.3. (Color figure available online.)



FIGURE 2. Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), *George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796. Oil on canvas; 96 × 60 in. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Bequest of William Bingham, 1811.2. (Color figure available online.)

form of government under the Articles of Confederation where there was no single executive. Americans, with their suspicion of power, needed to be convinced that a single executive would not be too monarchical. In part, creating an office of president to be inhabited by a single individual was agreed to at the Constitutional Convention due to the common belief that Washington would be the first occupant of that new position. The depictions of Washington, which became prominent in the early republic, aided in fostering the perception that the first president was, indeed, republican rather than monarchical.

Gilbert Stuart's 1796 *Lansdowne* portrait of George Washington⁴⁶ more than any other portrait clearly depicts the leader of a republic "serious like a Roman orator and simple like an American minister."⁴⁷ There are no monarchical accessories, but there are symbols of the new American Republic. On top of the table are two books—*Federalist* and *Journal of Congress*. Under the table are the *Constitution*

and *Laws of the United States*. By including the *Journal of Congress*, Stuart reminds the viewer that in the new Constitution, Congress, not the executive, was the institution laid out in Article I. In addition, the presence of the *Federalist* and the Constitution further reminds the viewer that the executive is constitutionally limited. Even though we know that Washington enjoyed "pomp and splendor" and that "he was ambitious and vain and possessed a considerable ego,"⁴⁸ his dress is depicted in a very plain manner. At the time Stuart painted this portrait, Washington was finishing up his second term as president; the artist took pains with Washington's dress to signal the lack of monarchical manner in Washington. We also see the national symbols of the eagle (in the table legs) and the stars and stripes (on the chair back), along with the red drapery and neoclassical column used in the other portraits of Stuart's Founding Fathers we discussed earlier. The symbols in this painting are national symbols as opposed to religious ones and furthermore were not symbols that would serve to elevate Washington personally. In addition, Stuart places a sword in Washington's hand, but he is not holding it by its hilt. It is not, therefore, a sword-at-the-ready. The book volumes and pen and inkwell are more prominently displayed than the sword. Washington is depicted as statesman, not a soldier.

In contrast with the *Lansdowne* portrait is Stuart's 1795–1796 *Vaughan Portrait*.⁴⁹ This portrait "represents the president in his black inauguration suit. Otherwise the portrait bust is devoid of the official trappings of power associated with the nation's chief executive."⁵⁰ This portrait is remarkable for its simplicity of portrayal and includes no republican symbolism. Washington presented as an ordinary American gentleman would be much like Trumbull's portrait of Hamilton.

The final Washington portrait we examine in this article is Gilbert Stuart's 1796 portrait of George Washington, which became known as the *Anthenaeum* portrait.⁵¹ This was the image of Washington that was the most favored and "neither the artist nor the engravers could keep up with the subsequent demand."⁵² The painting "projected the image of a plain citizen, an image that impresses by its commonality and not its uniqueness."⁵³ What makes this portrait ideal for conveying the values of the newly formed republic is how it captures Washington's character and summarizes his presidency "by reducing rather than enlarging him, by placing him among the people rather than above them."⁵⁴

All three of these Stuart portraits of Washington seem to take pains to present Washington as the antithesis of a king, accessible, and rather ordinary. Even though most Americans would never meet Washington, in these portraits they "would gravitate toward a common image where, in turn, they could come to a common mind about themselves"⁵⁵ and by extension the nation. Because "monarchical pomp and ceremony defined most forms of late 18th century government, the nation's early leaders struggled to invent signs and rituals compatible with republican ideals."⁵⁶ These images of Washington helped to distinguish and promote legitimacy and authority of the new government where a president, vested with perhaps more central authority than Americans were entirely comfortable, was presented in a very nonthreatening way.

