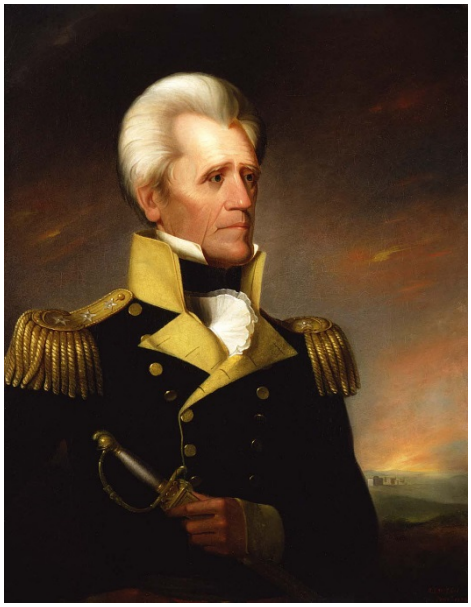
Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Role of Presidential Portraiture

Public perception of American political figures, especially the president, has always been influenced in some way by mass media. In the twentieth century, the advent of radio and television in the twentieth century gave the American public greater access to the president. They could hear him on the radio, and later, could see him on television. But in the nineteenth century mass media, and consequently the public's access to the president, was very limited. Public perception of the president was drawn from sources like pamphlets, political cartoons, and prints based off of paintings. It is for this reason that presidential portraiture was extremely important in the nineteenth century and had the power to shape the opinions of those who viewed it. Consequently, image was, and still is, vital in shaping a president's legacy.

Andrew Jackson: A 'National Picture'

As Andrew Jackson transitioned from military general to presidential candidate to president, it was vital that the portraits produced of him reflected this change. Jackson endured heavy controversy surrounding his actions during the War of 1812. Following Jackson's win against allied British and Indian forces at the **Battle of New Orleans**, the Florida-based Creek and Seminole Indians refused to recognize U.S. claims to their land. Jackson spurred into action, invading Spanish-held Florida without proper approval from Congress. He then consequently arrested, tried, and executed two British nationals accused of aiding the Indians. Despite calls for punishment for having essentially declared war on a foreign country, Jackson was never reprimanded by then-President **James Monroe**. In fact, after his retirement from the army, he was appointed governor of the newly acquired Florida Territory.



Andrew Jackson, 1835, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, Smithsonian American Art Museum

When Jackson decided to run for the presidency in 1824, he and his advisers were eager to minimize the controversy surrounding his military actions and emphasize the connection Jackson had to the public as a representative of the "**Common Man**." The depiction of Jackson as the quintessential Southern gentleman farmer, was a wholly American image evoking the simplicity of the farming life, of the Common Man. Jackson often referred to himself as "a plain cultivator of the soil." Consequently, Jackson's favorite portrait painter **Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl** began to produce more portraits of Jackson clothed in

civilian dress, as military dress might recall Jackson's controversial actions during the War of 1812.

Jackson was not the first U.S. president to alter his image; George Washington also successfully transitioned his public image from military general to that of statesman. Unlike Jackson, Washington's military career was widely praised, so his transition to statesmen was not out of political expediency. The overwhelming number of prints that were produced of the statesman-like Washington is a testament to the success of that transition. Even after his presidency Jackson continued to emulate Washington, preferring to retire to his plantation rather than seek further political office after his term as president.

Demand for Jackson's likeness increased during his second campaign for the presidency in 1828, with the availability of inexpensive engraved prints. The distribution of presidential likenesses and political cartoons provides an excellent indication into the extent of political awareness among the American public in the early nineteenth-century. At the time the nation was still young, having just barely celebrated its fiftieth birthday. Material objects displaying presidential images helped Americans to visualize a national identity for their young country and instilled in them a sense of national pride. The scale and variety of material objects available to citizens was immense; from presidential prints hung on walls, to pitchers and snuff boxes emblazoned with a favorite president's portrait. More universally, presidential images in the 1820s served to assist in unifying a young country which had already lived through two brutal wars. The nation now coalesced behind the idea of the presidency as unifying institution. The images also provided an article of national pride, reaffirming public confidence in the young republic.

