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From Gentility to Republicanism: Creating an American Form of Portraiture in the Early Republic

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In October 1825, the sculptor John Henry Isaac Browere arrived at Monticello to make a plaster "life mask," of former-President Thomas Jefferson's face. Although the final statue presents a serene, aged Jefferson, its peacefulness belies the trials Jefferson underwent in sitting for the mask. Jefferson's great-granddaughter, Virginia Randolph Trist, reported to Ellen Wayles Coolidge, the painful process Jefferson endured:

> A *vile plaisterer*, who calls himself an adept in the art of taking likenesses in plaister, came highly recommended, & prevailed on Grand-Papa to submit to that horrible operation of moulding the plaister on his face, & even enclosing the whole head & throat, which seems really like burying alive, however Grand-Papa was too weak to undergo it in the first place, & in the second the man was so very unskillfull, that he suffered the clay to get too dry before he removed it, and then not having put oil on enough to prevent its adherence to the skin, the operation of removing it became one of the most exceptionally painful that it is possible to imagine, & so slow withal that we expected Grand-Papa to faint from exhaustion before it was completed, and so I still believe he would have done if he had not been enduring torures that prevented it, and which wrung from him, patient as he always is in suffering, groans & even hysterical sobs.1

Jefferson's experience raises some important questions about American portraiture in the early republic. First, why did founders like Jefferson believe preserving their likenesses for posterity was so important that they would undergo a process akin to burying alive? And why was obtaining an exact likeness so important to both artists and the founders, especially when many European leaders and artists of the day preferred more idealized images? In this essay, I will attempt to answer those questions as I trace the emergence of a distinctive American style of portraiture in the early republic.

The dawn of the early republic, marked by the adoption of the constitution in 1788, was a unique period in the history of America, and indeed, the world. With the eyes of the world upon them, the founding fathers conducted a kind of experiment in government. The founders knew they faced terrible odds; schooled in ancient and modern European history and political theory, they knew the vulnerabilities of their republican form of government. A republic demanded a virtuous citizenry and thus a high moral code to ensure continued freedom. The founders thought that luxury, factionalism, and other vices were ever-present dangers, seeds of destruction that lurked in the souls of their fellow citizens and within themselves.2 Additionally, a man's investement in luxuries signalled to his fellow

Americans that he might support the ideas of artistocracy and monarchy instead of republicanism. Therefore republicanism called for thrift, simplicity and plainness in all things, be it fashion or food. Only by closely adhering to republican values could men guard against greed and corruption within others and within themselves, and thus preserve the American polity.

In light of the political culture of the day, American portraiture represents a unique fusion of two seemingly opposed concepts, that of ancient republican values and more modern European notions of gentility. Generally speaking, portraiture is the genre of gentility. In the earliest times, only monarchs and aristocrats could afford to commission portraits of themselves, and they used them to reinforce their authority and status both in their home countries and abroad. With the rise of the bourgeouise class in Europe, however, portraiture became less exclusively elite, as bourgeoise families used their newfound wealth to commission works of art. Still, the middle class appropriation of portraiture only reinforced it as a symbol of gentility. Through portraiture, members of the middle class hoped to increase their status, challenging that of the elites. In America, colonists generally realized the pretentiousness of comissioning one's own portrait. Still, wealthy families often commissioned portraits of family members whose status had changed because of marriage, an inheritance, or the assumption of public office.3 Aware of the genteel connotations of portraiture, the founding fathers and American artists endeavored to fuse two different concepts and ideals in the new American portraiture, that of republicanism and that of gentility. Therefore such portraits provide a valuable glimpse into how the founders viewed themselves both personally and politically.

Current studies of early republican portraiture fail to trace the political implications of such cultural objects. To date, historians have concerned themselves more with the distribution, creation, and authenticity of artists' images. Few have questioned why artists portrayed the founding fathers in the manner they did. For example, Edgar P. Richardson wrote that early American artists, "saw the war for independence and the creation of our republic from the midst of the action, painting its chief actors before time had wrapped a veil of idealization around them, and turned them into patriots and mythical heroes."4 What Richardson, and other historians overlook, however, is that idealization is a conscious artistic choice; not *time* but artists and politicians create idealized images. The lack of such idealization during the early national period was thus a deliberate choice made by leaders in conjunction with artists. American artists easily could have glorified the revolutionaries and founding fathers during their lifetimes. Such idealization and, in fact, outright fiction were not uncommon during the 1790s and early 1800s; Jean-Antoine Gros' *Napoleon visiting the plague victims at Jaffa* (1804) is a prime example of a flattering image of an imaginary event. Artists and politicians in America, however, carefully selected dress and strove for accuracy in likeness and size because they considered such images to be not only reflections of patriotism and heroism, but also tributes to the republican values embodied in the American Constitution.

