

# Rembrandt Peale



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Rembrandt Peale was born in 1778 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, one of seventeen children born to Philadelphia artist Charles Willson Peale. Rembrandt and many of his siblings were named after famous European artists such as Rubens, Raphaelle, Titian Ramsay, Sophonisba Angusciola, and Angelica Kauffmann. Rembrandt began painting at an early age completing his first credible self-portrait at age thirteen.

In 1795, at the request of his father, George Washington agreed to sit for Rembrandt, then only seventeen years old. In his lecture, *Washington and His Portraits*, first delivered in 1854, Rembrandt reminisced about the sittings, stating:

It was in the autumn of 1795 that, at my father's request, Washington consented to sit to me, and the hour he appointed was seven o'clock in the morning. I was up before daylight putting everything in the best condition for the sitting with which I was to be honored, but before the hour arrived became so agitated that I could scarcely mix my colors, and was concerned that my anxiety would overpower me and that I should fail in my purpose unless my father would agree to take a canvas alongside me and thus give me an assurance that the sittings would not be unprofitable.

Young Rembrandt lived in awe of Washington and the qualities of his portrait from those sittings later influenced the stylized yet acutely accurate images that characterized what became known as his porthole paintings. Rembrandt stated in the 1850s that his true calling was to multiply the countenance of George Washington.

Rembrandt's painting later benefited greatly from his travels abroad to England, France, and Italy. His style of painting changed from the tight style characterized by close observation typical of his father's eighteenth-century mode to a style

# VOCABULARY

French neoclassicism  
grand manner history painting  
portrait  
president  
porthole  
monumentality  
posthumous  
icon  
character  
identity  
environment  
political  
entrepreneur  
colonial

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strongly influenced by French neoclassicism and grand manner history painting.

Through his determination in capturing the visage of America's founding father for public enlightenment, Peale created his own quintessentially American niche market. His paintings of Washington appealed to America's fascination with making icons, that would culminate a century later with the Pop Art movement of the 1960s. He continued to work as a portrait and history painter for nearly seventy years, producing over one thousand finished works. He died in 1860 in Philadelphia.

## ABOUT THE ART

The Cincinnati Art Museum's *Porthole Portrait of George Washington* by Rembrandt Peale is a posthumously painted portrait of America's first President. It is patterned after Peale's original portrait of Washington painted from life in 1795. Peale generated a Washington portrait industry painting some eighty similar works, with slight variations to satisfy an enthusiastic market centered on the growing patriotism of which Washington was a central figure.

The oval painted frame surrounding the portrait is reminiscent of a ship's porthole. Painted to suggest stone, this framing device provides a sense of monumentality and dignified purpose to the subject. Painted wearing the uniform of a Colonial general, Washington is depicted as a military hero rather than a statesman.

Very similar versions of the *Porthole Portrait of George Washington* can be found in museums throughout the country including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The Metropolitan's collection also includes a *Porthole Portrait of Martha Washington*, painted around 1850.

The most famous of the porthole portraits of Washington, completed in 1824, hangs in the Senate Chamber of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. That painted porthole is an elaborate illusion of a stone-carved masonry frame encircled by a garland of oak leaves with a keystone representing Zeus, the supreme ruler of the ancient gods. The Latin inscription *Patriae Pater*, father of the country, is painted across the base of the painting under the porthole, appearing to have been carved on a monument. Created after three months of confining himself to his studio, Peale succeeded in painting what he had hoped would come to be the standard likeness of Washington. Peale justified his many replica paintings of George Washington by claiming that, as the only living painter who had seen Washington, "the reduplication of my work, by my own hand, should be esteemed the most reliable."

# CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

## LANGUAGE ARTS

- Write an essay about a notable citizen in your community. Describe why he or she deserves that title.
- Read a selection from George Washington's farewell address. Analyze its meaning and rewrite it in terms more easily understood today.
- Study American writers and their works from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Suggestions include Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, William Cullen Bryant's poems such as *To an American Painter Departing for Europe*, and the writings of Sojourner Truth.

## SCIENCE

In addition to interests in art, several members of the Charles Willson Peale family were noted for their accomplishments in science. In 1801 Rembrandt Peale assisted his father in unearthing the bones of prehistoric mammals in Newburgh, New York. His brother Rubens was a noted botanist. Investigate the specific contributions of these men to natural science.

## ECONOMICS

Successful early American entrepreneurs, such as artist Rembrandt Peale, sought the patronage of wealthy and influential clients to support the growth of their reputations through prestigious commissions and lucrative sales of their work. Investigate some of the economic sources of personal wealth during eighteenth-century America. What types of business, skilled trades, and scholarly pursuits produced great financial rewards for these Americans?

## SOCIAL STUDIES

An individual's identity is, to a large measure, constructed through the interaction of the individual with his or her environments and the consequences of these interactions. Analyze the influences of the social, political, and economic environment of George Washington's time that impacted the formation of his iconographic identity.

## GEOGRAPHY

Investigate early American territory acquisitions. Create a map depicting the parts of the present day United States that comprised America's territorial boundaries when George Washington became our first president. Discuss some of the possible dilemmas for early governance of diverse geographic areas.

## CHARACTER EDUCATION

Rembrandt Peale's Porthole Portrait of George Washington reveals a man of great dignity, respect, and courage. Consider what courage means. Behaviorally it could mean that you stand up for what is right, even if you stand alone. Write an essay describing a situation in which you showed moral courage and how people responded to you afterwards.

# CRITICAL THINKING

Washington's noble likeness became an icon of our American democracy. Consider the connections between concepts of democracy and respect.

How does a government "of, by, and for the people" depend on mutual respect among its citizens?

Brainstorm a list of people from more recent times who could similarly serve as icons of democracy both domestically and abroad. Analyze their contributions. Defend your selections.



Rembrandt Peale, *Porthole Portrait of George Washington*, between 1825–60, Gift of Reuben R. Springer, 1884.365

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