

GEORGE WASHINGTON

THOMAS JEFFERSON

JAMES MADISON

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

PORTRAITS of the **FOUNDERS** in a **TRANSITIONAL ERA** 1780-early 1790s

Portraits by Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, Edward Savage, Robert Edge Pine, and Joseph-Siffred Duplessis

The familiar portraits of the Founders do not include the likenesses above, painted as the nation floundered under the Articles of Confederation and began anew under the Constitution. The famous and oft-produced portraits come from later, more confident years when Founders served as the first five presidents—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe—and as cabinet members, such as Alexander Hamilton. Only Franklin's portraits from 1785 portray the iconic image Americans hold of the oldest Founding Father, who died in 1790 at age 84.

- How were the Founders represented in this transitional period?
- How does each portrait exhibit the purpose for which it was painted?
- What is conveyed through pose, gaze, expression, demeanor, and costume?
- How did the nation envision itself through the depiction of its revered Founders?

Presented here are eleven portraits from 1780, when the Revolutionary War was still unwon, to the early 1790s, as the nation began to solidify under Washington's presidency. Six of the portraits—and at least one of each group—were painted by the renowned Charles Willson Peale (himself a Revolutionary War veteran), many for the expanding portrait gallery of Revolutionary heroes in his Philadelphia museum, portraits composed to embody the virtue and resolve that had created the new nation and to serve as inspiration to its citizens.

- How do these portraits differ from later portraits of the men, especially the presidential portraits of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison?
- How are the portraits by Charles Willson Peale distinctive?
- Which painting is most effective for you, as a viewer? Why?

NOTES

¹ Charles Coleman Sellers, "Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, 42:1 (1952), p. 238.

² Edmund Quincy, *Life of Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1868), p. 51.

³ Doris S. Fanelli, et al., *History of the Portrait Collection, Independence National Historical Park* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001), p. 153.

⁴ E. P. Richardson, et al., *Charles Willson Peale and His World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982), p. 188.

⁵ The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary, online exhibition and Franklin artifacts database, Phillips Museum of Art, Franklin & Marshall College, at www.benfranklin300.org/frankliniana/index.htm.



George Washington, 1787 (age 55)

portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 24 x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (61 x 48.6 cm), Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Harrison, (The Joseph Harrison, Jr., Collection), 1912.14.3; reproduced by permission.

As the Constitutional Convention convened in Philadelphia in June 1787, Washington sat for his sixth and next-to-last life portrait by the well-known artist. Destined for the "Gallery of Great Men" in Peale's Philadelphia museum, it is the only Peale portrait of Washington in which "one cannot find at least the echo of a smile," comments a Peale scholar, perhaps due to Washington's resolute demeanor and to Peale's goal of producing a true likeness of the general.¹



Photo: Imaging Dept. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

George Washington, 1790 (age 58)

portrait from life by Edward Savage, oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{5}{16}$ x 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (77 x 64.5 cm), Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Portrait Collection, Gift of Edward Savage to Harvard College, 1791, H49; reproduced by permission.

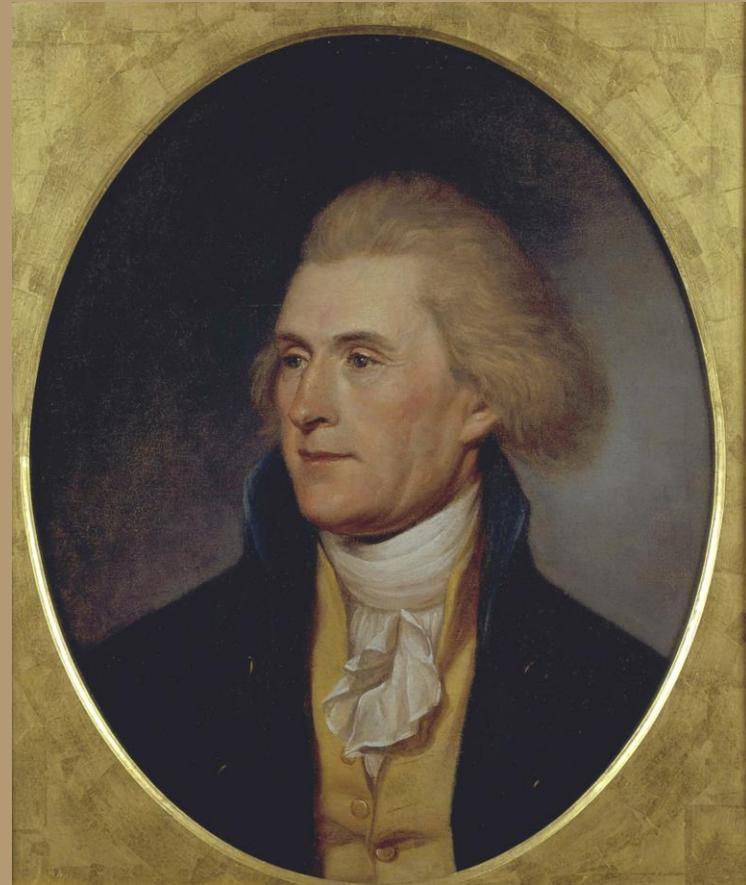
In his first year as the first president under the new Constitution, Washington posed for this portrait commissioned by Harvard College from a young untrained artist, Edward Savage. Dressed in his uniform as Commander in Chief (as in many other portraits), with his Society of the Cincinnati badge on the left lapel, Washington gazes to the left, not at the viewer. Josiah Quincy III deemed the portrait "the best likeness he had ever seen of Washington."²