Constructing and displaying "acceptable" images of the founding fathers was a challenging task for many artists because they had to incorporate republican principles of plainness and simplicity into a genteel genre. Men like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison agonized about their reputation in the eyes of posterity, forcing artists to craft portraits of such subjects carefully. Founding fathers insisted upon appearing noble and gentlemanly but not aristocratic for fear others might label them monarchists and enemies of the republic. In addition because people considered men like Washington to be models of republican virtue, artists had to represent them accurately and realistically so they could inspire such virtue in others. Artists also had to overcome more immediate obstacles to create and display their works. They often had to balance the demand for images memorializing American leaders with the reality that men like Adams and Washington could not spare the time to sit for portraits or simply disliked the tedium of sitting. Also, while some urban citizens could view statues and paintings of Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison in public buildings or

museums, others, especially poorer citizens, often knew their rulers only through inexpensive portrait prints, often rudely engraved. While creating and distributing acceptable images of early national politicians often proved challenging, portraiture is a valuable tool for understanding their personal and political goals. Scholars must study early national culture and politics and their interplay to fully understand both.

American portraiture during the early republic was indebted to the influence of British-inspired colonial artists, while still representing a deliberate break from such a tradition. Artists in America in the early eighteenth century were generally Englishmen or Europeans who had fled the politically and religiously unstable continent. People in this period generally thought of portraiture as a trade like cobbling or smithing; portraits were mere replicas of religious and political dignitaries showing no imagination or creativity, and as such, artists generally believed their work too unimportant to sign. Images of kings, queens and colonial governors graced the walls of public buildings like meeting halls and council chambers, while colonists hung portrait prints of monarchs and ministers in their homes. Most colonists believed commissioning one's own portrait pretentious, although few colonists had the means to do so anyway. Such was the state of portraiture in the colonies well into the second half of the eighteenth century.5

With America's formal break from England, American portraiture began to develop into something distinctly "American," although promising American artists still fled to the continent to train and to find work. During the Revolution, Charles Willson Peale began to compile portraits of "Revolutionary Patriots and other Distinguished Characters," which later formed the core of his Philadelphia museum. As Peale wrote in his 1813 introduction to his catalogue of the Museum, "several of the characters were painted in camp who afterwards fell in defence of their Country. How interesting it is to have preserved the features and countenances of men who sacrificed their lives in defense of rights and principles to be enjoyed by their successors!"6 Artists like Edward Savage and James Sharples also created collections of distinguised Americans. Such portraits sold rapidly in print form, often going through several editions in a few years. Reminiscing about early America in 1818, Russian diplomat and painter Pavel Petrovich Svinin remarked, "It is noteworthy that every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God's saints."7 Europeans also clamored for prints of American patriots like Jefferson and Washington. Yet despite this burgeoning interest in American subjects, many of the period's greatest American artists ironically called Europe home.8 Benjamin West, who had set up a studio in Europe in 1763, held court in London and was joined in the 1780s by such notables as Gilbert Stuart, John Singleton Copley, Mather Brown, and for a time, John Trumbull. Those men flocked to England for a variety of reasons. Obtaining portrait commissions in America was a difficult task, which forced even the most prominent artists to scour the land in search of a handful of commissions; Europe, on the other hand, had a much more established system for commissioning portraits. In addition, America did not have any art academies, forcing American artists to return to Europe to study the old masters. Thus, right until the birth of the republic, American art was still somewhat European, despite the proliferation of American subjects.

The constitution of 1788, rather than the Revolutionary War, served as the final break with Europe politically and thus artistically. The new American art which emerged was a highly didactic art on two levels, both political and personal. First, the new American art was a celebration of republican values. In choosing a republican form of government, the former colonists pledged themselves to the republican code of simplicity and plainness, and political opponents carefully monitored each other for any sign of potential treason. In such a political climate, men like Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison were sensitive to the way artists portrayed

them. They realized that to succeed politically they had to uphold the republican values of simplicity and plainness in their portraits. At the same time, however, the founding fathers were very conscious of their own personal roles as public figures, moral exemplars, and models for posterity. Never before in history had men been so aware of their roles as nation-founders. Those men understood that in order to secure their hold on political power and thus eternal fame, they had to merge political and personal didacticism in images of themselves. The key was to present themselves as model republicans for the rest of the nation, while at the same time *appearing* is selfless, republican leaders, since self-interest was tantamount to political suicide in the early republic. As Douglass Adair explained it,

> Of course they were patriots, of course they were proud to serve their country in her need, but Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, were not entirely disinterested. The pursuit of fame, they had been taught, was a way of transforming egotism and self-aggrandizing impulses into public service; they had been taught that public service nobly (and selfishly) performed was the surest way to build "lasting monuments" and earn the perpetual remembrance of posterity.9

Both the founding fathers and the men who depicted them clearly recognized the powerful didactic nature of art. After attending an exhibition in London, John Adams noted in his diary "The pleasure which arises from imitation we have in looking at a picture of a landscape, a port, a street, a temple, or a portrait. But there must be action, passion, sentiment, and moral, to engage my attention very much." He believed such subjects to be not only interesting, but "useful" as well.10 As early as the mid-1780s, as in the case of Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue of George Washington, the founding fathers recognized the importance of the human form as a model of noble actions to be conveyed to future generations.11 As Jefferson wrote to Washington to persuade him to sit for Houdon, "I trust that, having given your Country so much of your time heretofor, you will add the short space which this operation will require, to enable them to transmit to posterity the form of the person whose actions will be delivered to them by history."12 Although Washington had to rely upon history to impart his actions to posterity, his image was very important in the instruction of future generations. Thus, even before the existence of the American republic, the founding fathers recognized the importance of portraiture as a didactic tool, although only after the constitutional government's creation would artists more carefully deliberate over questions of dress, size, and likeness in an attempt to transmit a specific set of virtues.

