Portrait Gallery to Conserve the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington

Work Will Be On View Through Presidents’ Day 2016 Then Off View for 18 Months

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery will conserve its iconic Lansdowne portrait of George Washington beginning in February 2016. The painting will be off view for a period, but at points during the treatment it will be in the Lunder Conservation Center’s glass-enclosed lab where visitors can view the conservation work.

This work of art serves as the centerpiece of the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent exhibition “America’s Presidents.” Gilbert Stuart, one of America’s most talented artists of the early national period, created the painting in 1796, during Washington’s second term. The Lansdowne portrait visually defines the image Washington sought for the new national government and especially the new office of presidency. It symbolized that this role was not a king who gains power by inheritance, but an elected office. Historians consider this painting to be as significant as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

“This Lansdowne portrait of George Washington is the focal point of the Portrait Gallery’s ‘America’s Presidents’ exhibition,” said Kim Sajet, director of the museum. “With the museum’s talented conservation team and generosity of Bank of America, we are able to care for it today and into the future.”

Stuart demonstrated an extraordinary talent for capturing likeness from an early age. He went on to study with Benjamin West in England and executed more than 1,100 portraits during his lifetime. Senator and Mrs. William Bingham of Philadelphia, who were the wealthiest Americans at the time, commissioned Stuart to create a portrait of the man unanimously chosen to preside over the new country for the first two terms of leadership. The monumental 8-by-5-foot full-length painting of Washington was sent as a gift to the Marquis of Lansdowne, an...
English supporter of American independence, the same year it was created.

Funds for the project are being donated by Bank of America.

“Bank of America is pleased to partner with the National Portrait Gallery to provide funding for the conservation of this iconic American treasure and also for enhanced educational programming,” said Allen Blevins, director of Global Arts and Heritage Programs at Bank of America. “The Lansdowne portrait is significant to both the history of American art and the nation, and Bank of America is proud to work with the museum to conserve this work.”

Through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, the Lansdowne painting was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in 2001 and installed when the renovated museum reopened in 2006. More than 1 million school children and visitors of all ages from across the country and around the world view the artwork annually, and it remains a treasure for the American people.

Now more than 217 years old, the Lansdowne portrait requires conservation treatment and attention to ensure its proper presentation for the future. The painting had been restored prior to its long-term loan to the National Portrait Gallery in 1968. However, several layers of varnish remain on the painting’s surface, and Washington’s black coat has become discolored and uneven, a problem that has existed since the painting was loaned to the museum. Ultraviolet examination of the paint surface has revealed partial varnish removal in the coat, leaving a streaky, milky appearance to one of the major components of the painting. Eighteenth- and 19th-century black paints are very difficult to clean because of their sensitivity to solvents, and early restorations have left less than satisfactory results. With the extensive choices available today for removing varnish from sensitive paint surfaces, the appearance of the painting should improve with treatment.

Treatment Plan (anticipated 18 months to complete)

Analysis (Six months to complete):

- Digital X-ray composite of entire surface
- Digital infrared imaging of entire surface
- XRF (X-ray florescence) analysis of individual pigments
- Analysis of ground and varnish coating
Treatment (12 months to complete):

- Remove varnish coating with an appropriate solution (delicate and difficult process)
- Remove previous areas of paint compensation
- Apply an isolating varnish coat to surface of painting
- Fill losses with a chalk gelatin putty
- Inpaint losses with an appropriate color palette
- Apply a final protective varnish coating to the surface of the painting

**National Portrait Gallery**

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who shape its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story.

The National Portrait Gallery is part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000. Website: [npg.si.edu](http://npg.si.edu).

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