Washington in sculpture

As evidence that the Founders were personally involved in establishing a national identity through art, one need only to examine the correspondence among Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon about the statue commissioned by Virginia in 1784 for its capitol building (Figure 3). Prior to this commission there were not many sculptures that served as monuments to political figures, and this would be the first such sculpture of Washington.⁵⁷ Because Jefferson was in Paris at the time of the commission, the state of Virginia relied on him to suggest an artist and make arrangements. Initially, Charles Wilson Peale provided a portrait of Washington for Houdon to use as a model for the sculpture. Jefferson, however, determined that “No statue of Gnl. Washington which might be a true evidence of his figure to posterity could be made from this [Peale’s] picture . . .,”⁵⁸ and, as a result, Houdon traveled to America with Benjamin Franklin to meet Washington and prepare for the sculpture. While Houdon worked on the statue, Jefferson continued to play an active role in determining how Wash-

ington should be depicted. Jefferson wrote to Washington asking about what he desired for the statue. For example, Washington expressed his preference for a “modern dress.” Jefferson also specifically mentions American artists Benjamin West, John Trumbull, and John Singleton Copley in one letter to Washington acknowledging that Washington’s preference for modern dress was in line with the style of these artists.⁵⁹

Houdon’s final version with its “part modern, part ancient” costume seems to be a direct result of “the interaction of Jefferson and Houdon. It was Jefferson who selected Houdon, Jefferson who conveyed Washington’s wishes to the sculptor, and Jefferson to whom Houdon went when he wished to discuss details of the commission.”⁶⁰ Jefferson also “insisted that the size should be precisely that of a man. Anything bigger would have been pretentious. It shows the statesman as citizen, *primus inter pares*, in the Latin phrase that meant so much to the Founding Fathers—not a king, not a god, but first among equals.”⁶¹ In the sculpture there is a plowshare visible behind Washington’s feet. This is a reference to Cincinnatus, the farmer turned Roman dictator, who at the end of his term returned to his land. We are, thus, reminded that, like Cincinnatus, Washington resigned his commission at the conclusion of the Revolution, and that he did not seek a third term as president. Washington’s left hand rests on fasces (bundle of rods), each representing one state in the Union. Fasces, a symbol from Rome, were not an official emblem for the United States; however, “they were commonly used as a symbol of national union because they cannot be broken.”⁶² The concept of “union” was important to the Founders, as they were seeking to unite thirteen disparate states. Under the Articles of Confederation, the states existed in a “league of friendship.” Under the new Constitution, the states were bound together more intricately. It is also important to note that the symbol, as adopted by America, has a more passive connotation than that of Roman times, as well as by others in the twentieth century. Instead of a sword, which is present in the sculpture but not in Washington’s hands, Houdon has him holding “a walking stick, which he employed while supervising the cultivation of his Mount Vernon plantation.”⁶³ One additional feature of the sculpture that is not prominent “is a missing button on the right lapel of Washington’s coat, which lets you know that the great man is capable of a certain negligence in *tenue* and is not a stickler for protocol—a democracy in dress, as it were.”⁶⁴

Houdon’s statue of Washington symbolizes the classical republican elements while, at the same time, visually depicts Jefferson’s concern about presenting leaders as not extraordinary.⁶⁵ The importance American republican government placed upon rising above self-interest is clearly demonstrated by the choices Houdon made to model the statue after Cincinnatus and by the symbols incorporated. Any republic needs the support of the people, and the Founders knew they would have to work to legitimize the principles of republican government. The use of Roman iconography by artists supports the notion that the ancient republic represented the necessary visual elements that would serve as a form of communication for establishing a national identity among the citizens of the young American republic.



FIGURE 3. George Washington by Jean Antoine Houdon, 1785–88. Image available through ARTonFILE.com. (Color figure available online.)

As Washington's presidency faded from living memory, the republic matured, and Washington took on the iconic status he still holds in America's civil religion, it is worth noting how these early depictions of Washington discussed above differ from some of the later ones, in particular a sculpture by Horatio Greenough completed in 1840.⁶⁶ Following many debates in Congress, in 1832 they commissioned Horatio Greenough to create a sculpture to commemorate George Washington that was to be placed in the Capitol Rotunda.⁶⁷ After its completion, the sculpture proved to be unpopular and was eventually removed. Washington had long been considered a hero worthy of commemoration even before his death in 1799. In 1783, the Continental Congress under the Articles of Confederation passed a resolution "calling for a bronze equestrian statue of General George Washington clothed in a Roman uniform, to be executed by the best artist in Europe and displayed in the future residence of the national legislature."⁶⁸ Much of this description runs counter to republican principles, but we should note that it was before the republican Constitution had been constructed. It is also counter to Washington's later preference to being represented in modern dress as noted above. No action was taken on the Continental Congress's resolution.