Thomas Jefferson, 1788 (age 45)

miniature portrait (from original painted from life) by John Trumbull, oil on mahogany, 4½ x 3¼ in. (11.4 x 8.3 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Cornelia Cruger, 1923, 24.19; reproduced by permission.

In 1787 Jefferson posed for artist John Trumbull whom he had urged to depict the 1776 presentation of the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress for Trumbull's series of Revolutionary War scenes. Trumbull produced three copies of the resulting portrait for Jefferson's daughter Martha and two of Jefferson's close friends (of which this image is one). In 1818 Trumbull completed his massive 12x18-foot *Declaration of Independence* exhibited in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda (insets).



Thomas Jefferson, 1791 (age 48)

portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 23½ x 19 in. (60 x 48.3 cm), Independence National Historical Park, INDE11883; reproduced by permission.

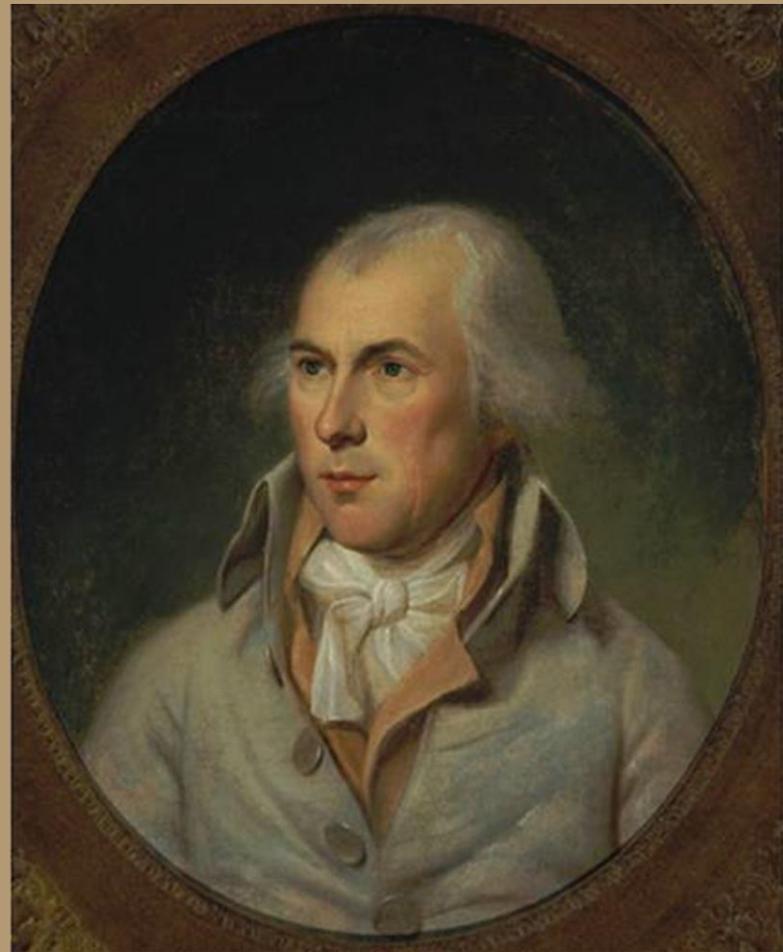
Peale created this portrait of Jefferson—then Secretary of State in Washington's first cabinet—for the portrait gallery of Revolutionary leaders in his Philadelphia museum of natural history, of which Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison were leading board members. His direct gaze and loose unpowdered auburn hair—in contrast to the wigged expressionless figure in the Trumbull portrait—capture the impassioned core of Jefferson's stature as a Founding Father.