Discussion about the pedestal inscription for Houdon's monument to Washington contains valuable clues about the self awareness of those involved in American political life in the 1780s and the following decades. Letters about the commission abounded with the words "posterity" and "history," revealing, once again, that those involved saw themselves as models for future generations of Americans. Originally, the legislature designed the inscription to read as follows:

> The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia have caused this statue to be erected as a monument of affection and gratitude to GEORGE WASHINGTON who uniting to the Endowments of the Hero the Virtues of the Patriot and exerting both in establishing the liberties of his country has rendered his name dear to his fellow citizens and given the World an immortal example of true Glory.13

When Houdon complained that the inscription was too long, he sparked a lively debate about its replacement. Jefferson, writing to James Madison, suggested the following. "Behold, Reader, the form of George Washington. For his worth, ask History; that will tell it, when this stone shall have yielded to the decays of time. His country erects this monument: Houdon makes it."14 What is significant is that Jefferson proposed to omit from the inscription the description of Washington's merits, relying

upon the statue itself to impart those virtues to the viewer. He did maintain, however, that History would be able to discern Washington's achievements even after the statue crumbled, suggesting that fame lives forever

Not just the founding fathers, but also artists recognized the potential importance of art in shaping the virtues of a younger generation. In 1789, John Trumbull was already contemplating several historical paintings chronicling the history of the American Revolution; his proposed series included *The Declaration of Independence* (1818), a work featuring the portraits of 47 founding fathers, that eventually found its home in the United States Capitol. In a letter to Jefferson, then-Minster to France, Trumbull lamented the neglect of painting and outlined his higher aims for the medium:

> I am fully sensible that the profession as it is generally practised, is frivolous, little useful to Society, and unworthy the attention of a Man who possesses talents for more serious occupations-- but, to diffuse the knowledge and preserve the Memory of the noblest series of Actions which have ever dignified the History of Man:-- to give to the present and future Sons of Oppression and Misfortune such glorious Lessons of their rights and of the Spirit with which they should assert and support them:--and even to transmit to their descendants the personal resemblance of those who have been great actors in these illustrious scenes, were objects which gave a dignity to the profession, peculiar to my situation...15

Trumbull, like many of his peers, recognized that painting portraits of American founding fathers was an effective means of conveying "glorious Lessons" to future citizens. By rendering such noble men and deeds on canvas and in stone, artists hoped to garner glory not only for their subjects, but also for themselves. For example, Thomas Jefferson, described the sculptor Houdon in terms he might have used to describe a fellow politician: "He comes now for the purpose of lending the aid of his art to transmit you to posterity...I have spoke of him as an Artist only; but I can assure you also that, as a man, he is disinterested, generous, candid & panting after glory: in every circumstance meriting your good opinion."16 Thus political men and artists were united in their aims.

Because artists and politicians were so aware of the importance of conveying republican values in portraiture, they strove to keep all aspects of a portrait "republican," including dress. The dress code came into being in England in the thirteenth century, and according to a 1510 law, allowed only lords to wear gold or silver cloth and lace; knights could opt for blue or red velvet, and lower class citizens had to choose rougher fabrics.17 The dress code lingered into the eighteenth century, and, under the auspices of British imperialism, implanted itself in colonial America. In 1761, John Adams noted two portraits of King Charles II and King James II hanging in the Council Chamber in Boston's old Town House, and described them years later as follows:

> "If my young eyes or old memory have not deceived me, these were as fine pictures as I ever saw; the colors of the royal ermines and long flowing robes were the most glowing, the figures most noble and graceful, the features the most distinct and characteristic..."18

Even in 1761, dress distinguished royalty and nobility from the masses. Kings and queens still enjoyed furs, richly colored robes, and lace.

During the Early Republic, politicians were particularly suspicious of monarchists and their secret desires to overthrow the republic. This concern carried over into portraiture; in such an environment dress was highly suspect, especially aristocratic dress. John Singleton Copley's 1783 full-length portrait of John Adams is a prime example of an aristocratic portrait that later became an embarrassment during the reign of republican virtues and values. In the portrait, Adams, with lace at

his throat and cuffs and a sword at his side, grasps a scroll in one hand, while a globe rests at this feet. His lace and somewhat haughty stance could easily have elicited cries of "monarchist" from fellow republicans. As early as 1784 Adams realized he may have made a mistake by allowing Copley to paint such an "English" portrait:

> Desire Mr. Copeley to get a Frame made for my Picture and do you give him the Money. He will tell you how much and give you a Receipt. The Frame should be made, to take to Pieces, so that it may be removed to the Hague or to Boston, in time. Thus this Piece of Vanity will be finished. May it be the last.19

Because post-Constitutional sensitivity to monarchism tendencies had not yet matured, Adams' discomfort with the portrait was more personal than public; he viewed it as a sign of personal pretension rather than government subversion. By 1793, however, Adams' sentiments had changed. In that year, William Stockdale proposed that an engraved copy of the portrait serve as a frontispiece to his Defence of the Constitution of the U.S. of America. Adams unsuccessfully tried to change Stockdale's mind.

