

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, 2016.

(After Gilbert Stuart) **George Washington/Lansdowne Portrait**, oil on canvas, H. 93 in. (236.2 cm.) x W. 59 in. (148.9 cm.) in frame. Gift of Samuel Larned, 1838.

Visitors to the Athenaeum are greeted by this magnificent copy of Gilbert Stuart's 1796 *George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait)* at the bottom of the library's Reading Room stairs. The life-sized figure of Washington in *The Lansdowne Portrait* utterly commands the space; he appears every inch the charismatic leader of a fledgling United States. *The Lansdowne Portrait* perfectly complements the Athenaeum's mission; a purpose eloquently vocalized by Francis Wayland, the fourth president of Brown University, in his address for the inauguration of the Athenaeum in 1838:

[The Athenaeum] is to provide the means for the universal diffusion of knowledge, of knowledge in its most extensive signification, among the citizens of Providence.¹

As a symbol of democracy and equality, *The Lansdowne Portrait* encapsulates the library's core values and functions as a visual manifesto for the Athenaeum.

Gilbert Stuart [American, 1775-1828] was born in Washington County, Rhode Island, and shortly after his birth, his family moved to Newport.² Stuart began painting at a young age, and soon traveled to Europe to finish his training in London, under the tutelage of Scottish portraitist, Cosmo Alexander, and American history painter, Benjamin West.³ In 1793, Stuart returned from Europe and installed a studio in New York City.⁴ Stuart had lofty ambitions for his career; he sought status and fame among the higher echelons of society. Painting Washington's portrait would help Stuart to achieve his dreams, as images of the nation's first president were in high demand and guaranteed commercial success. From his earliest moments in office, the President projected a sense of celebrity. On his way to his first inauguration, spectators declared, "they could die content, having cast their eyes at last on the savior of the country."⁵ In 1794, Stuart moved from New York to Philadelphia to pursue a sitting with Washington, and in the following year, the President sat for Stuart for the first time.⁶ There is some controversy surrounding whether this first portrait still exists. Rembrandt Peale, a contemporary of Stuart's, maintained that *George Washington (Vaughan Portrait)* was Stuart's first picture of Washington.⁷ A second

¹ Discourse at the Opening of the Providence Athenaeum, July 11, 1838 by Francis Wayland, (Providence: Knowles, Vose, & Company, 1838), 4

² Lawrence Park, *Gilbert Stuart, An Illustrated Descriptive List of his Works, Vol. I* (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1926), 13

³ William T. Whitley, *Gilbert Stuart* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 16

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87

⁵ Barbara J. Mitnick, "Parallel Visions: The Literary and Visual Image of George Washington," in *George Washington: American Symbol*, ed. Barbara J. Mitnick (New York: Hudson Mills Press, 1999), 55

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94

⁷ Dorinda Evans, *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 60

sitting with Washington in March of 1796 resulted in *George Washington (Athenaeum Portrait)*, currently part of the Boston Athenaeum's art collection. It is the Athenaeum portrait that later served as the model for the Lansdowne work.

Prominent Philadelphia socialites, William and Anne Bingham, greatly admired the Athenaeum portrait, and commissioned a full-length portrait of Washington as a gift to the Marquis of Lansdowne. The Marquis had served as a proponent for the American Revolution in the British Parliament, and the Bingham's were eager to cultivate a positive relationship with such an instrumental political figure.⁸ *The Lansdowne Portrait* proved to be an immediate success and one of the greatest highlights in Stuart's career. It is a powerful image. Stuart faithfully follows the grand tradition of European portraiture, featuring sober colors, a strong and stable composition, and theatrical, Greco-Roman elements. *The Lansdowne Portrait* exemplifies the late eighteenth and nineteenth century movement of neoclassicism, through formal elements and depiction of Washington.

Neoclassicism influenced more than art; it colored perceptions of Washington. He came to be thought of as a contemporary patrician, as he possessed an admirable sense of justice and democracy, devotion to public service, and sound judgment. Artistic depictions of Washington accordingly illustrated these new conceptions of Washington through classical formal components, such as formal or military attire, erect posture, swords, or pointing in one direction--all exemplified in *The Lansdowne Portrait*.⁹ The work features Doric columns and dramatic red drapes, which set the stage for a resolute Washington as he prepares to deliver an address. The President rests one hand on sword, and stoically gazes beyond the viewer, undoubtedly towards the future. The portrait simultaneously portrays Washington as an intrepid leader of a newborn nation, a deft and fearless military leader, and an exemplar of moral character, who refused a kingship. *The Lansdowne Portrait* does more than demonstrate neoclassical conceptions of Washington; it casts Washington, the colonial hero, among the luminaries and leaders of antiquity.

Stuart was extremely pleased with *The Lansdowne Portrait*, and rightly anticipated that the engravings based on the image would yield valuable commercial sales. Stuart informed the Bingham's that he reserved engraving rights to the portrait, yet unfortunately, the Bingham's did not communicate Stuart's wish to the Marquis.¹⁰ As a result, James Heath, an English engraver, created an unauthorized mezzotint of the work. Heath published his print on January 1, 1800, just two weeks after Washington's death. The engraving sold extraordinary well and Stuart was utterly dismayed. Though he would not be able to capitalize on the popularity of the Lansdowne portrait, his portraits of Washington established the visual criteria for presidential portraits to come. He would paint the next four presidents after Washington.

