

Activity: Observe and Interpret

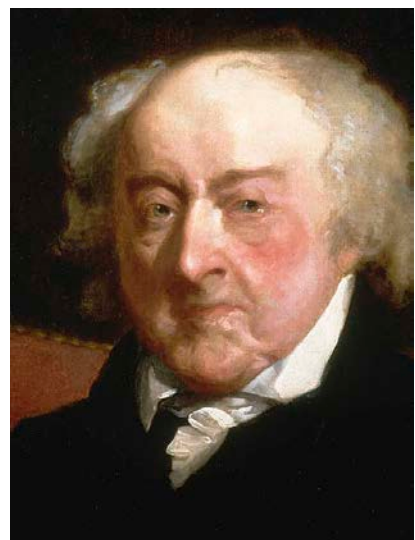
Artists make choices in communicating ideas. Compare the portraits of presidents John Adams and Andrew Jackson. What were the artists trying to communicate about these men? How do the artists capture each man's personality? What input do you think each president may have had in determining how his portrait looked? What visual clues has each artist provided to send a particular message about each president? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.

Observation: What do you see?

John Adams

- **What symbols are used to give us clues about the life of the sitter?**
- **What is the location of the sitter in the portrait?**

The portrait of John Adams by Gilbert Stuart depicts the elderly 2nd President of the United States seated in the corner of a red upholstered sofa. The curved frame of the sofa envelops the frail frame of the elderly Founding Father. His face shows telltale signs of his advanced age – wrinkled flesh, dimmed blue eyes, and a puckered mouth, twisted and sunken from a lack of teeth. His bony right hands grasps the top of a cane, yet another indication of his fragile state. Despite these signs of age, Adams gazes out at the viewer with a direct, intense stare, reminding us of the man he once was – a tenacious, strong-willed legal mind that helped orchestrate the American Revolution.



Andrew Jackson

- **Where is Andrew Jackson standing? Is the background real or imagined? What is the background's relation to Jackson?**
- **How does color set the tone and mood of this painting?**

In a full-length portrait, Andrew Jackson is depicted on the portico of the White House. He stands erect, dressed in stately clothing. The deep black color of his suit is starkly contrasted with the brilliant red color of his cloak and his starched white ruffled shirt. Jackson carries a walking stick in one hand and in the other he grasps a white leather glove. His iconic white and black beaver hat rests upside down on a gilded, red silk upholstered chair. Behind him, weeping willow trees flank a porte-cochère, or covered entryway, to the White House. A dirt road leading out of the entryway hints at a winding path through the streets of Washington, D.C., all the way to the Capitol Building (as it looked in 1836), which is situated in the far distance. A lingering red-golden sun sets behind the figure of Jackson, while darker clouds from an impending night sky frame his face and trademark head of thick white hair.



Interpretation: What does it mean?

John Adams

Gilbert Stuart painted Adams at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts when the former president was eighty-nine years old. 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. Family friend Josiah Quincy, then the mayor of Boston, remarked that in his 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.” Adams’ son John Quincy Adams, who commissioned this portrait, recalled seeing his father late in life, writing, “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.” This visit with his father convinced him to commission Stuart to paint a portrait of his father. Unlike the larger-than-life portrait of Andrew Jackson, the intimate scale of Adams’ portrait suggests a personal rather than ceremonial intent.

Andrew Jackson

The full-length, larger-than-life portrait of President Andrew Jackson, dubbed the ‘National Picture’ by its artist, is the portrait of Jackson most in keeping with the tradition of presidential “state” portraiture. The tradition of state portraiture was a convention adopted by American



artists from Europe. Ralph E.W. Earl's portrait of Jackson echoes Gilbert Stuart's famous [Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington](#) in both scale and prominence. Jackson is depicted on the White House's South Portico, his back to the Capitol Building – suggesting his longstanding difficulties with Congress. The president is dressed in a scarlet-lined military cloak, alluding to his military background, yet his black suit, white ruffled dress shirt, gloves, and walking cane remind us of his impending transition from statesman to civilian farmer. The weeping willows and his trademark white beaver hat with black mourning hat band serve as reminders that Jackson's presidency began with the death of his beloved wife Rachel. Jackson acquired the hat in 1829 from Washington D.C. hatter Orlando Fish and was rarely seen without it until his death in 1845. The golden autumnal sunset is

representative of the conclusion of Jackson's time in office; the sun figuratively setting on his administration. One contemporary reviewer called the sunset "emblematic of his glorious official retirement."