

**Hiram Power's Bust of *George Washington*:
The President as an Icon**

Hiram Power's bust of *George Washington* in the Arizona State University's art collection (Figure 1, 1846-1848) is a classicizing portrait of the first president as a Roman emperor in apotheosis. Although this type had been popular in American art during the early decades of the nineteenth century, by the 1840s when Powers carved the *Washington* bust, images of statesmen as citizen-orators prevailed instead, especially in public portrait monuments.¹ Indeed, Powers also executed a full-length, standing figure of George Washington for the Louisiana state legislature (1848-1854) which adhered to this more common image of a civic hero. These works by Hiram Powers afford the opportunity to explore the reasons for the change in iconography and to analyze two nineteenth-century images of George Washington – in apotheosis and as a citizen-orator – to demonstrate that American artists, especially sculptors, transformed the man into a national icon.

Prior to his emigration to Italy in 1837, Powers had visited Washington, DC and Boston to capture likenesses of prominent statesmen in anticipation of receiving commissions for marble busts and full-length effigies. Between 1834, when he left his hometown of Cincinnati and his transatlantic voyage of three years later, Powers modeled the images of numerous statesmen, including John Marshall, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, John C. Winthrop, and Andrew Jackson.² While in the national capital, he also executed a bust of George Washington from a death mask preserved in the State Department.³

Although these images became the basis for his later marble busts and full-length public portrait monuments,⁴ when Powers received his first commission in 1846 for an effigy of George Washington, he consulted sources other than his earlier likeness copied from Washington's death mask. In March of that year, William Shepard Wetmore and his wife visited Powers's Florence studio and ordered a marble bust of George Washington and one of Mrs Wetmore.⁵ Completed in July of

Figure 1. Hiram Powers, *George Washington*, 1846–1848, marble, Arizona State University Art Museum.

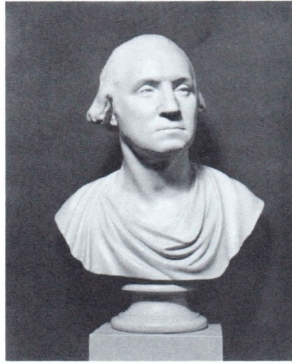


Figure 2. Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Bust of George Washington*, ca. 1786, plaster, Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York City.

Figure 3. Jean-Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*, 1784–1796, marble, Virginia State Capitol. Reproduced courtesy of Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia.



1848, the bust of *Washington*, now housed in the art collections of Arizona State University, became the basis for at least twenty-five replicas that Hiram Powers executed for numerous American and European patrons.⁶

Rather than emulate his own copy modeled twelve years earlier from the death mask, Powers instead consulted late antique busts of Roman emperors and Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait preserved both in plaster (Figure 2) and in a full-length monument executed for the Virginia State Capitol (Figure 3, 1784-1796). Powers derived the likeness, the hairstyle in peruke, the classicizing features, and the slightly turned head from Houdon's portraits; yet, unlike Houdon, Powers clothed the former president in a simplified Roman toga that has deeply carved, cascading folds. Furthermore, Powers assimilated the raised eyebrows, contracted forehead, undrilled eyes, rigidly symmetrical features, and calm, timeless expression of late antique busts to signify the president's transcendent qualities. As a result, Powers created an image of George Washington as a deified ruler in apotheosis.⁷

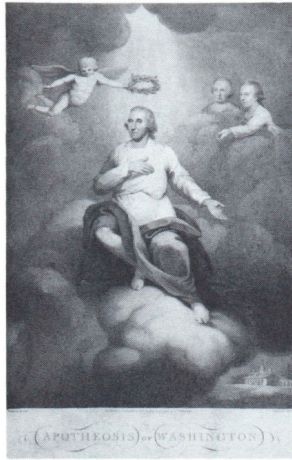


Figure 4. David Edwin, after Rembrandt Peale, *Apotheosis of George Washington*, 1800, engraving, New York Public Library, Prints Division, McAlpin Collection.



