

Activity: Observe and Interpret

Artist make choices in communicating ideas. These two artworks were created many years after the respective events that they depict. Why would the artists choose to commemorate these events when they did? What are the Minute Man and George Washington's significance to the nation nearly one hundred years after the Revolutionary War? What clues do the artists give us to answer this question? Observing details and analyzing components of the sculptures, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of these artworks.

Observation: What do you see?

What does Washington hold in his right hand?

In his outstretched hand, Washington holds a rolled up piece of paper. From the title of the artwork, we can infer that this piece of paper is his military commission of the Continental Army. He hands over his commission papers, formally resigning his position as General of the Army.

Describe Washington's attire and his stance? Taken together, what do these two elements convey about Washington?

Washington is dressed in the military regalia of the Continental Army, similar to a 1789 uniform of his [on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History](#). He wears a uniform coat, which would have been dark blue in color, with gilt buttons. The coat is adorned with epaulets on the shoulders made of braided gold thread, indicating his military rank. He wears a beige wool waistcoat with matching knee breeches and knee-high leather boots. His white undershirt reveals a ruffled collar and ruffled sleeve cuffs.

Washington's pose reveals confidence without arrogance. He stands in *contrapposto*, a pose where most of his weight is on one side so that his upper torso and shoulders are twisted off-axis from his hips and legs. His left hand rests on the hilt of his sheathed sword as he calmly extends his right arm, offering his resignation. His facial



[Washington Resigning His Commission](#), 1841,
Ferdinand Pettrich



expression is resilient and steadfast, confident in his decision that his resignation is in the best interests for the young nation.

Perhaps the most dramatic part of Washington's ensemble is his floor-length cape. The cape serves to add drama to an otherwise static artwork, but also adds supportive structure to the large sculpture. This convention of placing a structural support under the guise of a compositional element harkens back to ancient Greek and Roman marble statuary. Marble did not have the proper tensile strength to bear its own weight so artists would add supports, called struts, in order to achieve the necessary balance of weight. These supports were often modeled in the forms of tree trunks. The material of this artwork is plaster painted to look like bronze, but it was thought that it would eventually be transferred to marble or bronze, in which case extra support would have been necessary for the structural integrity of the artwork.

What do the plow and the rifle tell us about the minuteman?

The Minute Man holds the handle of a plow in his left hand, an essential tool for his occupation as a farmer. The plow draws attention to the land itself, representing the physical territory that the man hopes to defend from British aggression. His right hand grips a musket, showing that he is ready to fight for the American colonies – not yet a country – at a moment's notice. In contrast to the plow, the musket is a symbol of war. Here, the farmer turns away from the peaceful act of farming to take up his weapon as a soldier.

How is the Minute Man posed? What do you sense he will do next?

The Minute Man stands resolutely with one foot forward, as though in mid-stride. This is not an introspective moment – he has already made the decision to fight and is walking forward, ready for battle. His determined step is echoed in his squared shoulders and steady gaze. Daniel Chester French chose to base the figure's pose on the [Apollo Belvedere](#), a celebrated classical sculpture from Roman antiquity that first exhibited this stance of impending motion. Imagine the minuteman as a static figure standing firmly on both feet. How would it change the tone or energy of the figure?



[Concord Minute Man of 1775](#); 1889, cast 1917; Daniel Chester French

Interpretation: What does it mean?

When paired together, these two artworks represent bookends of the American Revolution. The first, the minuteman, represents the beginning of the Revolution – a patriot setting aside his farming implements to answer the call to arms. George Washington, depicted in the act of resigning his military commission, represents the conclusion of the Revolution. In resigning his commission, he lays down his sword in order to return to life as a gentleman farmer now that the need to have a standing army has passed. Washington declared that "as the sword was the last resort for the preservation of our liberties, so it ought to be the first thing laid aside, when those liberties are firmly established." He believed that only monarchies needed standing armies, chiefly to keep citizens subdued. Citizen militias like the minutemen were organized at moments of crisis and quickly disbanded, representing the true nature of a democracy. The men who comprised these militias came from many professions and spent only a portion of their time at arms. Called "minutemen" for their ability to be armed and ready at a minute's notice, they were the adversarial force against the British in the first two military altercations of the Revolutionary War, the battles of Lexington and Concord.

Ferdinand Pettrich created the sculpture of George Washington in 1841 at a time when political power in the United States was being consolidated around the federal government. He may have felt that this historic moment in Washington's life would remind a new generation of the nation's founding ideals, and of the dangers of too much power given to too few. Similarly, Daniel Chester French was commissioned in 1871 to create a larger-than-life sculpture of a minuteman to commemorate the centennial of the battle at Concord in 1775 – the first altercation of the Revolutionary War where both sides fired shots. Ten decommissioned brass cannons from the Civil War were used to cast the mammoth sculpture, located on the site of the battle. This version in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum is a scaled-down version of the original, created at a later date in 1917.

The creation of the sculpture after the Civil War is significant as well. As a torn nation began to heal during Reconstruction, the figure of the Minute Man harkens back to a time when thirteen colonies banded together, united in their efforts against the British – a reminder that our nation is stronger together and will be again.