> If Mr. Copley is willing that the Picture should be put into the hands of any Artist you may name, I have no Objection, and you may do as you please: but I own I should be much mortified to see such a Bijou affixed to those Republican volumes.20

During this period, the aristocratic nature of Adams' portrait stood in direct opposition to the republicanism embodied in his Defence of the Constitution. Such complications compelled prominent early national politicians to eschew aristocratic dress and stances of the kind exhibited in Adams' portrait.

Although the founders considered themselves republican--a concept with roots in classical Greece and Rome--they often shunned Greco-Roman dress in portraits, signaling a further break with European neoclassical portraiture and politics. After the Virginia General Assembly awarded the commission for Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait of George Washington, a great debate ensued about whether Washington should wear ancient garb or modern attire. The traditions of classical antiquity pervaded both Revolutionary rhetoric and the nation's republican government, rendering classical imagery a logical choice for American portraits. Such motifs were common in Europe at the time -- Canova sculpted Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker, while David drew on classical Greece and Rome in his turn-of-the-century society portraits. Perhaps the association between classical motifs and European art prompted Jefferson to urge Washington to adopt modern dress -- a deliberate break with the vogue in some parts of Europe.

> I was happy to find by the letter of Aug. 1, 1786. which you did the honour to write me, that the modern dress for your statue would meet your approbation. I found it strongly the sentiment of West, Copeley, Trumbul[l] and Brown in London, after which it would be ridiculous to add that it was my own. I think a modern in an antique dress as just an object of ridicule as an Hercules or Marius with a periwig and chapeau bras.21

Thus, Houdon's sculpture portrayed Washington cloaked in American military attire. The effect of such a choice was two-fold. First, modern dress underscored the forward-looking aspect of the new republic. Secondly, modern dress depicted Washington as a man of his time, making him a more approachable model of virtue for his fellow citizens. By choosing modern attire instead of the classical, American politicians boosted republican virtue and broke with the European traditions of the day.

John Trumbull's portrait of Alexander Hamilton (1792) underscores the importance of dress in creating paintings that would serve as moral exemplers. In 1791, several New Yorkers raised money to subsidize a portrait of Hamilton in honor of his service to the nation. In the letter to Hamilton telling him of the commission, they asked him how he would like to be portrayed, telling him they would be "pleased to permit the representation to exhib such part of your Political Life as may be most agreeable to yourself."22 Instead of attempting to represent his political life, Hamilton went one step further than Washington, who had opted to show himself in the garb of a military hero. Hamilton hoped to make himself a model for his fellow citizens by representing himself as one of them, as he wrote in response to the citizens' letter:

> I shall chearfully obey their wish as far as respects the taking of my Portrait; but I ask that they will permit it to appear unconnected with any incident of my political life. The simple representation of their fellow Citizen and friend will best accord with my feelings.23

Thus, unlike Adams and Washington, Hamilton chose not to show himself as an aristocrat or even a military hero, but as someone whom the common man could emulate. By rejecting a political representation of himself, Hamilton chose to present himself as a disinterested citizen, someone above politics. In choosing such a representation, Hamilton paid tribute to the republican values of simplicity and disinterest.

While portraits of European aristocrats during this period were usually highly stylized and idealized, artists and politicians in America struggled to accurately replicate bone structure and proportions, which they thought revealed a man's inner character. During the late eighteenth century, physiognomy and phrenology were all the rage; both were pseudo sciences that closely linked virtue and the shape of the facial features and head. Swiss minister Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801) argued in his Essays on Physiognomy that his goal was to study morality, which "discovers itself principally in the face--in the various changes and transitions, or what is called the play of the features." At the same time, Lavater saw "a natural union between physical and moral excellence."24 Thus, in order to reveal their subject's morality and high virtue to the world, artists had to obtain an accurate representation. Such concerns came to the fore after Houdon agreed to sculpt Washington. Those involved originally agreed that Houdon would strike the bust in France from a life-sized portrait by Charles Willson Peale. After much debate, however, Houdon agreed to come to America to obtain a more accurate likeness. As St. John Crévecoeur argued,

> the most perfectly painted ressemblance, in my opinion, is Insufficient to Enable a Statuary, however skillfull, to represent perfectly the desired object; if this is really the Case, some other Means must be Look'd for, in order to procure the true features, & the most perfect resemblance of that General--so Great is my veneration for him that I most Earnestly wish that the French artists may give us an exact Copy if I dare use that word, & a striking representation of that Head to the Internal organization of which we are all so highly Indebted....this Statue is to go down to posterity, thousand of Busts will be made from it at Paris either in Terre Cuite, Plaister or Bronse; it cannot therefore resemble too nearly the original.25

In order to provide a model of virtuous citizenship for the nation, St. John Crévecoeur argued that Washington must either travel to France and sit for Houdon, or sit for a life mask in America that could later be sent to France. Jefferson, too, saw the importance of obtaining an exact life replica of Washington, so he could be a moral exemplar.

Of course no statue of Gnl. Washington which might be a true evidence of his figure to posterity could be made from his picture. Statues are made every day from portraits; but if the person be living they are always condemned by those who know him for want of resemblance, and this furnishes a conclusive presumption that similar representatives of the dead are equally unfaithful.26

Thus Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin persuaded Houdon to come to America to take a life likeness of Washington.