Figure 5. John James Barralet, *Apotheosis of George Washington*, 1802, stipple engraving, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of William H. Huntington, 1883. (83.2.159)

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, American artists and writers often commemorated Washington as a transcendent hero.⁸ For example, Parson Weems first mythologized the president by way of apotheosis in his 1800 biography of George Washington:

Swift on angels' wings the brightening saint ascended; while voices were . . . hymning the great procession towards the gates of heaven. His glorious being was seen far off, and myriads of mighty angels hastened forth . . . to welcome . . . a dear loved son, deemed lost, but now found, and raised to kingly honours!⁹

Artists subsequently visualized this scene of transfiguration. David Edwin's 1800 engraving after Rembrandt Peale's *Apotheosis of Washington* (Figure 4) and John J. Barralet's popular engraving of 1802 (Figure 5), for instance, portray Washington's immortality by way of Christian iconography; these are secular versions of the Assumption or the Resurrection.¹⁰ Antonio Capellano's

Fame and Peace Crowning Washington (Figure 6, 1827), located directly above the central portal on the east facade of the U.S. Capitol, similarly features Washington in apotheosis. Located in the center of Capellano's composition is a bust of the president, while flanking this portrait are two flying allegorical figures; Fame on the right holds a trumpet and Peace on the left a palm branch. These winged figures hover over Washington's bust and are about to crown him with victory wreaths.

Rather than create an elaborate secular version of the Assumption or the Resurrection, however, Capellano derived his composition and iconography from antiquity. The rectangular format of the relief, the symmetrical composition with centralized bust, the victory wreaths, and the winged figures all derive from ancient Roman sarcophagi such as the "*Season*" Sarcophagus (Figure 7; Elvehjem Museum of Art). Typically these coffins show frontal, static portraits of the deceased within a medallion held aloft by putti. The "*Season*" Sarcophagus also features a laurel wreath beneath the medallion; in ancient Rome, the crown of victory had been placed on a Triumphator and hence became a symbol of the soul's ascension in funerary art.¹¹ American artists later adopted this attribute to represent transcendence in such works as Peale's engraved *Apotheosis* (Figure 4), the textile, *America Presenting at the Altar of Liberty Medallions of Her Illustrious Sons* (Figure 8; Winterthur Museum, 1785), and the painting, *Liberty and Washington* (Figure 9; New York State Historical Association, 1800-1810).

Figure 6. Antonio Cappellano, *Fame and Peace Crowning George Washington*, 1827, sandstone, U.S. Capitol.



Figure 7. Roman, *Seasons Sarcophagus*, ca. 280 AD, marble, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Max W. Zabel Fund purchase.



Despite Capellano's compositional and iconographic borrowings from antiquity, however, the Italian sculptor, like Hiram Powers, consulted Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait. Copying the hairstyle and likeness, Capellano also adopted from the marble statue Houdon's modern dress of open coat, unbuttoned vest, and ruffled shirt. Capellano eliminated Houdon's military reference, however, reflecting a tendency to humanize America's first president while at the same time immortalize his fame by way of apotheosis.

The desire for more humanizing representations of our presidents that developed during the Jacksonian era contributed to the public's rejection of Horatio Greenough's *George Washington* (Figure 10, 1832-1841).¹² When Congress passed a resolution in 1832, naming Horatio Greenough as the sculptor for this portrait, the document furthermore specified the work be "a full length pedestrian statue. . . the head to be a copy of Houdon's Washington, and the accessories to be left to the judgement of the artist."¹³ Secretary of State Edward Livingston sent a copy of the resolution to Greenough along with the dimensions and the elevations of the Rotunda. In his letter, Livingston suggested Greenough make a square pedestal for the portrait and decorate it with bas-reliefs, "representing, first, the surrender of Yorktown; second, the resignation; third, his inauguration as President. . . fourth, an inscription."¹⁴ Despite Livingston's suggestions and the resolution's specification of a pedestrian statue, Greenough executed a seated figure, thereby eliminating the need for a square pedestal. Edward Everett suggested this composition in July of 1832:

I would have you . . . elevate your imagination by reading the great works of the great masters and particularly the greatest master the Jupiter Olympus of Phidias. . . you have a hall to place it in probably as spacious as the . . . hypothralral court . . . of the temple of Jupiter at Elis and on the principle of facing the standard of excellence to which you aspire as high as possible I would have that immortal work ever before your mind. It will deserve your profound consideration whether you will not have your Washington seated like the Jupiter and as near the colossal as modern taste permits. . . you are acquainted no doubt with the work of M. Quatrè-mère de Quincy on the Jupiter Olympus.¹⁵



Figure 8. *America Presenting at the Altar of Liberty Medallions of her Illustrious Sons*, 1785, textile, Courtesy of The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

By December, 1833 Greenough proposed the following composition:

I have made him seated – looking straight forward – with a sheathed sword in his left hand and with his right pointing to heaven. He is dressed in a large white mantle whose hem is embroidered with stars. He sits on a massive chair ornamented with fruit flowers and Naval and Military trophies – the large spaces on the back of which are filled by bas-reliefs representing virtues personified. The hind posts of the chair are surmounted on each side by an Eagle....¹⁶



Figure 9. *Liberty and Washington*, c. 1800–1810, oil on canvas window shade. New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York.

This description and the final composition of the colossal *Washington* indicate that Greenough followed Everett's advice in emulating Quatrèrè de Quincy's illustration of Phidias's *Jupiter*.¹⁷ However, he probably also consulted Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's imperial portrait of *Napoleon* (Musée de l'Armée, Paris, 1806).¹⁸ Like these precedents, *Washington* is rigidly symmetrical, frontal, colossal, and enthroned. Nevertheless, Greenough replaced the *Jupiter's* ancient, pagan symbols and the painted *Napoleon's* French monarchical and classical accessories with American motifs adapted from antiquity; he furthermore substituted *Jupiter's* spear and statue of Victory, and *Napoleon's* scepter and hand of justice with a short sword and right arm pointing to heaven.

Like Capellano in his Capitol relief and Hiram Powers in his later bust, Greenough transformed Houdon's prototype into a classicized image of Washington as a deified ruler in apotheosis. Besides depicting raised eyebrows, a creased forehead, unfocused eyes, and rigidly symmetrical features, Greenough furthermore carved a heavy mass of locks in emulation of Hellenistic ruler portraits. Whereas both Capellano and Powers depicted a close-fitting wig with lightly incised wavy lines to suggest texture, Greenough deeply carved Washington's hair into a wreath of wavy locks to indicate divine inspiration.¹⁹

Despite this deification of George Washington, however, Greenough rendered the former president as presenting with his left hand the sword of the people. This signifies, in the artist's own words, "the entire abnegation of self," "the apotheosis of abnegation."²⁰ This gesture thereby refers to Washington's resignation, first from the military and later from the presidency.²¹ In Greenough's ideal-heroic portrait of George Washington, then, the president is depicted as a divinely inspired ruler who utilized his powers only when necessary to achieve independence and to establish a democratic form of government. As Horatio Greenough himself wrote:

... Washington's face and form are identified with the salvation of our continent. That sword... cleared the ground where our political fabric was raised. I would remind our posterity that nothing but that, and that wielded for years with wisdom and strength, rescued our rights, and property, and lives from the most powerful... nation of Europe... But the man who overthrew a tyranny, and founded a Republic, was a hero.²²



Figure 10. *Horatio Greenough, George Washington, 1832–1841, marble, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Transfer from the U.S. Capitol.*

Although Greenough followed established iconography for the divine ruler in apotheosis and utilized accepted neoclassical precepts, the American public ridiculed and rejected his colossal portrait of *George Washington*. Pragmatism and prudery resulted in outrage over Washington's nudity. As Philip Hone reasoned in his diary, "Washington was too prudent and careful of his health to expose himself thus in a climate as uncertain as ours, to say nothing of the indecency of such exposure. . . ."²³ Americans furthermore took exception to Washington's deified status; they could not reconcile Greenough's god-like hero with their perceptions of the former president, an elected official who reluctantly took office to serve his country.

