

George Washington Lansdowne Analysis
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Lesson Topic

Painting Analysis of the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington

Essential Question

Why is the portrait such a pivotal representation of the American presidency?

Context and Content Background

George Washington was the first president of the newly formed United States (from 1789-1797). He was president for two terms before peacefully transferring executive power in 1797 to John Adams. The portrait we will be examining is a full-length portrait painted by Gilbert Stuart. It was painted in 1796 and is called the Lansdowne painting because it was a gift to the Marquis of Lansdowne, an English supporter of American independence, from Senator and Mrs. William Bingham of Pennsylvania.¹ (This is also the painting Dolly Madison saved as she fled the White House during the War of 1812.)

Lesson Focus

This lesson focuses on a critical analysis of a painting. It is meant to submerge students in symbolism and an understanding of symbolic meaning.

Lesson Sequence and Understandings

- 1) Go over the background and history of the portrait.
- 2) Have students examine the large slide picture of George Washington. The first step is to list everything they see in their notebooks.
- 3) Hand out the Painting Analysis Worksheet and ask students to will fill out the second column in which they try to discover the meaning of the items listed.
- 4) Have students present their findings.
- 5) Go over “other interpretations” on the teacher’s guide worksheet. Have students add the other interpretations to the third column.
- 6) Students should gain the essential understanding from this exercise of the highly symbolic and pivotal nature of George Washington releasing his position and the peaceful transition of presidential power—something that has occurred since the creation of this nation.

¹ From The Smithsonian Portrait Gallery <http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait/index.html>



George Washington (Lansdowne portrait) by Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas, 1796
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
(<http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait/non-flash.html>) December 1, 2008

George Washington Lansdowne Painting Analysis Worksheet

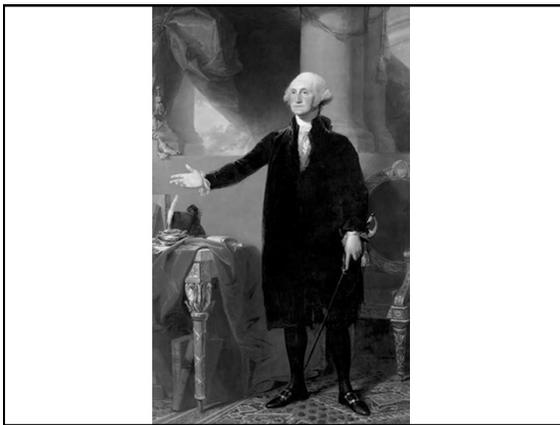
Item	What you think it means	Other interpretations
1. Gesture and Figure		
2. Face		
3. Clothing		
4. Sword		
5. Table (Leg)		
6. Chair		
7. Books on Table		
8. Books on Floor		
9. Inkwell		
10. Rainbow		
11. Dark Clouds		
12. Portico		

Painting Analysis

- What do you see?

George Washington (Lansdowne portrait) by Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas, 1796
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait/non_flash.html)
December 1, 2008

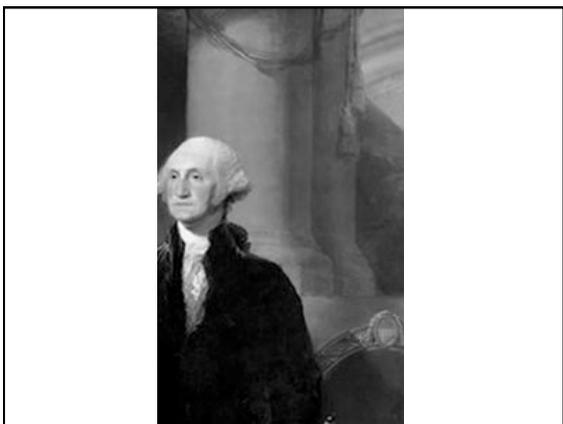




Divide into quadrants....

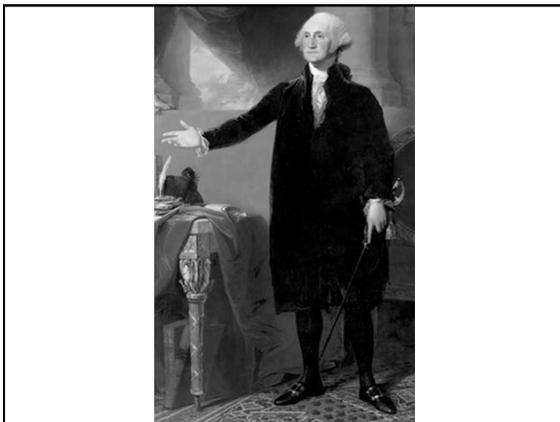
List what you see in each quadrant,
and then look again at the whole
picture.











What does this mean?

Focus on your assigned piece of the painting. Write down what you think it means.