Although politicians were adamant that their portraits were exact likenesses, portraitists had to strike a balance between maintaining accuracy and lapsing into mere copying. As Trumbull pointed out while under attack for his Declaration of Independence, "painters as well as poets have their license. [W]ithout this the talent of imagination would be banished from the art. [T]aste and judgment in composition would be of no value, and the mechanical copyist of matter of fact would be on a footing with the first painter."27 Thus the ability to render sitters both accurately and creatively was a skill many artists coveted. An artist glorified himself and his art by accommodating his patron without sacrificing his art.

Despite their fear of becoming mere copyists, artists relied upon elaborate measuring and tracing techniques to get accurate likenesses of the founders, and thus reveal the virtue apparent in their faces. In 1790 Washington sat for John Trumbull ten times in a six-month period; such repeated sittings were not uncommon. Measuring sitters' faces was also a common phenomenon. When artist G.P.A. Healy asked John Quincy Adams if he could measure Adams' face, Adams remembered a similar scene from years earlier when his father John Adams sat for John Singleton Copley. As Healy noted, "Copley had painted an excellent portrait of my sitter's father, and when I asked permission to measure the face [of John Quincy Adams], as I always do, he observed that he had seen Copley measure not only his father's face, but his arms and legs."28 Use of the physiognotrace also came into vogue during the early national period. Gilles-Louis Chrétien had invented the physiognotrace in the 1780s, an instrument designed to trace the subject's profile, producing a life-sized replica which could then be reduced. The famous profile portraitist Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin used a physiognotrace to produce hundreds of portraits, including those of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. By 1803, Rembrandt Peale was using an improved physiognotrace at Charles Willson Peale's museum in Philadelphia. By tracing the lines of the founding fathers' faces, artists hoped to convey to the public the virtues inherent in their physical features.

Measuring and tracing were not the only methods used to create exact replicas of the founders; life masks also were popular in the early republic. In executing his busts of Washington and Jefferson, Houdon took life masks of his subjects. The process, which entailed applying oil to the face and then covering it with several layers of plaster, did not always go smoothly. As noted earlier, while taking his life mask of Jefferson, John Henry Isaac Browere put the former President through great pain in order to produce an exact model of his face. Although the process of taking life masks was often uncomfortable, several founders underwent the process- -some more than once. As Jefferson wrote to James Madison,

> I was taken in by mr. Browere. he said his operation would be of about 20. minutes, and less unpleasant that Houdon's method. I submitted without enquiry. but it was a bold experiment on his part on the health of an Octogenary worn down by sickness as well as age...29

That Jefferson, 80 years old and ailing, would submit to such a practice without question, reveals the importance politicians placed on obtaining life-likenesses.

In the early republic, creating a life-sized portrait was almost as important as obtaining a subject's exact facial features; a gigantic statue was literally larger-than-life and therefore less emulable for the common man. As with every other detail, the size of the Houdon sculpture of Washington was a thoughtful and deliberate choice. Referring to European equestrian statues, Jefferson wrote:

> the smallest yet made is infinitely above the size of the life, and they all appear outrée and monstrous....Yet it is impossible to find a point of view from which it does not appear a monster, unless you go so far as to lose sight of the features and finer lineaments of the face and body, a statue is not made, like a mountain, to be seen at a great distance. to perceive those minuter circumstances which constitute it's beauty you must be near it, and, in that case, it should be so much above the size of the life, as to appear actually of that size from your point of view.30

American's preferred life-sized sculptures because they enabled citizens to appreciate the physiognomy of the subject, enhancing the power of its moral message. Jefferson also preferred a life-sized statue so that it could stand as a standard for all future images of Washington. Still, Jefferson understood that a life-sized monument might not be possible. In such a case, he expressed his hope that the statue would at least appear life sized. As he wrote:

> We are agreed in one circumstance, that the size shal be precisely that of life. Were we to have executed a statue in any other case, we should have preferred to make it somewhat larger than life; because, as they are generally a little elevated, they appear smaller, but we think it important that some one monument should be preserved of the true size as well as figure, from which all other countries, and our own, at any further day when they shall desire it, may make copies, varying them in their dimensions as may suit a particular situation in which they wish to place them.31

Jefferson also favored life-sized paintings, as he did when commissioning Mather Brown to paint John Adams. As he wrote to William Stephen Smith, "With respect to Mr. Adams's picture, I must again press it to be done by Brown, because Trumbul[l] does not paint of the size of the life, and could not be asked to hazard himself on it."32 Life-sized portraits were almost as important as accurate likenesses in conveying the sense that the founders were real people and thus realistic models for the common man.