Earlier, from the turn of the century until the 1820s, representations of Washington in apotheosis had proliferated and, in the case of Barralet's engraving, were popular. However, when Rembrandt Lockwood and Constantino Brumidi executed their respective works of the same theme during the mid-century, criticism prevailed.²⁴ *The Albion*, for instance, labeled Lockwood's

compositional drawing, *The Last Judgement* (c. 1854, Newark Museum), as "patriotic folly."²⁵ Mid-century Americans preferred humanized representations of their elected representatives, one which celebrated their roles as statesmen and military heroes.²⁶ Few artists made the same mistake again as Horatio Greenough in creating an image of a divine ruler.

More acceptable to the American public and consonant with a republican democracy were sculptured portraits of statesmen as civic heroes. Related to painted historic conversation pieces such as John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* (US Capital, 1786-1820), and the "philosopher in his cabinet" type such as John Singleton Copley's *John Adams* (Harvard, 1783) and Gilbert Stuart's *Lansdowne Washington* (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1796), the carved effigies of American statesmen feature single men in formal poses either in meditation or in the act of speaking.²⁷ Frequently accessory symbols or inscriptions identify the statue's content, further amplified by an address delivered at the monument's unveiling ceremonies.

Although Hiram Powers continued an earlier tradition of representing Washington in apotheosis in his marble bust, he adhered to what would become a more acceptable image of the president as a citizen-orator in his monument executed for the Louisiana State Capitol. No longer extant nor preserved through photographs, Powers's Louisiana *Washington* nevertheless can be reconstructed from the artist's unpublished correspondence. In 1848, the governor of Louisiana wrote Hiram Powers that the legislature had appropriated five-thousand dollars for a full-length statue of Washington to be executed in marble for the statehouse in Baton Rouge.²⁸ When Powers nearly had completed his model, he explained its meaning and composition in a letter to Governor Walker:

I am representing Washington – nearly as possible – as he appeared in the citizen dress of his time, and I have chosen the period after he had proposed for himself a life of retirement. This retirement from public life was I presume the crowning glory of Washington – who became greatest when as far as was possible with him, he made himself least. I have placed him a meditative and dignified posture, the farewell address is in his left hand, and he leans with this right arm upon a column composed of rods banded together – at the base of which appear the sickle and the pruning hook – emblems of husbandry.²⁹

For authenticity, Powers consulted a cast and a daguerreotype of Houdon's Virginia Capitol *Washington* and clothes worn by the former president when he resigned his commission.³⁰

Hiram Powers not only utilized Houdon's *Washington* for his likeness, but also apparently emulated its iconography to some degree. Although the Louisiana monument was destroyed in a fire shortly after the Civil War, the sculptor's description provides enough information to detect this association. Houdon had clothed his figure in contemporary garb and had included a sign of agriculture in order to represent Washington's retirement from a military career. Holding a walking stick and leaning on the fasces, Houdon's *Washington* stands before a plowshare, thereby evoking the Roman general Quintius Cincinnatus who, like Washington, left the military to return to farming.³¹ Powers similarly modeled contemporary clothing, farm tools (the sickle and the pruning hook), and the fasces;³² yet as indicated in his proposal, his version represents a different image than that of an American Cincinnatus in referring to the culminating event in George Washington's last years as *patriae patrus*. Rather than representing Washington's retirement from the military *prior* to becoming the first president of the United States, Powers depicted Washington as he announced his retirement from that office.

Moreover, Powers's *Washington* seems to have been a citizen-orator whose basic message was that of unity, the sculptor specifying that the fasces symbolized "Union and Strength."³³ He posed Washington in the act of presenting his famous farewell address devoted to national continuity. According to the artist's description, Washington paused in the midst of his presentation, meditating on his message and the nation's future course.