⁸ *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)*, National Portrait Gallery, accessed February 9, 2016, <http://npg.si.edu/collection/lansdowne.html>

⁹ Barbara J. Mitnick, "Parallel Visions: The Literary and Visual Image of George Washington," in *George Washington: American Symbol*, ed. Barbara J. Mitnick (New York: Hudson Mills Press, 1999), 128

¹⁰ Charles Merrill Mount, *Gilbert Stuart: A Biography*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1964), 211

The Athenaeum's copy of the Lansdowne is in remarkably fine condition. Originally, the work hung in the Directors' room, located on the library's main floor, to the north of the main door, until it was moved to its present location in 1905.¹¹ The Athenaeum obtained the portrait in 1838, shortly after it had opened its doors. The portrait was the library's first art acquisition, which is poetic considering Washington was the nation's first president.¹² Samuel Larned [1788-1846], an Athenaeum member, generously donated the portrait.

Larned, a diplomat and merchant from Providence, served as the United States Consul at Cadiz Spain, and later as the Secretary of Legation in Chile in 1820.¹³ He was later promoted to Chargé d'Affaires in Peru and Bolivia in 1828. After an illustrious career in Foreign Service, Larned retired to Providence in 1837, where he lived on Union Street – only a short walk from the Athenaeum – until his death in 1846.¹⁴ A member of both the Athenaeum and the Rhode Island Historical Society, Larned possessed a wide-ranging enthusiasm for academic thought.¹⁵ Larned and other members of his family were among the original shareholders of the Athenaeum.

The copyist the portrait is unknown, but is believed to be the work of an accomplished artist of the Italian School.¹⁶ One intriguing possibility is that the artist may be Providence native, Sarah Wickes Lippitt, [American, 1789-1847] the daughter of prominent Rhode Island textile manufacturer, Charles Lippitt, and one the earliest Rhode Island artists to follow in the path of Stuart.¹⁷ Sarah Lippitt studied art in Italy where she copied work in Florence's Uffizi Gallery in 1837.¹⁸ Like the Larned family, the Lippitt's had strong ties to the Athenaeum and indeed were among the library's original shareholders.¹⁹

Another potential artist may be Providence portrait painter, James Sullivan Lincoln [American, 1811-1888]. Lincoln, dubbed "Father of Rhode Island Art", enjoyed a prolific career in

¹¹ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 64

¹² Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 64

¹³ Samuel Larned Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.rihs.org/>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Proceedings of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1872-3 (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1873), 8

¹⁶ Frederick August Farley, *Third Annual Meeting of the Providence Athenaeum, September 24, 1838* (Providence: Knowles, Vose & Co., 1838), 10

¹⁷ W. Walden Brown, *The Past Quarter-Century of Art in Rhode Island* (Publisher unknown, 1925), accessed at The Providence Athenaeum

¹⁸ Jane Fortune and Linda Falcone, *Invisible Women. Forgotten Artists of Florence* (Firenze: The Florentine Press, 2009), 114

¹⁹ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 197

Providence for over sixty years.²⁰ He had earned a reputation as an influential artist, who documented the rapidly changing social and political scene of Rhode Island. Lincoln painted several Providence notables and powerful citizens, including the Athenaeum's portrait of John Russell Bartlett.

Lincoln was born in Taunton, Massachusetts. When he was ten years old, his family moved to Providence. As a young boy, Lincoln found employment in an engraver's shop to make drawings for "sketch engravings".²¹ His artistic ability soon caught the eye of local portrait painter, C.T. Hinckley, who took him in as an apprentice. Hinckley had observed, for one so young, Lincoln had "a correct eye and a good conception of his work."²² When Lincoln was sixteen, Hinckley and Lincoln collaborated to create several copies of Stuart's *The Lansdowne Portrait*.²³ However, according to a friend of Lincoln's, "James did most of the work."²⁴ One copy is at the Historical Society of Taunton, and another hangs in the State Room of the Rhode Island State House. It is entirely plausible the Athenaeum owns one of Lincoln's copies, as Larned paid Lincoln three dollars to repair a portrait of Washington on September 25, 1838.²⁵

When Larned donated *The Lansdowne Portrait* to the Athenaeum in 1838, he had a specific purpose in mind for the work. Larned wrote to the Board of Directors:

May it...long continue to adorn the Halls of the Literary Institution over which you preside, shedding a genial influence over the place and lending its inspiring aid to the rich stores of learning there collected, in forming the character of our youth and pointing their ambition and their patriotism to worthy and virtuous objects.²⁶

In the end, Larned's hopes that Washington's portrait would "[shed] a genial influence over the place" have been fulfilled. Washington presides over the Reading Room, a symbol of the Athenaeum's mission of democratically disseminating knowledge to ultimately achieve the betterment of man.

Sarah Chin

²⁰ C.L. Bert and L. J. McElroy, "Documents of an Era; Portraits by James Sullivan Lincoln" in *Sketches: An Art Journal* (Providence: TCI Press, 1992), 1

²¹ *Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition of the Works of James S. Lincoln Held at the Providence Art Club House from the 16th February to 2nd March 1888, With a Biographical Sketch*, Rhode Island Historical Society R.I. Biog. L-63-S, 4

²² *Ibid.*, 4

²³ *Ibid.*, 4

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4

²⁵ Rhode Island Historical Society, Samuel Larned Papers, Box 1, Folder 16

²⁶ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 64