Despite the importance of obtaining accurate likeness and life-size compositions, inaccurate resemblances sold rapidly both in Europe and America, especially during the colonial and Confederation periods. Demand for Washington's image was so heavy in Europe in 1775 that printmakers created a completely fictitious image of him for mass production, instead of waiting for an accurate likeness to reach the continent. In America, common folk could not afford oil portraits and marble busts, and had little opportunity to view them publicly; instead many Americans bought portrait engravings of the founders. The poor quality of many of these engravings implies that simple patriotism outweighed the need for accurate representations among the common people. Though printmaking became more sophisticated during the early republic, Jefferson commented upon the proliferation of inaccurate representations of himself. The Reich medal struck from Houdon's bust "sells the more readily as the prints which have been offered the public are such miserable caracatures," he wrote to his daughter.33 The rapid sale of inaccurate likenesses suggests that those removed from the political hot house, the common folk, were less concerned with republicanism and virtue than the founders. That the founding fathers could have so misread their portrait audience suggests that they might not have been completely selfless in striving for glory and recording their images for posterity.34

While artists and politicians joined to create a didactic form of explicitly American art, portraiture had other functions as well, including an ambassadorial role. Artworks imparted a politician's likeness to citizens of Europe since men like Madison, Washington, and Hamilton did not make extended visits to the continent often if at all. Many European leaders included portraits of the founders in their collections of portraits of distinguished characters. As early as 1784, Count Friedrich-Christoph hoped to secure a portrait of Washington for his collection, which included likenesses of Prince Eugene, Maurice of Saxony, and Frederick the Great. Washington responded to his request with the following:

> I must entreat, my General, that you will accept my best acknowledgments for the favorable opinion you are pleased to express of my military character, as well as for your great politeness in proposing to introduce my likeness amongst your collection of heroes....35

Washington commissioned Joseph Wright (1756-1793) to complete the portrait. Because the piece was going to the continent, it followed the European style--Washington cloaked himself in Greco-Roman attire. By adopting European portrait conventions, Washington suggested that the fledgling country of America was on par with the more established European nations. Thus, artists were instrumental in spreading an image of the new republic. A sort of portrait trade came into existence, as Europeans collected images of distinguished Americans and Americans, in turn, rushed to collect portraits of European leaders. By creating a sort of "republic of portraits," American artists and politicians increased their stature by showing they could compete with artists and leaders on the continent. Charles Willson Peale was especially instrumental in creating an American collection of European rulers to rival any European collection. As he wrote to Jefferson, "I mean to continue my labours of preserving Duplicates of American Subjects for the purpose of exchanging them for those of other Countries, altho' I have been rather unfortunate in an attempt of this kind with Sweden."36 Peale eventually sent his son Rembrandt, another renowned portraitist, to Europe to study and also to collect portraits of Europeans and American living abroad for Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia museum. Rembrandt collected portraits of Houdon, General John Armstrong, Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford and others while in Europe in the early nineteenth. The acquisition of European portraits provided a comparison of European artists with American artists like Rembrandt. As Charles Willson Peale wrote to Jefferson:

> I cannot but have the fullest confidence in his ultimate success & that his Country may yet be proud of his talents....As one of the means of enabling Rembrandt to accomplish his object, I shall engage him to paint for the Museum about 12 Portraits in Paris or Rome or both."37

Peale hoped that his son could paint a life portrait of Napoleon, although he would have to be "at the head of Portrait Painters on the Continent" to secure such a commission.38 Not more than 32 years after the Declaration of Independence, the fledgling American republic was ready to compete with its mother country in the art world.

As brokers of the founding fathers' images at home and abroad, artists maintained a marginal hold in the political world, often serving in minor political posts to supplement their incomes, which were small because of the relatively primitive nature of American art. Both John Trumbull's and Charles Willson Peale's connection to politics stemmed from their service during the Revolutionary War. Their military experiences subsequently inspired them to record the visages of America's war heroes. Serving in the army, both men made valuable contacts with political leaders of the day. Trumbull later secured an appointment as John Jay's secretary during the negotiation of the Jay Treaty, and in 1796

Washington appointed him to a commission to recover American seamen impressed by Great Britain. In 1800, Charles Peale Polk, the orphan nephew and foster son of Charles Willson Peale, served as the secretary of the Republican citizens' committee of his county, but he sought another office to help support his family.

> It is known to you, Sir, the languid State of the fine Arts in the Country, particularly that of Painting; and it has been my misfortune to meet but with little encouragement for several Years past, owing to a variety of causes. In the County where I reside, 'tho vastly wealth, that wealth lies in the hands of a Class of Citizens, whose political principles seem to have forbidden not only the encouragement of those who dared to differ in Opinion from them, But they have even gone so far as to cherish a Spirit of persecution against every man who presumed to Opposed [sic] them...It is then, Sir, under the reluctant pressure of necessity, that I venture to Solicit your Patronage in Obtaining Any Situation, here or Elsewhere, under the General Government, that my answer the purpose of Affording any comfortable subsistance to my family.39

Because artists relied upon political leaders for many of their portrait commissions, art became a political activity; artists needed the money, and politicians needed artists on their side. Jefferson by far had the largest circle of artistic friends. He and Trumbull had been close during Jefferson's tenure as minister to France. Jefferson also communicated frequently with Charles Willson Peale. As the above letter and others suggest, Jefferson's association with the Peale family extended into the second generation.