James Madison, 1783 (age 32)

miniature portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, watercolor on ivory in gold case, presented in velvet-lined container. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Rare Books & Special Collections.

Madison was a 32-year-old member of the Continental Congress when he fell in love with 15-year-old Catherine "Kitty" Floyd, daughter of a fellow Congressman. With Jefferson's encouragement, Madison proposed marriage and commissioned portrait miniatures—to be worn as pins—from Peale. When Floyd broke the engagement, having fallen in love with a 19-year-old medical student, Madison was heartbroken.



James Madison, 1792 (age 41)

portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 36¼ x 31½ in. (framed), Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 0126.1006; reproduced by permission.

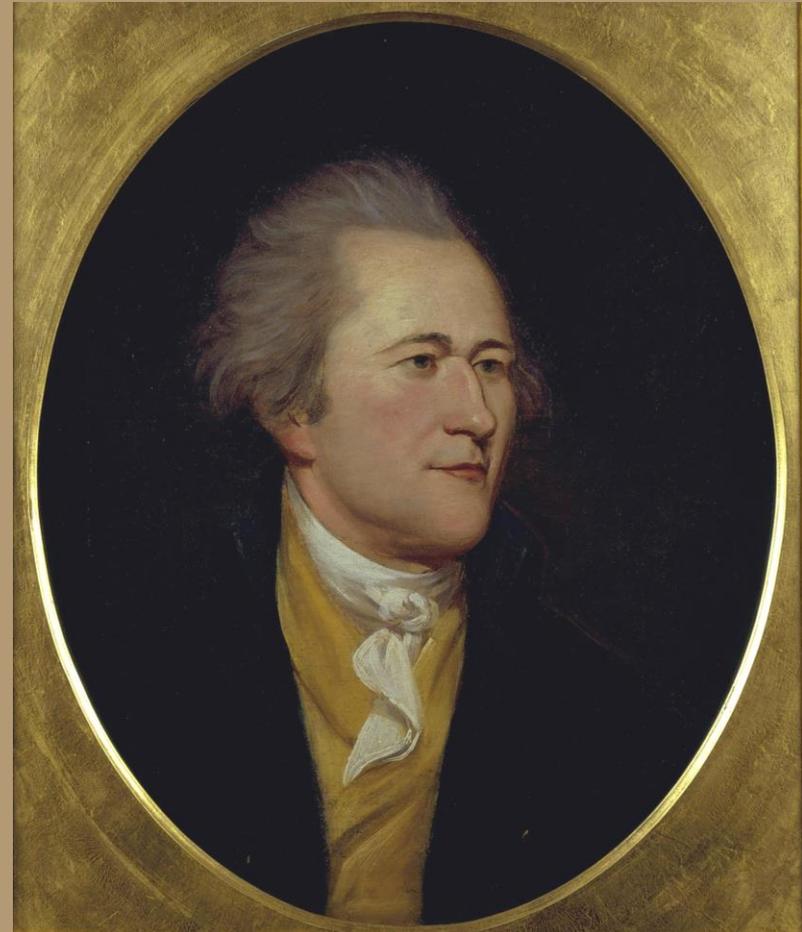
While a Virginia representative in the first Congress under the Constitution, Madison posed for his portrait to be displayed in Peale's gallery of Revolutionary leaders in his Philadelphia museum of natural history. The portraits were created in a neoclassic style "on the assumption that the sitters' virtues were apparent in their physical features" and thus serve as role models for the nation's citizens.⁴



Alexander Hamilton, ca. 1780 (age 23 or 25)

miniature portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, watercolor on ivory, 1.8 x 1.4 in., (4.5 x 3.5 cm), Columbia University Libraries, Special Collections; reproduced by permission.

In a period when Peale was producing numerous miniature portraits on ivory, this work was likely commissioned by Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth Shuyler, the year they were married. (See the miniature portraits by Peale of James Madison and his fiancée.) The ornate silk mat (inset) was likely embroidered by Shuyler, who is reputed to have fallen in love at first sight with the young Lieut. Colonel Hamilton, then serving as General Washington's primary aide-de-camp during the Revolution.



Alexander Hamilton, ca. 1790-1795 (age 33/35-38/40)

portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 19 3/8 in. (61 x 50.8 cm), Independence National Historical Park, INDE11877; reproduced by permission.