**Gesture
and Figure**



Face



Clothing











Books on the Table

Federalist

Journal of Congress

Books on the floor

General Orders,
American Revolution

Constitution and Bylaws



Inkwell



Rainbow

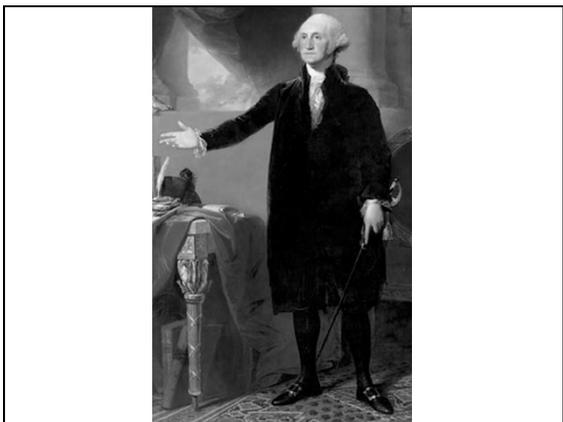


**Dark
Clouds**





Portico



TEACHER'S GUIDE: George Washington Lansdowne Painting Analysis Worksheet

Directions: Fill out your paper like the table below. Examine the portrait and explore the symbolic meanings and interpretations of the objects in the portrait. Try to make meaning from what you already know about Washington and the New Nation.

1. **Gesture and Figure**

Some think that Washington is pointing toward the future, foreseeing bright prospects for his nation. Others believe that Washington is saying farewell. When this portrait was painted, he was about to leave office after having served two terms as President. Viewing the portrait, an observer saw him “bestowing his good advice to his countrymen.”

2. **Face**

Stuart, like many of his contemporaries, believed in physiognomy, the theory that a person's appearance reflected temperament and character. Thus Stuart wanted to depict Washington so that his sterling character would be conveyed. An engraving of Stuart's first portrait of Washington was used as an illustration for a book, *Essays on Physiognomy*. In the book, a writer comments that “every thing in this face announces the good man, a man upright, of simple manners, sincere, firm, reflecting and generous.”

3. **Clothing**

Washington was well aware of the symbolism of personal attire. When the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia in 1775, he was the only delegate in military uniform, for he wished to demonstrate Virginia's willingness to aid Massachusetts, already fighting British troops. For a portrait of Washington, who was so frequently painted in military uniform, the depiction in a suit symbolized a switch in his public role from general to President. At his first inauguration in 1789, he had worn a brown suit of broadcloth from Hartford, Connecticut, with eagle-adorned buttons. The attire reflected the complexity of the new idea of an American President. He chose to wear American-made clothing, rather than attire made in Britain. The eagle was a symbol of the new nation. In the Lansdowne portrait, he wears, as a second-term President, a formal black suit more suitable to his station.

4. **Sword**

The sheathed sword, held in Washington's left hand, is ceremonial. Although a sword with a suit (rather than with a uniform) was going out of style, it was “the grand distinguishing mark of a fine Gentleman.” It is also a symbolic reference to Washington as head of state.

5. **Table (Leg)**

The table and chair in the portrait probably never existed; they serve only as symbols. The furniture's neoclassical decorative elements are derived from the Great Seal of the United States, authorized by Congress in 1782. Like the eagle on the Seal, the two eagles at the top of the table leg are posed upright. Each holds in one claw a bundle of arrows, a symbol of war. But unlike the eagle on the Great Seal, neither holds an olive branch, the symbol of peace, in the other claw. The wooden mace in the House of Representatives may have inspired the design for the table leg. That mace (destroyed when the British set the city of Washington afire in 1814) was described as a bundle of reeds tied together and topped by an eagle. A similar object was carried by officials in ancient Rome as a sign of power. A version of it, looking more like a torch, appears on today's dime.

6. Chair

The oval medallion on the back of the armchair is draped with laurel, a symbol of victory. The medallion's stars and stripes imitate those on the Great Seal, in which an eagle bears a shield with a blue horizontal field with 13 stars above 13 red-and-white vertical stripes. William Barton, one of the designers of the Seal, said the stars and the stripes represented the 13 original states, individually and as a confederation.

7. Books on Table

On the table are two books: *Federalist*, a reference to the *Federalist Papers*—essays published to support ratification of the Constitution—and *Journal Of Congress*. Here, and with the books under the table, Stuart chooses symbols of Washington's work in the world of ideas and the world of politics, where his integrity and sense of purpose shaped the American presidency.

8. Books on Floor

The books under the table include *General Orders*, *American Revolution and Constitution and Bylaws*; they symbolize Washington's roles as commander of the American army, and as President of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, during the debates over the structure of the new government.

9. Inkwell

The inkwell and quill may refer to the making of laws and the fact that Washington wrote and signed many important documents in his lifetime. The two documents on the table could be Stuart's way of symbolizing Washington's role in important documents, but Stuart does not portray any specific document.

10. Rainbow

The rainbow, closely connected with the story of Noah, evolved into a symbol of purity, because it appears after rain has purified the air. Also, it is a symbol of hope, recalling the Biblical story of the deliverance of humankind from the great flood. And because it is white light split into its parts, a rainbow symbolized unity in diversity for a new nation.

11. Dark Clouds

An advertisement about this portrait says that “the appearance of the rainbow is introduced in the background as a sign” that storms have passed. Not all Americans had expected the nation to survive under a federal government. Debates over states' rights still simmered. But, as Washington said in his First Inaugural Address, “the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people” had thus far succeeded.

12. Portico

The portrait follows the European tradition of so-called “state” portraits: a portico-like space with a wall, columns, a curtain, and an open sky behind the figure. The foreground, an ambiguous space that is often furnished and carpeted, repeats compositions used for portraits of monarchs, bishops, admirals, or other public figures.