

A Closer Look at James and Dolley Madison

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
- Compare and contrast the characteristics of two portraits that share similar subject matter, historical periods, and/or cultural context
- Use portrait analysis to deepen their understanding of James and Dolley Madison and the roles that they played in U.S. history.

Portraits

[James Madison by Gilbert Stuart](#)

Oil on canvas, 1804

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia

[Dolley Madison by Gilbert Stuart](#)

Oil on canvas, 1804

White House Collection, Washington, D.C.; gift of the Walter H. & Phyllis Shoreinstein Foundation in memory of Phyllis J. Shoreinstein

Additional Artworks

For more portraits and artworks, visit the “1812: A Nation Emerges” online exhibition at <http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/1812>

Background Information for Teachers

Information about James Madison (1751–1836) from the James Madison Museum
(<http://www.thejamesmadisonmuseum.org/biographies/james-madison>)

James Madison was born on March 16, 1751, in Port Conway, Virginia. The oldest of ten children in a distinguished planter family, he was educated by tutors and at Princeton University (then called the College of New Jersey). At a young age, Madison decided on a life in politics. He threw himself enthusiastically into the independence movement, serving on the local Committee of Safety and in the Virginia Convention, where he demonstrated his abilities for constitution-writing by framing his state constitution. When poor health kept Madison from military service, he served in the Virginia Assembly and in the Council of State.

In 1780 Madison became the youngest delegate to the Continental Congress, where he was an early advocate of a strong central government. He earned the title “Father of the Constitution” from his research and writings prior to the 1787 Philadelphia Convention; his efforts to drive the Constitution through (he spoke more than 200 times, never missed a session, and negotiated and compromised with other attendees); and his dedicated efforts toward the document’s ratification

by the states. Madison, along with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, authored the *Federalist Papers*, which were essays supporting ratification. In 1788, he campaigned tirelessly for the Constitution's ratification in his home state. He faced stiff opposition but finally gained support with the promise of the addition of a Bill of Rights, now the first ten amendments to the Constitution.

In 1789, Madison won a seat in the first House of Representatives, where he served until 1797. By this time he was a committed leader of the Democratic-Republicans; he became secretary of state in 1801 when his friend and co-founder of that party, Thomas Jefferson, became president. Madison succeeded Jefferson in 1809, and during his administration, the long-standing tensions between Britain and the United States finally erupted into the War of 1812. The British burned many of Washington's public buildings in 1814. Later that year, the signing of the Treaty of Ghent ended the war and returned Anglo-American relations to *status quo ante bellum* (the state of things before the war).

After his second term as president, Madison retired to his estate, Montpelier, where he edited the journal he kept during the Constitutional Convention. He wrote newspaper articles supporting his fellow Democratic-Republican (and fellow Virginian), President James Monroe. Madison acted as Monroe's informal adviser on foreign policy. In his last years, Madison became actively involved in the American Colonization Society, an organization that encouraged the emancipation of slaves and their resettlement in Africa.

Information about Dolley Madison (1768–1849) from the James Madison Museum
(<http://www.thejamesmadisonmuseum.org/biographies/dolley-madison>)

Dolley Madison's second husband was James Madison, the fourth president of the United States. "The 'great little Madison' has asked to see me this evening," she wrote in 1794 of the congressman, who was seventeen years her senior. Dolley was one of the first socialites in Washington, D.C., and was well known for her skills as an exemplary hostess.

She was born into the Quaker colony of New Garden, North Carolina. Her father, John Payne, moved his family to Virginia and then to Philadelphia after freeing their slaves. In 1790 Dolley married John Todd, a Quaker lawyer. However, he died along with their youngest son, William Temple, when yellow fever swept through the city in 1793, leaving Dolley widowed at age twenty-five with a young son, John Payne. When she married Madison one year later, she was expelled from the Society of Friends for marrying a non-Quaker.

Dolley Madison turned the new nation's capital from a dull swamp into a social scene. During Thomas Jefferson's presidency, Dolley served as the official White House hostess because Jefferson was a widower. During this time, James Madison served as secretary of state. After Madison won the presidency in 1808, Dolley created the role of first lady as a hostess and trendsetter by wearing turbans, playing cards, and holding weekly parties for politicians and citizens. Although the country was divided, Dolley had a unique ability to bring together both Democratic-Republicans and Federalists to the White House for official functions.