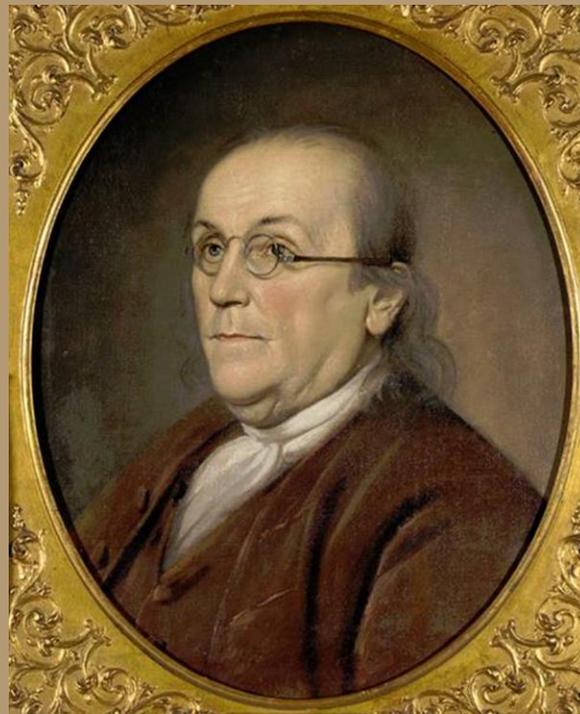
While Hamilton was serving as Secretary of the Treasury in Washington's first cabinet, Peale created this portrait for the gallery of Revolutionary leaders in his Philadelphia museum, for which Hamilton served on the board of trustees with other notable Founders. It was perhaps completed from an initial sketch; while the facial features are distinct, the hair and body are uncharacteristically incomplete for Peale's work.³



Benjamin Franklin, 1785 (age 79)

portrait by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis (Paris), oil on canvas, 28½ x 23½ in. (72.4 x 59.7 cm), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, NPG.87.43; reproduced by permission.

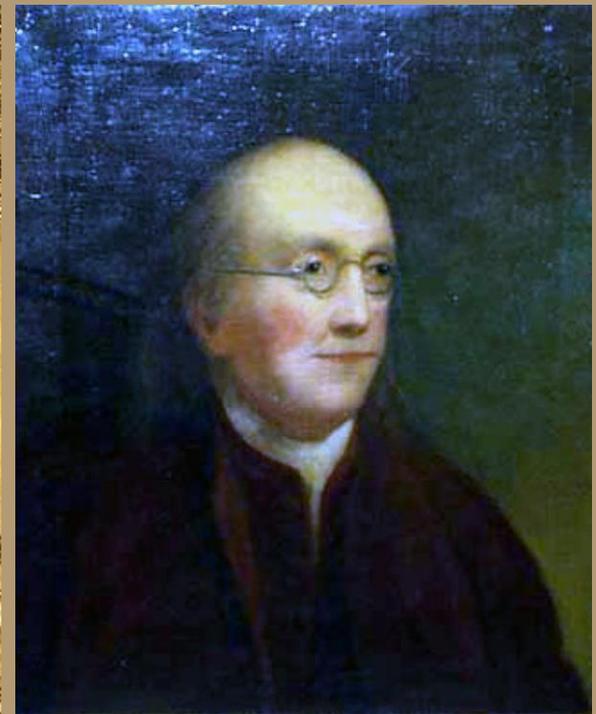
A noted French portraitist, Duplessis based the “grey coat” portrait of Franklin on his 1778 “fur collar” portrait commissioned by a French aristocrat and friend of Franklin during Franklin’s nine-year service as a U.S. representative in Paris. The “grey coat” portrait provided the model for the current \$100 bill, introduced in 1966, that replaced the image adopted in 1914 from the 1777 portrait by Jean-Baptiste Greuze.



Benjamin Franklin, 1785 (age 79)

portrait from life by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 25½ x 19 1/16 in. (58.7 x 48.4 cm), Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr., Collection), 1912.14.2; reproduced by permission.

Soon after Franklin’s final return to the U.S. from Europe after three tours of duty as an American representative in Europe, Peale created this portrait for the “Gallery of Great Men” in his Philadelphia museum. Like Jefferson and other Founders, Franklin was an ardent supporter of Peale’s innovative museum of natural history, to which he donated an early specimen—the body of his pet angora cat from France, which he asked to be preserved through taxidermy.



Benjamin Franklin, ca. 1787 (age 81)

portrait, likely from life, attributed to Robert Edge Pine, oil on canvas, 26 x 21 in. (67.3 x 54.6 cm), The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, 3329; reproduced by permission.

This little-known portrait was created by Robert Edge Pine, an English artist and admirer of the new nation who had recently emigrated to the U.S. and settled in Philadelphia. Whether Franklin sat for the painting is unknown, yet considered likely as the two men lived a few blocks apart and travelled in the same social circles.⁵ It is the last portrait by Pine before his death in 1788, and perhaps the last life portrait of Franklin, who died in 1790 at age 84.