Andrew Jackson, 1836-1837, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, Smithsonian American Art Museum

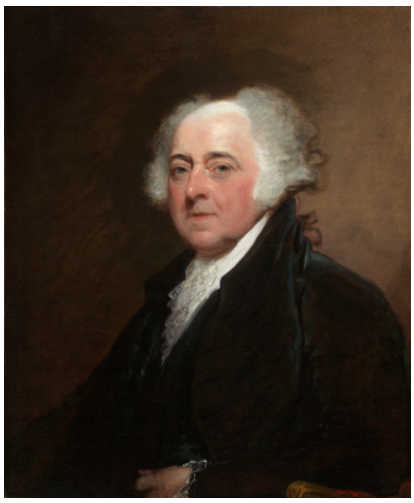
On the eve of Jackson's retirement from office in 1836, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl painted this full-length portrait of the outgoing president, which he called the 'National Picture.' It depicts Jackson in the civilian dress of a statesman, and is the portrait of Jackson most in keeping with the tradition of state portraiture – a convention adopted by American artists from Europe. Instead of having their leaders bedecked in the trappings of monarchial power like

jewels and ermine fur capes, American artists deliberately chose to portray their leaders in a more modest approach.

Though Jackson's portrait is grand in scale (larger than life), compositional elements in the portrait such as the landscape background and style of clothing are kept relatively simple and understated – a notion in keeping with Jackson's image as the "Common Man." Similarly, emblems of the new republic, like the Capitol Building, are incorporated into the composition – as opposed to symbols of monarchial power found in European portraits of this scale and importance. **Gilbert Stuart**'s stately full-length portrait of George Washington, known as the Lansdowne Portrait, is one of the earliest, most significant portraits to employ American emblems of democracy. Earl's portrait of Jackson certainly echoes Stuart's in scale and prominence. Situated on the White House's South Portico, his back to the Capitol Building, Jackson's scarlet-lined military cloak alludes to his military background, yet his somber black civilian dress, white ruffled shirt, gloves, and walking cane remind us of his transition from president to civilian land owner. The portrait honors Jackson's retirement and intended to be consumed by the masses. In fact, the portrait was commissioned and entirely paid for by one dollar contributions from Washington, D.C. citizens, and was first displayed in City Hall. The work received immediate acclaim. In a letter to the *Boston Statesman*, an admirer claimed that the work would immortalize artist Earl as the Lansdowne Portrait had immortalized Gilbert Stuart.

John Adams: A Private Portrait

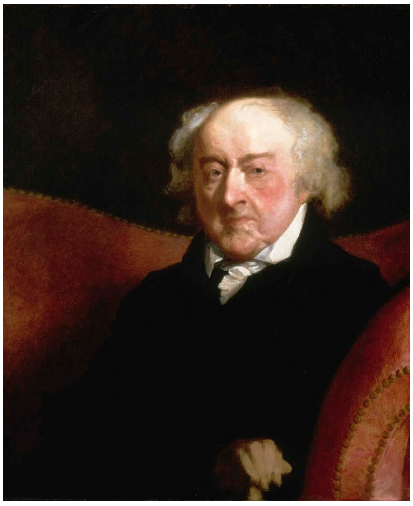
On the other end of the spectrum from Jackson's state portrait, we are presented with an intimate portrait of our nation's second president, John Adams, painted by Gilbert Stuart. Stuart, America's foremost Revolutionary-era portrait painter, painted the eighty-nine-year-old former President and signer of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams, toward the end of his life at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts.