Despite the fact that space was left in the Rotunda to house Washington's remains, Washington would be buried at Mt. Vernon, honoring his desire as set forth in his will. The intended spot in the Capitol was a crypt under the Rotunda. "In 1828, Congress ordered the closing of the aperture, because dampness emanating from it adversely affected John Trumbull's paintings on the walls of the Rotunda."⁶⁹ By 1832, all hopes that Washington's remains would be moved to the Rotunda ended when the General Assembly of Virginia rejected a petition from Congress to move Washington's remains to the Capitol.⁷⁰ The House of Representatives eventually voted for Horatio Greenough's commission to create a sculpture of Washington to be placed in the Rotunda. "They recognized that through sculpture Washington could be spiritually present in the Capitol, standing as a symbol of centralized authority."⁷¹ The political time was important; there was debate about centralized and decentralized authority (states' rights) in the 1830s, the nullification crisis, and regional divisions that dominated congressional debates and presidential-congressional relations. Greenough lived in Florence when he received his commission, and by the time the sculpture was completed, the nullification crisis had ended; however, these issues were important at the time the decision was made to commission the sculpture. In the nineteenth century, it was common to "turn to Washington as a symbol of unity" and nationhood.⁷²

Greenough's design was initially based on a "drawing of the Borghese Warrior as the foundation for Washington's pose and proportions."⁷³ As Fryd notes, there were multiple other influences on Greenough's creation. Representative Edward Everett recommended Phidias's *Zeus*.⁷⁴ Another influence was Ingres' image of Napoleon.⁷⁵ Rather than modern dress, Greenough swaths Washington in a toga from antiquity with his feet shod in sandals. Greenough sought to represent the republican notion of relinquishing one's duty through the sword that Washington holds, offering the

hilt to be taken up by another, similar to the theme Houdon employed in his sculpture. In the end, Greenough "was severely criticized for his Zeus-like portrayal of a semi-nude Washington," and the sculpture did not take its place in the Capitol Rotunda.⁷⁶ While both the Houdon and Greenough statues surround and imbue Washington with republican symbolism, Houdon's statue caused no controversy and has endured, while Greenough's representation was not popular (and currently resides in the Museum of American History). Greenough's representation did not seek a blending of ancient and modern in the way that Houdon's did, much as the republican principles of the ancients were refined and adapted in the new American polity.⁷⁷ In addition, the representation of a bare-chested Washington likely offended religious sentiments in the country.

Through these representations of Washington and the other Founders in the early years of the republic, we see that these artists (excepting Greenough's 1840 work) took care to present these individuals as modern republicans, ordinary in their dress and demeanor. Republican symbols were often present in these representations, as well. These images helped to foster republican sentiment, and in the case of Washington, communicate that the public had nothing to fear from centralized power in the form of a president. It is also interesting to note that all of these representations included no religious symbolism. While these images will help create a national identity and a civil religion, these representations from the formative years of the republic furthered a civil religion that was secular.

HISTORICAL PAINTING

The final area we examine relates to historical paintings, and in particular historical paintings that would be accessible to the public—those commissioned from John Trumbull in 1817 for the new Capitol building in Washington, DC. Trumbull knew the Founders of the new republic well. He was an aide to George Washington during the Revolution and would subsequently meet with various presidents over the course of his commissions for the Capitol. In the days of the early republic, Trumbull heavily lobbied to get a commission to decorate the walls of the newly-built Capitol. He approached both Jefferson and Adams for recommendations and placed a small version of the *Declaration of Independence* in the Hall of Representatives. Congress subsequently authorized the president in 1817 to employ Trumbull to paint four commemorative scenes from the American Revolution for the Capitol.⁷⁸ Trumbull coordinated with President James Madison on the size and topics of the paintings. "Madison recommended that the figures be life-size so as not to be diminished by the Rotunda's vast space" and they agreed that two scenes should commemorate military scenes from the Revolution, and two should be civic in nature.⁷⁹ The two military scenes are the *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis* and the *Surrender of General Burgoyne*, both notable for the orderly way in which these scenes are depicted. They were placed in the Rotunda in 1826. We focus on the two Trumbull paintings that commemorate civic events: *Declaration of Independence* (Figure 4) and *General George Washington*