> My Son Rembrandt, some time past, wrote a letter to the President [Jefferson], in which he intimated a wish to be employed in some public office, he did not then know, that the heads of the departments, appointed their own Clerks. He has merit as an artist, yet does not meet with the encouragement he deserves. His other talents equal those for painting, any of which might be valuable if exercised.40

By encouraging artists, perhaps men like Jefferson hoped to win their good will and monopolize their talents to propagate their own images.41

Though many artists held minor political offices, their relationship to the founders was equivocal. Although Charles Willson Peale and Jefferson wrote to each other about a variety of topics including art, agricultural and natural science, the two men may have been less than equals. As Peale wrote,

> when I reflect with what freedom I dictate my letters to you, they may be though by those who do not know me, presumtive and deficient of respect...I have long been accustomed to addres you with the freedom of a friend that has always sought occasions to serve me.42

Peale's letter suggests that artists traditionally were deferential to politicians, though relations between artists and politicians were rarely so cordial. Many politicians viewed artists as necessary to their cause, but lazy. Gilbert Stuart took approximately 15 years to complete his portrait of James Madison. As Madison lamented, "I know nothing of Stuart's success. I sat to him at the request of the Massachusetts legislature, but have never seen any thing of the picture but the first sketch."43 While Stuart was renowned for his snail-like pace, other artists proved equally unreliable. Jefferson worried that Mather Brown was taking too long to complete his portraits of Jefferson and Adams, while Washington called Joseph Wright "a little lazy." Washington chided Wright, "as the Count de Solms proposes to honor it [Washington's portrait] with a place in his collection of Military characters, I am

persuaded you will not be deficient in point of execution."[44] Still, laziness was not the only censure that artists earned for themselves. Sometimes politicians viewed artists as swindlers who used images of America's leaders to earn as much money as possible. As Fisher Ames wrote to Alexander Hamilton, "We have you exhibited here in Wax. You see that they are resolved to get money by you in every form."[45] Italian artist Giuseppe Ceracchi perpetrated perhaps the greatest scheme of all. Early in 1790 Ceracchi came to America intending to build a monument to the American Revolution. While here he made terra cotta profiles of men like Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and George Washington who considered them gifts. When Elias Boudinot made disparaging remarks about Ceracchi's intended monument, Ceracchi decided to charge the sitters for their terra cotta profiles and busts-- asking Madison for $250 and Jefferson for $1500 for a bust and engraved pedestal. Yet, Ceracchi believed himself to be the victim of the scam. As he explained to Madison,

> By the infamous manner with which I have been treated...I find myself hurt in every respects....Under such evidence you may immagine Sir that a Lion would suffer mortification, therefore I shall fly from this country as quick as possible in order to forget all the dessitful gaemes plaed aigent my sincerity....But what as been the product of all this exercions. Ingratitud I received for my reward and offences, after the sacrifice of my mony, time and performances and even of that honour I was seeking for[sic].[46]

Doubtless, such an incident worsened relations between artists and politicians.

Early national political culture shaped forever the development of American portraiture. Just as Americans solidified their political independence from England in 1788, they declared their artistic independence as well. American art incorporated two diametrically opposed concepts -- the republican values of simplicity, plainness, and disinterestedness, as well as portrait connotations of gentility and elitism. Americans developed an American purpose for art (imparting republican values), created an American style of art (republican simplicity), and used American subjects for art (republican leaders), but in a traditionally unrepublican medium, the portrait. The founders hoped such an art form would provide their countrymen with models of virtue, while simultaneously increasing America's legitimacy abroad by creating an explicitly American form of culture. While they hoped to boost America's political standing through art, they also used the medium to secure more personal goals. Through art, the founders strengthened their own authority and ensured that their visages would be instanlty recognizable for generations to come. While examining the gallery of notable Americans in Charles Willson Peale's museum, Theodore Sedgwick noted,

> Many of these men are now no more. The various affections with, which my heart was expanded, as the likeness for departed heroes & Statesmen brought to my remembrance, the great events in the production of which they in the hands of providence were the instruments cannot be described. I will say, however, till then I never so well knew the value of portraits.[47]

On the whole, American artists and politicians succeeded in creating a politically and personally didactic art.

Notes

1. Virginia Randolph Trist to Mrs. Joseph Coolidge Jr., October 16, 1825, The Ellen Wayles Coolidge Letterbook, acc. 9090, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

2. For a description of virtue and its importance in the Early Republic, see John R. Howe, "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," American Quarterly, 29 (Summer 1967): 147-165.

3. See Ellen G. Miles and Richard H. Saunders, American Colonial Portraits: 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C., 1987), p. 16.

4. Edgar P. Richardson, Brooke Hindler, and Lillian B. Miller, Charles Willson Peale and His World (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), p. 23.

5. See Ellen G. Miles and Richard H. Saunders, American Colonial Portraits: 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C., 1987) for an excellent overview of American portraiture prior to the ratification of the Articles of the Confederation.

6. Historical Catalogue of the Paintings in the Philadelphia Museum, Consisting Chiefly of Revolutionary Patriots and other Distinguished Characters, Philadelphia, 1813, Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family (microfilm).

7. "The Observations of a Russian in America," unpublished excerpt from A Picturesque Voyage Through North America, as quoted by Abbott Gleason in "Pavel Svin'in, 1787-1839" in Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation, 1776-1914 (Washington, D.C.: Published for the National Portrait Gallery by Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1976), p. 21.

8. For a wonderful account of American expatriate artists in the late 1780s, see section 43 of Kenneth Silverman's A Cultural History of the American Revolution (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1834).