John Adams, c. 1800/1815, Gilbert Stuart, National Gallery of Art

This portrait of Adams in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection is an 1826 copy by Stuart of his original 1823 version, which is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 1823 **John Quincy Adams** was serving as President James Monroe's secretary of state, and it was during a visit to his father's house that convinced Adams that he

needed to commission a portrait of his father. Adams was deeply affected by the visit, recalling that "Within the two last years, since I had seen him, his eyesight has grown dim, and his limbs stiff and feeble. He is bowed with age, and scarcely can walk across a room without assistance." Less than two weeks later, Adams "called . . . upon Stewart the Painter, and engaged him to go out to Quincy, and there paint a Portrait of my father – More than twenty years have passed since he painted the former portrait; and time has wrought so much of change on his countenance that I wish to possess a likeness of him as he now is."



John Adams, 1826, Gilbert Stuart, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Over the course of a year, Stuart made multiple trips to Quincy, Massachusetts beginning in 1823 to paint Adams' portrait. Adams apparently enjoyed his sittings with the painter, stating, "I should like to sit to Stuart from the first of January to the last of December, for he lets me do just as I please and keeps me constantly amused by his conversation." Though suffering various physical infirmities, Adams' mind was still clear and sharp and most of the time he was in good spirits, exhibiting a lively sense of humor. Relative Josiah Quincy, then the mayor of Boston, remarked that in this portrait "Stuart caught a glimpse of the living spirit shining through the feeble and decrepit body. He saw the old man at one of those happy moments when the intelligence lights up the wasted envelope, and what he saw he fixed upon the canvas."

In 1826, following his father's death, John Quincy Adams asked Stuart to paint a posthumous copy of his father's portrait. This is the version that is in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection, gifted to the museum by Adams descendent Mary Louisa Adams Clement in 1950. John Quincy Adams recalled this second portrait in a diary entry dated October 4, 1831:

> *Stewart's last portrait of my father. That portrait was painted at my special desire, about two years before my father's decease and when he was in his ninetieth year. My purpose was to have a likeness of him in his last days by the first painter in this country. It has been a source of much gratification to me that this was effected* [sic]*. The picture is an excellent likeness, and one of the best that Stewart ever painted. After my father's death I had a copy of it painted by Stewart himself which is at Washington. Charles [Francis Adams] has the original in his house in Boston.*

Stuart painted Adams on a 1790s Chippendale sofa in the parlor of the Adams' family home, called "Peacefield," now part of the Adams National Historic Site. The sofa Adams sits on is original to the house and both the sofa and the cane upon which Adams rests his hand are still extant in the house. Since Chippendale furniture was already considered old-fashioned by the 1820's, it has been suggested that Stuart chose to depict the sofa as an allusion to the Revolutionary era which was quickly fading from collective memory as its principal protagonists passed on.

Glossary

Battle of New Orleans: (January 8-15, 1815) the final major battle of the War of 1812. The American forces, commanded by then-General Andrew Jackson, prevented a much larger, combined British-American Indian force from capturing New Orleans.

Common Man: the everyday, working class man – not a wealthy landowner or man of power like a politician. Andrew Jackson, despite his high office, became emblematic of the common man because he came from humble beginnings.

Gilbert Stuart: (1755-1828) American portrait painter, best known for his works of George Washington.

James Monroe: (1758-1831) 5th President of the United States. He oversaw major westward expansion of the continental U.S., and strengthened America's foreign policy with the eponymous Monroe Doctrine (1823), which warned that any attempt by European powers to colonize the Western Hemisphere, or interfere with their politics, would been viewed as a hostile act against the United States.

John Quincy Adams: (1767-1848) 6th President of the United States. American statesman, diplomat, Senator, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives; son of the 2nd U.S. president John Adams.

Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl: (1785-1838) American painter, son of itinerant colonial portrait painter Ralph Earl (1751-1801). Ralph E.W. Earl is best known as the "court painter" to Andrew Jackson, having painted dozens of portraits of Jackson and his family.