

Commander in Chief WASHINGTON

PORTRAITS of GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON

— 1779, 1780, 1785 —

Shown at right (in proportional size) and reproduced on the following pages are three portraits of General George Washington by noted artists, completed during and soon after the American Revolution (1775-1783).



- Charles Willson Peale, 1779 (bottom)
oil on canvas, ~2½ yards in height
 - John Trumbull, 1780 (top left)
oil on canvas, one foot in height
 - Robert Edge Pine, 1785 (top right)
oil on canvas, ~one foot in height
- Consider your immediate impressions of the three portraits. What initial response does each artist mold for his viewers?
 - What do the artists convey through Washington's demeanor—his stance, gesture, facial expression, and direction of gaze?
 - What do they convey through the objects, and other people in the portraits? through the backgrounds?
 - How do the artists use light, shading, and contrast to direct the viewer's eye and response?
 - For what audience and purpose did the artists create the portraits?
 - How could one argue that each portrait reveals the "real" Commander-in-Chief? the "real" George Washington?
 - Trumbull and Peale served with Washington in the Continental Army. How might this have influenced their portraits?
 - Compare these portraits of General Washington with those created during his presidency (1789-1797), including those by:

Edward Savage	1789-90
John Trumbull	ca. 1792
Rembrandt Peale	1795
Charles Willson Peale	1795
Gilbert Stuart	1795
Gilbert Stuart	1796
James Sharples	ca. 1796

[last portrait painted from life]

[See George and Martha Washington: Portraits from the Presidential Years, National Portrait Gallery, www.npg.si.edu/exh/gw/.]





Charles Willson Peale (American, 1741-1827), George Washington at Princeton, 1779

Oil on canvas, 93 x 58.5 in. (236.2 x 148.6 cm.), Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. www.pafa.org. Reproduced by permission. Gift of Maria McKean Allen and Phebe Warren Downes through the bequest of their mother; Elizabeth Wharton McKean. 1943.16.2.

A triumphant Washington is depicted after the American victory in the Battle of Princeton in January 1777, two weeks after his daring crossing of the Delaware River and surprise attack at Trenton. Wearing the blue sash of the Commander in Chief, a resolute and confident Washington stands amidst a captured cannon, a fallen British flag (left) and two Hessian flags (right, captured at Trenton). At right, a soldier holds Washington's horse; above them flies the Continental battle flag. In the mid distance are captured British soldiers. In the far distance is the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), where the critical battle ended. It is dawn, the time the battle commenced and perhaps, Peale may suggest, the dawn of American military triumph.

Already an accomplished artist, Peale served in Washington's army as a militia officer, fighting in the Battles of Princeton and Trenton. In 1779, he was commissioned by the Executive Council of Pennsylvania to paint this portrait for display in its chamber in Independence Hall. Responding to its immediate popularity, he produced eighteen replicas with minor variations.