FIGURE 4. Artist John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* (1786–1820). Oil on canvas; 53 x 78.7 cm (20 7/8 x 31 in.). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, 06520 1832.3. (Color figure available online.)

Resigning His Commission (Figure 5). Given the importance of the Declaration of Independence, it is an obvious choice for the Rotunda. The second painting with a civic subject, however, from the title could appear to be military, as well, because its subject is General Washington. The subject, however, is one of civic importance because Washington is setting an example of voluntarily giving up power, a theme that is key in republican thought.

The *Declaration of Independence* shows Jefferson, Adams, Sherman, Franklin, and Robert Livingston presenting the Declaration to John Hancock, as president of the Continental Congress. Trumbull worked for many years to



FIGURE 5. Artist John Trumbull, *The Resignation of General George Washington, December 23, 1783* *The Resignation of General George Washington's Commission, Annapolis, December 23, 1783* (1824–1828). Oil on canvas; 50.8 x 76.2.5 cm (20 x 30 x 1 in.). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, 06520 1832.8. (Color figure available online.)

make sure he accurately painted each attendee. “Trumbull soberly represents the central act of the American Revolution as a rational, legal act, undertaken by a republican aristocracy who wished to preserve rather than disrupt the natural social order.”⁸⁰ Demonstrating the involvement of the Founders, Bjelajac notes that it was probably Jefferson who suggested the addition of British flags and trophies confiscated from British troops that decorate the back wall.⁸¹ Slaughter notes that on the desk in front of John Hancock is a Bible.⁸² This represents the only depiction of any kind of religious symbolism in Trumbull’s Rotunda paintings.

Perhaps more than the *Declaration of Independence*, *General George Washington Resigning His Commission* highlights the values of a republic. Washington’s resignation of power was the ultimate act of a republican leader. Outside of the ancient example of Cincinnatus, leaders tended to seize power and stay in power until they died or were overthrown. Washington embodied the values of a republic, and Trumbull memorialized these values in his painting.

Trumbull’s paintings served an important purpose in cultivating a national feeling and identity. The republic was new and did not have a long collective history upon which to draw. By depicting scenes (both civil and military) that were important in the life of the republic, people could unite around them; certainly subjects from the Revolution could serve as touchstones for the public. Furthermore, each of the civil scenes revolves around the presentation of written documents to a collective entity, and each of the military scenes is depicted as very orderly events.

Trumbull’s paintings for the Rotunda (along with other Trumbull works) were exhibited publicly at various places across the country before they were permanently housed in the Rotunda.⁸³ It seems that Trumbull succeeded in inspiring and moving those who saw his works during their exhibition. After viewing *The Battle of Bunker Hill* (not one painted for the Rotunda), it is reported that Abigail Adams said “Trumbull is the first painter who has undertaken to immortalize with his Pencil those great actions . . . [H]e teaches, mankind, that it is not rank, or titles, but Character alone which interest Posterity.”⁸⁴ With these words the ideals and values of a republic are seen. Building both the political foundation and public support necessary to maintain a republic Trumbull, along with other artists, cultivated a national identity through art that invoked the “sentiment” needed to support the new nation. Trumbull’s paintings complimented other efforts being undertaken to encourage national sentiment among the public, such as through education. “American history textbooks . . . drew on Noah Webster in admonishing schoolchildren to seek common affection setting out a secular catechism: The Union of these States is the production of the spirit of harmony and compromise. Do we remember how much our fathers surrendered to compose [it], and shall we refuse to surrender any thing to preserve it?”⁸⁵ Likewise, the four Trumbull paintings from his 1817 commission are decidedly secular, even given the appearance of a Bible in the *Declaration of Independence*. Trumbull had, both before and after his congressional commission, painted many religious scenes.⁸⁶ It is, therefore, perhaps notable that the artist’s only

inclusion of religious imagery in his Rotunda paintings is very minimal.⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