9. Douglass Adair, "Fame and the Founding Fathers," in Trevor Colbourn, ed., Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair (New York: Norton, 1974), 31.

10. John Adams' Diary, July 1, 1786, Works of John Adams, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1856), 3:398-99.

11. The Virginia General Assembly commissioned Houdon's statue of Washington. Although Houdon did not complete the statue until 1791, it is dated 1788.

12. Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, December 10, 1784, Houdon in America: A collection of documents in the Jefferson Papers of the Library of Congress, ed. Gilbert Chinard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1930), 5.

13. THE STATUE OF WASHINGTON, Resolution of the General Assembly of Virginia, June 22, 1784, Houdon in America, 1.

14. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, February 8, 1786, Ibid., 30.

15. John Trumbull to Thomas Jefferson, June 11, 1789, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Julian Boyd and et al, 23 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950--), 15:177.

16. Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, July 10, 1785, Houdon in America, 11.

17. See Richard Bushman, The Refinement of America: persons, houses, cities (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 69-74 for a description of the dress code.

18. John Adams to William Tudor, March 29, 1817, Works of John Adams, 10:245.

19. John Adams to John Quincy Adams, post June 6, 1784, Adams Family Correspondence, ed. Richard Alan Ryerson, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard, 1993), 5:341.

20. A bijou is a jewel or trinket. By calling his portrait a "bijou" Adams is pointing out the decorative and ornate nature of the piece. John Adams to Wm. Stockdale, May 12, 1793, Adams Family Papers, (microfilm).

21. Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, August 14, 1787, Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 12:36.

22. Roger Alden, Brockholst Livingston, Carlile Pollock, Gulian Verplanck, and Joshua Waddington to Alexander Hamilton, December 29, 1791, Papers of Alexander Hamilton, ed. Harold C. Syrett et al, 27 vols., (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961--), 10:482. This portrait now hangs in the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York in New York City.

23. Alexander Hamilton to Roger Alden, Brockholst Livingston, Carlile Pollock, Gulian Verplanck, and Joshua Waddington, January 14, 1792, Ibid., 10:515.

24. Johann Kaspar Lavater as quoted in José López-Rey. "Goya's Caprichos: Beauty, Reason, and Caricature." from Goya's Caprichos: Beauty, Reason, and Caricature. (Princeton, 1953), 116-117.

25. St. John Crévecoeur to Thomas Jefferson, September 1, 1784, Houdon in America, 2-3.

26. Thomas Jefferson to Governor Harrison, Jan. 12, 1785, Ibid., 6.

27. Thomas Jefferson to Col. John Trumbull, Nov. 11, 1818, Jefferson papers, (microfilm).

28. G.P.A. Healy, Reminiscences of a Portrait Painter. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1894), 157.

29. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, October 18, 1825, Jefferson Papers, (microfilm).

30. Thomas Jefferson to the Virginia Delegates, July 12, 1785, Houdon in America, 14-15.

31. Thomas Jefferson to Governor Harrison, January 12, 1785, Ibid., 6-7.

32. Thomas Jefferson to William Stephen Smith, Feb. 2, 1788, Papers of TJ, 12:558.

33. Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, April 3, 1802, Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, eds. Edwin M. Betts and James A. Bear Jr., (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 221.

34. Common folk were not the only group who did not understand or care to understand the republican messages encoded in American portraiture. American ladies often did not sense the political importance of dress and accuracy in portraiture either. Abigail Adams described Copley's portrait of John Adams as "a most Beautiful painting,""very Elegant," and an "admirable likeness." See Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, July 25, 1784 and AA to Elizabeth Smith Shaw, July 28, 1784 in Adams Family Correspondence, 5:374 and 403-4.

35. George Washington to Solms, January 3, 1784, Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series, eds. W.W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992--), 1:8-9.

36. Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, June 22, 1796, Jefferson papers, (microfilm).

37. Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, September 21, 1808, Jefferson Papers, (microfilm).

38. Ibid.

39. Charles Peale Polk to James Madison, April 2, 1801, Papers of James Madison, Secretary of State Series, ed. David B. Mattern, 3 vols. (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 1:65.

40. Charles Willson Peale to James Madison, May 21, 1801, Ibid., 1:218.

41. Jefferson also may have had some influence over Joseph Wright too. In 1792 Wright was appointed the first draftsman and die sinker of the U.S. Mint, which fell under Jefferson's jurisdiction as Secretary of State.

42. Charles Willson Peale to Thomas Jefferson, February 10, 1807, Jefferson Papers, (microfilm).

43. John Adams to F. A. Vanderkemp, Works of JA, March 3, 1804, 9:589.

44. George Washington to Joseph Wright, January 10, 1784, Papers of GW, Confederation Series, 1:32.

45. Fisher Ames to Alexander Hamilton, August 15, 1791, Papers of AH, 9:59.

46. Giuseppe Ceracchi to James Madison, May 11, 1795, Papers of James Madison, ed. William T. Hutchinson and M.E. Rachal et al, 16 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, later Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 16:5-7.

47. Theodore Sedgwick to Pamela Sedgwick, January 9, 1791, Theodore Sedgwick papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (First Federal Congress Project, George Washington University).