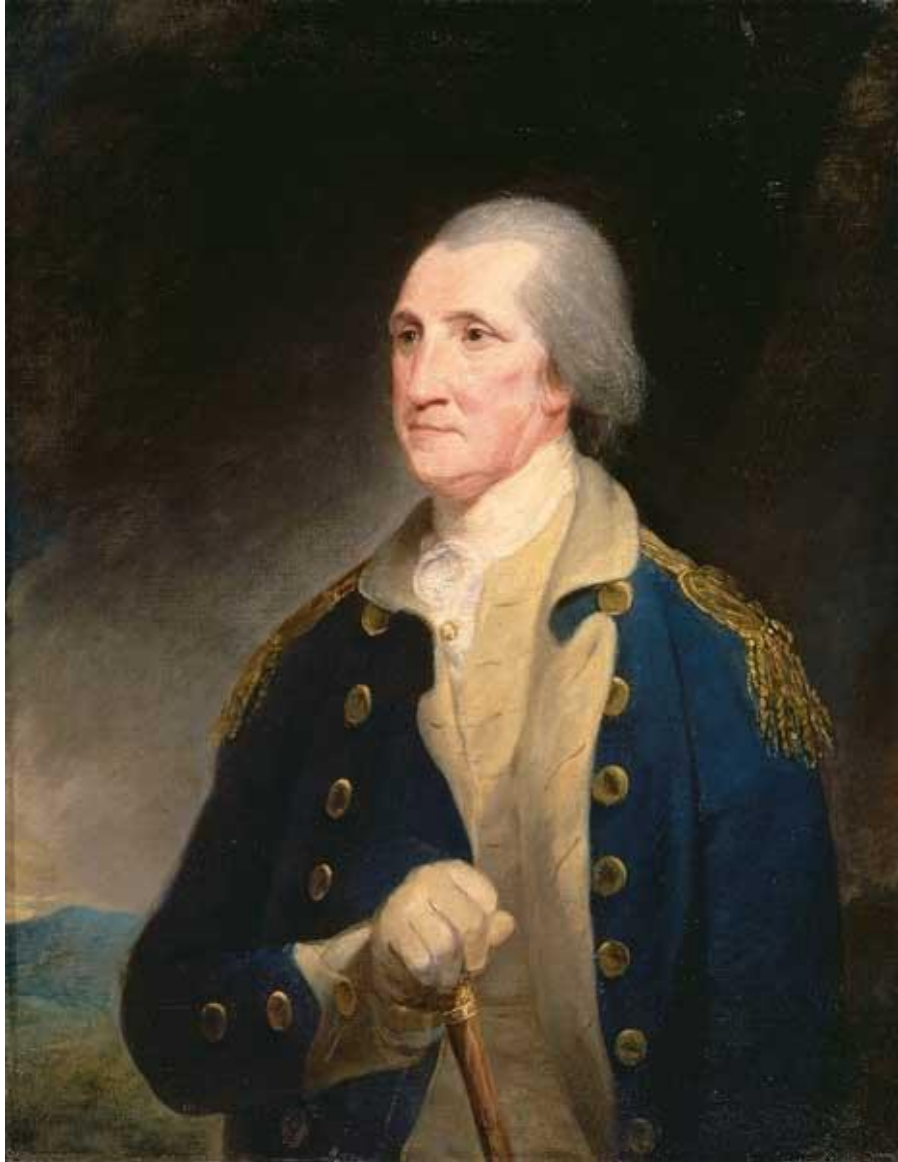


John Trumbull (American, 1756-1843), Portrait of George Washington, 1780

Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 in. (91.4 x 71.1 cm.), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Charles Allen Munn, 1924 (24.109.88). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduced by permission.

Standing on a promontory high above the Hudson River while a British warship fires upon an American fort, Washington projects a self-aware and disciplined composure as Commander in Chief. Behind him stands his enslaved personal servant, William "Billy" Lee, wearing an exotic turban (which may be factual), and gazing intently in Washington's direction. Lee holds the reins of Washington's horse (see head and leg, lower right). Washington points across the river to the fort under attack (see the warship placed between Washington's left leg and the horse's head).

As Trumbull had been an aide-de-campe (personal aide) in Washington's staff in 1776-77, he painted Washington from personal memory. Although he would likely have met William Lee, his depiction of the slave identified as "mulatto" in Washington's will is considered inaccurate. Trumbull painted the portrait in 1780 while studying with artist Benjamin West in London.



Robert Edge Pine (English, ca, 1720-1788), Portrait of George Washington, 1785

Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 27.5 in. (90.2 x 69.9 cm.)

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution: NPG 80.16. Reproduced by permission.

In 1783, two months after the signing of the Treaty of Paris that formally ended the American Revolution, 52-year-old George Washington resigned his commission as Commander in Chief and returned to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia. Accustomed to sitting for portraits by this time, he agreed to pose for the English artist, Robert Edge Pine, who had recently settled in Philadelphia and spent nearly a month in at Mount Vernon in 1785.

In the portrait, Washington holds no hat or sword but firmly grasps a walking stick. He is surrounded by no accouterments of war or landscapes of victory, yet he is still clearly dominant and self-possessed. His demeanor conveys a fatigued but undiminished resilience. In early 1784 he wrote to a friend that "I am just beginning to experience that ease, and freedom from public cares which, however desirable, takes some time to realize; . . . I feel now, however, as I conceive a wearied traveller must do, who, after treading many a painful step, with a heavy burden on his shoulders, is eased of the latter, having reached the Goal to which all the former were directed . . ."** Five years later Washington would return to public service as the first president of the United States.

*Letter to Henry Knox, 20 Feb. 1784.