

Sully, Portrait of George Washington

Introduction

Welcome! Today we will look at a series of art pieces that share stories from the past 200 years in the United States from artists across America. Through these American stories we will learn about history, identity, traditions and experiences of our diverse country. We will look at a variety of artwork including a painting of our first president, a calendar from the Lakota tribe as well as a photograph of life in modern day St. Paul, each one telling a unique story of American life. Each and every one of you have stories to tell about your life experiences. Which stories are the most important and how do you think those stories will be shared in the future?

Key Idea 1: Heroism

George Washington is painted here as a heroic statesman and first official leader of our country. His heroism is conveyed by positioning George in a stiff, proud and powerful three-quarter stance. The life size painting from a low point of view accents his importance—chest out, chin slightly raised, with a sword at his waist and his hand at the ready. The horizontal lines of the table and ledge convey peace and calm (in our country) and the use of vertical elements like his stature, the table legs and Grecian architectural columns convey power and stability. These elements combined communicate a specific political message and encourages the viewers to have faith in our leader and future country. George Washington is an important piece of American history and tells the story of the building of the government in the United States as we know it today.

Question: Stand like George. How does it make you feel to stand in this position? Now sit. How is this position different? Which position best describes your personality?

Key Idea 2: Setting & Symbolism

The visual elements surrounding George are carefully chosen to symbolize importance and offer clues as to why George was chosen as our first president. The copy of the Constitution emphasizes George's role as a statesman. The rainbow in the sky seen through the window is a symbol of hope for a successful future. The light of dawn symbolizes the new governmental era in America. The inkwell and quill refer to lawmaking, appropriate for a presidential portrait. The books on, and under, the table symbolizes Washington's authority on law. The 3-dimensional eagles on the legs of the table refer to power and victory.

Question: What objects do you see that tell you George was a military man? An educated man? An important man? What objects would you use to tell your story?

Key Idea 3: Color, Shapes & Lines (Elements of Art)

The colors, shapes and lines used throughout emphasize the grandeur and importance of George's presidential role, depicting him as a noble figure in America. The use of red throughout the piece (table cloth, chair, curtain, sword ribbon, rose colored cheeks) moves your eye around the painting creating an overall balance. The rich red and gold colors used in the background are strategically placed and provide contrast to George's black and white attire making him stand out even more prominently. The oval medallion design on the chair refers to the Roman crown of victory. The circular shape is repeated in the floor design and the oval chair back creating rhythm and harmony. The use of vertical and horizontal lines within the setting elements (table, books, columns, window ledge, table top, chair seat) conveys solidity and stability which reinforce George's anticipated success as a leader.

Question: What colors do you notice in this painting? What shapes do you see? How do these make you feel? What do they say about George?

Transition

As we discussed, this artist set the scene of George Washington's story using symbolic elements to communicate his heroism as the first leader of our young American nation. We will now look at an artwork by the Lakota people. Once there, I will ask you what symbols the Plains Indians use to tell their story.

J: Welcome! I'm Jennifer. **M:** I'm Molly. **J:** We're so glad you're here. Today we are fortunate to be inside this amazing museum called Mia. It is like a library of stories visually unfolding artwork by artwork. As we walked through the lobby I'm sure you noticed the giant statues of Egyptian gods. There is a special exhibit telling their story which hopefully you can come back to experience soon. Today we are looking at artwork telling stories about America. What are these stories? Who are they about? And how are they shared?

As Americans we all take part in creating the stories of our country. Even as 5th graders you have an impact on what America will become by the things you choose to do. We have a lot of American stories to explore together today, so let's get started!

M: Stand back a bit and take a look at this painting of our first president, George Washington. There's a bit of a glare so it's easier to see this way. Position yourself like George: one foot forward, chin up. Try to get the same expression he has too. How do you feel standing this way? {Take responses.}

Okay, now take a seat. Note to yourself how this position feels different than when you were standing up. Think about: How would this painting be different if George was shown sitting instead?