When James retired from politics, the Madisons returned to their home, Montpelier, in Virginia. They never had children of their own. Montpelier had so many guests, however, that children were almost always in the house.

When Dolley Madison died in 1817, Zachary Taylor spoke at her funeral and in his eulogy coined the term “first lady.”

Information about the Madison portraits by Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) from the Gilbert Stuart Museum (<http://www.gilbertstuartmuseum.com/spring2011.pdf>)

Gilbert Stuart was the most widely admired portrait painter in federal-era America. His ability to enliven a portrait with unblended, quick brushwork was perfected during his eighteen years in London and Dublin. His sympathetic characterizations made him widely sought-after as a portrait painter on his return to America in 1793. Stuart moved to Philadelphia (then the capital of the United States) in the latter part of 1794. He wrote to his uncle Joseph Anthony, a resident of the city, that he meant “only to secure a picture of the President, and finish yours,” but he remained for nine years. By 1803 Stuart’s finances were in a hopeless tangle. He sent his family to live in Bordentown, N.J., and he left Philadelphia for Washington, D.C., in December. He had a plan to become rich and pay off his debts. Now that the federal government had moved to the new capital, he knew he would find many opportunities to paint the portraits of the country’s leaders. He planned to make many copies of the portraits and sell them. In the crowded, unfinished city, Stuart found a room in which to live and paint and began to take commissions for portraits.

Thomas Jefferson became president in 1801 and chose James Madison as his secretary of state. Madison’s wife, Dolley, soon became a Washington hostess of note, and it was only fitting that she should commission portraits of both her husband and herself from Stuart in the spring of 1804. Both were shown seated in the same gold-painted chair with red upholstery. The same red draperies are in each painting: in Dolley’s they are pulled back to reveal a blue sky, while in James’s they remain closed as a backdrop to law books. The Madisons are turned slightly toward each other but look out at the viewer.

Dolley Madison is dressed in the height of fashion in a low-necked, high-waisted Empire-styled gown. A loosely painted shawl emerges from behind her, and her hands also look casually painted. Her face draws in the viewer in and shows why Stuart was so in demand for his portraits of women. Her dark ringlets frame a winning face with pink cheeks and lips. Her smile catches the sparkle of her personality, exhibiting the liveliness and humor that made her so beloved.

It is interesting to note that in the year and a half he spent painting in Washington, Stuart painted four other couples in almost identical settings. However, each individual’s personality comes through. Dolley wrote to her sister, Anna Payne Cutts, “he [Stuart] is a man of genius and therefore does everything differently from other people.”

As first lady, Dolley Madison is perhaps best known for rescuing Stuart’s portrait of George Washington from the White House as the British were burning the capital city in August 1814. At the same time, the Madisons’ portraits were also saved from a similar fate. Over the years,

Dolley's portrait found its way back to the White House while James's is many miles away in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Lesson Procedure

Portrait Analysis

1. Have students work in small groups to compare and contrast the portraits of James and Dolley Madison by Gilbert Stuart (found on the "1812: A Nation Emerges" online exhibition). Ask them to describe the setting, pose, clothing, and facial expression in each portrait and to list the similarities and differences between the artworks.
2. Have each group come up with at least two or three adjectives that they think best describe how Stuart portrays each of the sitters in their portraits. Then have each group identify the overall impression that they think Stuart wanted to convey about each sitter.
3. Have each group generate a list of the choices that Stuart made in each of the portraits to convey the impression that the group identified in step 2..

Follow-Up Discussion

The Gilbert Stuart portraits were painted in 1804, when James Madison was secretary of state. Dolley Madison often served as a hostess in Thomas Jefferson's White House. If Stuart had painted the Madisons at the end of the War of 1812, and at the end of their tenure in the White House, how might the portraits have been different? What aspects of the Madisons' lives might Stuart have chosen to highlight at that point, and what symbols might he have included to reflect those aspects?

National Standards of Learning

Standards in History for Grades 5–12

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–61)

- Understands United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.
- Understands the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.