There were many challenges at the beginning of the newly-created republic, and one of the biggest was fostering collective identity. As Wood observes, “The United States was founded on a set of beliefs and not, as were other nations, on a common ethnicity, language, or religion.”⁸⁸ This was a special challenge during the early years of the Republic when citizens were often more likely to think of themselves as citizens of a state, rather than citizens of the United States. Creating a national identity that would nurture the new form of government was necessary. Portraits, sculptures, and historical paintings discussed here contributed to illustrating and cementing republican ideals and values that ultimately allowed the United States to democratize, grow, and prosper. We see in the depictions of the Founders, artists representing them as truly republican, fairly ordinary gentlemen with no trappings of monarchy. Symbols that were used were neo-classical, patriotic, and sentimental, rather than religious. In Trumbull’s historical paintings for the Capitol Rotunda with civic themes, we see an emphasis on orderly depictions of acts where written documents are presented to a collective governing entity. Furthermore, these images fostered the formation of an American civil religion that, in the first few decades, was secular.

Republics require the support of the people; to support a political system people need to believe in the principles and ideals of the government. The art of the early republic with its clear symbolic meaning provided accessible visual images to turn abstract political concepts into something more concrete because “political symbols provide identity, give rise to motivation, set the community agenda, and establish and perpetuate socio-political order.”⁸⁹ The portraits and sculptures of the Founders contributed to this notion, as did Trumbull’s Rotunda paintings.

NOTES

1. Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: Federal Culture and National Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2–3.
2. Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 3.
3. Gordon S. Wood, “The Significance of the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (1988): 16.
4. James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community 1800–1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 17.
5. Girma Negash, “Art Invoked: A Mode of Understanding and Shaping the Political,” *International Political Science Review* 25 (April 2004): 185.
6. Edelman, 6.
7. Paul Von Blum, *The Critical Vision: A History of Social and Political Art in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 6.
8. Warren E. Burger, “A Republic, If You Can Keep It: A Bicentennial Commentary,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18 (1988): 473.
9. Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 107.
10. Paul Staiti, “Gilbert Stuart’s Presidential Imagery,” in *Shaping the Body Politic: Art and Political Formation in Early America*, eds. Maurie McInnis and Louis P. Nelson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 169.
11. Sandra Moats, *Celebrating the Republic: Presidential Ceremony and Popular Sovereignty from Washington to Monroe* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 171.

12. Maurie D. McInnis and Louis P. Nelson, eds. *Shaping the Body Politic: Art and Political Formation in Early America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 12.

13. Pamela Scott, *Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. But Young finds this presented two problems for the success of the government. Government was “at a distance and out of sight” and the separateness of the institutions inhibited effective governance. Young, 83.

16. Maurie D. McInnis, “Revisiting Cincinnatus: Houdon’s George Washington,” in *Shaping the Body Politic: Art and Political Formation in Early America*, eds. Maurie McInnis and Louis P. Nelson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 140.

17. Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers, 1994), 136.

18. Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 134.

19. Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 128.

20. Jacques-Louis David, *The Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and the Coronation of Empress Joséphine on December 2, 1804*, 1806–07, Louvre, Paris, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/consecration-empereur-napoleon-and-coronation-empress-josephine-december-2-1804>.

21. Michael J. Lewis, *American Art and Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

22. Mattern is particularly critical of John Dewey’s view of art as political communication precisely because he “erased conflict, negotiation, and contestation . . . from the world of art.” Mark Mattern, “John Dewey, Art and Public Life,” *The Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 55. Mattern, however, is speaking of art that is normally removed from people’s everyday lives. Popular culture and public art “are characterized precisely by their everyday character, by the degree to which they infiltrate people’s daily lives, for better or worse” (55). It is largely this kind of art on which we focus.

23. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 354.

24. John M. Murrin, “A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity,” in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, eds. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 346–7.

25. This concept is most associated with Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96 (Winter 1967). However, Bellah rejects the notion that American civil religion is secular. We would argue that evidence from much of the art of the very early republic, which like the Constitution, also aids in fostering the notion of civil religion, was decidedly secular. It will be in later decades that a religious aspect is overlaid, or incorporated into American civil religion, perhaps coinciding with the peak of the Second Great Awakening, something that is beyond the scope of our examination.

26. Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 245.

27. Rogan Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 97.

28. Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 9.

29. Moats, 4.

30. Karen Hoffman, *Popular Leadership in the Presidency: Origins and Practice* (Maryland: Lexington Books-Lanham, 2010), 16.

31. Stuckey, 9.

32. Staiti, 162.

33. *Ibid.*, 164.

34. Rebecca Bedell, “What Is Sentimental Art?” *American Art* 25 (2011): 9.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 10.

37. Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987).

38. Craven, 136.

39. Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, “By Your Inimmitable Hand”: Elijah Boardman’s Patronage of Ralph Earl,” *The American Art Journal* 23 (1991): 5.

40. David Meschutt, “Gilbert Stuart’s Portraits of Thomas Jefferson,” *The American Art Journal* 13 (1981).

41. Gilbert Stuart, *John Jay*, 1794, National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/stuart/newyork.shtm>.

42. Gilbert Stuart, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1805–07, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Image available through ArtStor.

43. Gilbert Stuart, *James Madison*, 1805–07, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Image available through ArtStor.

44. John Trumbull, *Alexander Hamilton*, 1806, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/alexander-hamilton-31047>.
45. Benjamin West, *George III*, 1783, Cleveland Museum of Art, <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1952.17>. See also Benjamin West, *George III*, 1799, Royal Collection Trust, <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/405407/george-iii-1738-1820>.
46. Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, <http://www.npg.si.edu/collect/lansdowne2.htm>.
47. Staiti, 169.
48. *Ibid.*, 170.
49. Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (Vaughn Portrait)*, 1795, National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg60a/gg60a-1121.html>.
50. David Bjelajac, *American Art: A Cultural History* (New Jersey: Pearson, 2005), 141.
51. Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (Athenaeum Portrait)*, 1796, National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/stuart/philadelphia.shtm>.
52. Schwartz, 160.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. Staiti, 186.
56. Moats, 4.
57. McInnis, 131.
58. *Ibid.*, 132.
59. *Ibid.*, 138–9.
60. *Ibid.*, 139.
61. Hughes, 124.
62. Scott, 12.
63. Bjelajac, 143.
64. Hughes, 125.
65. McInnis, 140.
66. Horatio Greenough, *George Washington*, 1833–41. National Museum of American History, <http://www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu/objectdescription.cfm?ID=66>.
67. Vivian Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 62.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*, 63–4.
70. *Ibid.*, 64.
71. *Ibid.*, 65.
72. *Ibid.*, 66.
73. *Ibid.*, 68.
74. *Ibid.*, 71–2.
75. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne*, 1806. Musée de l'Armée. Image available through ArtStor.
76. Bjelajac, 139.
77. It is interesting to note that in Brumidi's fresco on the ceiling of the Capitol Rotunda (*The Apotheosis of Washington*, 1865), Washington is depicted as fully clothed, even though, as he ascends into the heavens, he is surrounded by images of ancient republicans, many of whom are not fully clothed.
78. Fryd, 12.
79. Fryd, 12–3.
80. Bjelajac, 138.
81. *Ibid.*
82. Slaughter, 231.
83. Bedell, 10.
84. *Ibid.*, 11.
85. Kersh, 98.
86. See the commentary on Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* from the Architect of the Capitol (http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/rotunda/declaration_independence.cfm).
87. We note that there is, in the Capitol Rotunda, the painting *Baptism of Pocahontas*. This painting, however, by John Gadsby Chapman was installed in 1840.
88. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 4.
89. David E. Proctor, *Enacting Political Culture* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 5.