Edward Everett in the meantime devoted numerous orations to George Washington and his Farewell Address that could have applied to the Baton Rouge monument, at least from a Northern point of view. "The Birthday of Washington" delivered in New York on February 22, 1851, claimed that Washington still lived in his Farewell address which, Everett asserted, everyone has "read . . . a thousand times," continuing:

And what is the leading advice of this ever-memorable address? Is it not ADHERENCE TO THE UNION? . . . He tells us to watch over its preservation with the most jealous anxiety. On the love of liberty. . . there is but a single sentence, a couple of lines; he just alludes to it as an indwelling sentiment of the American heart. . . . As for the preservation of State rights. . . Washington does not so much

allude to them. . . . NO. . . it is Union, Union, Union, the first, the last, the constant strain of this immortal address.³⁴

Later Everett devoted himself entirely to the Union and preached the gospel of its maintenance by emphasizing Washington's devotion to national cohesion in his final address. In "The Character of Washington," a speech first delivered on February 22, 1856 and then repeated in every major city in the United States, the renowned statesman and orator concluded with the following appeal:

Of all the exhortations which it [the Farewell Address] contains, I scarce need to say that none are so emphatically uttered, none so anxiously repeated, as those who enjoin the preservation of the Union of these United States. Of this, under providence, it depends in the judgement of Washington whether the people of America shall follow the Old World example, and be broken up into a group of independent military powers. . . or whether they shall continue to constitute a confederate republic. . . .³⁵

Hiram Powers's full-length statue of *Washington* executed for the state of Louisiana and Edward Everett's orations both illustrate the status accorded George

Figure 11. *The Marquis De Lafayette Viewing the Statue of George Washington by Antonio Canova in the Old State House, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1840*, lithograph, from a painting by J. Weisman and Emanuel Leutze. Collection of the North Carolina State Department of Archives and History.



Washington as the Great Unifier prior to the Civil War. However, throughout the century, George Washington was extolled as a hero and moral example, not just a symbol of unity. As Edward Everett stated in a speech delivered in New York in 1851, Washington was “a character to be held up to the imitation of our children, to be pointed out to the admiration of the stranger, to be commended to the fervent applause of all mankind, and to be handed down to the last posterity.”³⁶ Within this context, public portrait monuments and busts of George Washington could morally elevate and educate the American public. For example, a lithograph of 1840 (Figure 11) depicts General Lafayette and a young boy as inspired by Antonio Canova’s statue of *George Washington* executed for the North Carolina statehouse (1819-1821). In Francis William Edmond’s *The Image Peddler* of 1844 (Figure 12), a father points to Washington’s bust for the edification of his child. Finally, an illustration from John Frost’s *The Pictorial Life and Washington* published in 1857 shows a boy in reverence of a classical bust of the president clothed in a Roman toga, an image that resembles Powers’s marble portrait housed in the Arizona State art collection.³⁷

Figure 12. Francis William Edmonds, *The Image Peddler*, ca. 1844, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York City.



Prior to the Civil War, sculptors emphasized George Washington's heroic status in public portait monuments and in busts, transforming him into a national icon. However, after the North-South conflict, Abraham Lincoln replaced Washington as the premier statesman and civil hero glorified in bronze and in marble. Depicted as a citizen-orator in such works as Augustus St. Gauden's standing *Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, 1887) and Thomas Ball's *Emancipation Group* (Figure 13; Washington, DC, 1865-1887), Lincoln, identified as the Great Emancipator and Unifier, was immortalized among the pantheon of America's great leaders as the president who "saved the Union and preserved the republic which Washington founded. . ."³⁸ Thus, as this statement and as Ball's statue demonstrate (in Ball's bronze monument, Washington's bust decorates the podium upon which Lincoln leans), George Washington continued to be extolled even after the Civil War, retaining his status as a national icon, but now as the predecessor to Abraham Lincoln.



Figure 13. Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Group*, 1873, marble, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Gift of Dr. Warren E. Gilson.