J: Thomas Sully carefully painted this portrait of George Washington. In the early 1800's America was looking for heroes to help tell the story of who we are as a nation. George Washington was an ideal role model, as both the first president and a revolutionary leader. In fact, there was such a demand for his portrait that it was hard for painters to keep up. Sully based this painting on a famous portrait of Washington done by Gilbert Stuart who had painted the president from life. Remember standing there? Imagine having to stand for hours to have your portrait painted.

M: Sully was a student of Gilbert Stuart's and painted many images of George Washington based on Stuart's paintings. But he also had his own style. The color is brighter and the forms are sharper than Stuart's painting. See how the black stands out against the red? His fluid brushstrokes make a rich, glossy effect. George's head is also more clearly formed and heroic looking than in the original portrait.

What Sully wanted most to convey in his painting was George Washington's importance. What do you see in the painting that shows us George is a noble hero? {Take responses}

J: The artist gives us clues in this painting that tell us about who Washington is as a person -- his abilities, talents and personality.

What do you see that shows us he is a military general?

What do you see that shows us he is an educated person?

What do you see that shows us he is wealthy?

What shows us some of his interests?

What's the weather like outside? Do you see a storm cloud? A rainbow?

What about the color? How does it make you feel?

What lines and shapes do you see? {vertical lines reinforce power; horizontal lines reinforce stability; oval; irregular lines add drama & richness}

M: Take a look behind you. Who is that? That's right, it's a marble bust of George Washington depicted as a Roman or Greek hero. Show of hands: Which depiction of George Washington do you prefer -- the painting or the statue? Why?

J: As we discovered together, this painting of George Washington tells us a story of him as an American hero and at the same time tells the story of how the young American nation wants to be seen.

We are now going to look at artwork by the Lakota people and the symbols they use to tell their American story.

M: While we walk, think about one or two symbols that you would choose to tell the story of who you are. I think I'd choose a book, because I like to read. What about you? A soccer ball? Your favorite food? Pair share with a friend what symbol you'd choose to tell your story.

Welcome! Today you are fortunate to be inside this amazing visual story book we call the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. You have entered a vast library of stories visually unfolding artwork by artwork. Perhaps you heard about Egypt's Sunken Cities and the story behind their discovery, or maybe you noticed the beautiful we just walked by. You may have even been here before and peered into the story of an ancient Chinese warrior as you admired his amazing coat of armor. As you can see, so many stories to explore. Today, we are going to look at artwork telling stories from across America.

American Stories. What are they? Who are they about and how are they shared? By living in Minnesota, attending school at ... you are all characters in the American Story. Even at 12 years of age, the things you do every day can have an impact and help shape America, writing the stories history books and museums may one day tell and show. For example, take a look at this painting of the first American President, George Washington. Now, position yourself just like George: one foot forward, chest out, chin up. How do you feel standing this way?

In addition to his stance, what else do you see that shows power and strength?

- Important, strong & heroic
 - sword: symbolic of service in the army & as a general
 - Grecian columns: vertical elements convey power
 - Life size painting hung high ensures we literally look up to George

What else do you see?

- Symbols
 - Constitution (rules of new America)
 - Storm clouds (war); Rainbow (peace and hope)
 - Light of dawn (new governmental era)
 - Ink well (lawmaking); Books (highly educated, an authority on law)
 - Eagles on table legs (symbols of America, power and victory)
 - Medallion on chair (Roman crown of victory)

What else do you see?

- Color, shapes & lines
 - Red color: draws you in, moves your eye, provides contrast to George
 - Vertical lines (table legs, books, columns): reinforce power
 - Horizontal lines (table top, window ledge, chair seat): reinforces stability

Transition:

As we discovered, this is more than a simple painting of George Washington. It is the story of the building of America utilizing symbolic elements to provide a visual reminder that we will be protected under the leadership of a heroic and powerful American President. In just a few minutes, we are going to look at an artwork by the Lakota people and discover what symbols the Plains Indians use to tell their American story. While we walk, think about what important life experiences you've had and pair share with a friend how you would like those stories shared in the future. What visual elements would you use as symbols to help tell the story?