

Young Portrait Explorers:

George Washington



Learning Objective: Learn about the first president of the United States, George Washington.

Portrait Discussion:

Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the painting to the bottom.

Pose: Can you pose like George Washington? He has his feet planted firmly on the ground as he stands with his right arm stretched out. Why do you think he has his arm stretched out? Is he pointing to something or welcoming someone? George Washington was a great **orator** (speaker). His outstretched arm represents his ability to speak clearly. Do you like to talk? Do you ever talk with your hands?

Clothing: Take a look at Washington's clothing. He is wearing a black velvet suit and shoes with silver buckles. This style was popular when Washington lived. He wore these clothes when he **addressed** (spoke to) the public. What kind of clothing do presidents wear today? Since he was the first president, Washington could have chosen a king's robes or a military uniform, but he set an example for future presidents by wearing a suit—even if it looks different than the ones presidents wear now. What would you wear if you were president?

Objects (material things that can be seen or touched): There are many objects in this portrait! What objects can you find? Each object in this portrait tells us something about George Washington. Let's take a closer look at a couple of them. How many books can you find in this painting? In portraits, books often represent knowledge. Washington was a very smart man and a great writer. Can you find the **inkwell** (a container that holds ink to write with) and feather pen on the table? What about the circular red, white, and blue flag on the chair? This might look like an American flag, but it is actually a **presidential seal** (a symbol of the presidency). And what about that sword that Washington is holding? Washington did fight in a war, but this sword is **ceremonial**, which means that it was used in ceremonies or on special occasions but never in battle. The sword represents Washington's time on the battlefield.

Background: What do you see in the background? Can you spot the dark clouds and a rainbow? When do you normally see a rainbow, before or after a storm? George Washington led the United States during the Revolutionary War. The dark, stormy clouds (which represent the war) fade into a rainbow to symbolize brighter days ahead. There is also a column behind Washington. Can you think of any buildings that have columns? The background of the painting is not a real place. The artist **invented** (or made up) this room to tell us about George Washington.

Historical Context: *George Washington served as the first president of the United States. Before he became president, Washington was **Commander in Chief** (or the leader) of the American soldiers during the **Revolutionary War** (a war between England and the United States). After helping the United States win the war, Washington became president. He made sure to use his new powers carefully and set a up a **government** (or the system that creates and lays out the laws) that is similar to the one we have today. This portrait of George Washington was painted by Gilbert Stuart, a very popular artist during his time. Stuart was one of the only artists to paint Washington from life. Much of what we know about George Washington's appearance comes from Stuart's portraits.*

Related Children's Books:

A Picture Book of George Washington by David A. Adler, illustrated by John and Alexandra Wallner

I Am George Washington by Brad Meltzer, illustrated by Christopher Eliopoulos

Activity: Self Portrait with Objects

Materials: Paper and pencil or coloring utensil

Instructions: Every object, pose, and expression in George Washington's portrait was painted to tell us his story. Now, it's your turn! Create a self-portrait with

objects. Think about which objects represent you. Are you a great swimmer? Draw yourself in goggles. Do you like to bake? Draw yourself with a cookie or a rolling pin. How would stand in your self-portrait? Would you stand still or draw yourself in action?



George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, oil on canvas, 1796. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired as a gift to the nation through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

Find the portrait on our website, here: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2001.13