The One and the Many:
Authenticity and Multiplicity in the Posthumous Lives of George Washington's Portraits

by

Isaac Ogden King

Bachelors of Arts, Northern Arizona University, 2008

Masters of Arts, University of Arizona, 2011

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This dissertation was presented

by

Isaac Ogden King

It was defended on

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and approved by

Dr. Christopher Drew Armstrong, Associate Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Dr. Holger Hoock, Amundson Chair of British History, History

Dr. Shirin Fozi, Assistant Professor, History of Art and Architecture

Dissertation Director: Kirk Savage, Professor, History of Art and Architecture

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George Washington's singular national prominence in American patriotic memory has placed his portraits in a state of continual reassessment and has made them a well-documented target of historical, political, and popular scrutiny. After his death in 1799, these portraits became a visual embodiment of his absent presence and played a key role in defining an American national portrait tradition. His portraits became potent objects through which the American public could actualize their desires to preserve, multiply, and sacralize Washington's memory. However, in order to allow them to function in this way, the public increasingly demanded assurances that their portraits were authentic representations of Washington's person.

In this dissertation I examine the reception history of these portraits from Washington's death to the end of the nineteenth century. I argue that the level of sustained interest granted to these portraits over this period make them an ideal case for investigating changing notions of authenticity in portraiture. As an impressive range of artist, collectors, printsellers, publishers, historians, and politicians grappled with the demand for authentic records of Washington's appearance, they interrogated an assortment of cultural considerations regarding which types of evidence granted authority to a portrait, and which did not.

Spanning a key historical moment that begins with portraiture, biography, and nationalism expanding to permeate all layers of American society and continuing through to the development and rapid spread of photography, the representational paradigms of portraiture during this period were in a state of profound flux. As various portraits of Washington were interpreted, and

reinterpreted, by those hoping to garner public confidence in one representation or another, the often abstract ideas that stabilize links between signifier and signified were put to practical use. This dissertation examines three case studies that provide insight into the changing notion of authenticity in early American national portraiture through the posthumous lives of Washington's portraits.

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Preface

There is no end to the personal and professional debts that I have incurred in the pursuit of this project. It is my humble honor here to invoke the names of a few persons and organizations that have motivated my work over the years. A dear teacher once joked that the iconography of a "philosopher's body" was plump because it was unlikely to be the case that someone could devote themselves to intellectual pursuits if they lacked basic necessities. And so, my first thanks must be extended to the University of Pittsburgh and the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, for keeping the appetites of my entire family mostly satisfied over the past several years. The work of art historians also often requires travel and the History of Art and Architecture department was instrumental in supporting me in this. As a bumpkin from the America's western frontier, touring the bounty of the many rich institutions that populate the eastern states will always be a cherished memory. My project was also supported by generous research grants from the Library Company of Philadelphia and the United States Capitol Historical Society, which allowed me to access several important resources. Other benefactors have also played an indispensable role in this process that I will not embarrass by naming here. Of course, the single person most responsible for keeping me fed and funded throughout this process has undoubtedly been my late father. There was never a thing so broken that that man feared to attempt to fix it. Following his example, I have strived to keep the gears of my own household running well past their natural service life, but more importantly, he taught me the value of being capable and willing to help others and that there is more to life than simply being well fed.

I would never have attempted graduate school had I not been encouraged by so many wonderful mentors over the years. First and foremost, I must thank my mother, who served as my

first debate partner. There could be no better place for a young man to try and make sense of the world than under the wing of such a strong, knowledgeable, and compassionate mother. I would also like to thank the late Larisa Aukon, who taught me that being good at something was no excuse for complacency. At a time when I still nursed a childhood fantasy of becoming an artist, she taught me what it meant to be one. To her I also owe my subsequent interest in portraiture. Zsuzanna Gulácsi and Alyce Jordan sang the siren song that ultimately persuaded me to study art history. Sarah Moore, Paul Ivey, Josh Ellenbogen, Jennifer Josten, John Lambertson and Doug McGlumphy have all graciously allowed me to lean on them for intellectual, professional, and emotional support. I also want to thank my committee, Drew Armstrong, Shirin Fozi, and Holger Hoock, for their patience, encouragement, and enthusiastic input. My advisor Kirk Savage has channeled the very spirit of a fabled paternal mentor. Measured and thoughtful, he was always courteous and constructive, even when I felt I deserved otherwise. As I struggled with my own doubts, Kirk never exhibited any indication that his confidence in me wavered. Being able to work so closely with such an admirable scholar and exemplary human being has been an unbelievably precious gift.

I would also be remiss if I didn't thank the many friends that have supported me along the way. However, if I were to attempt to name the many incredible people that I have had the pleasure of getting to know throughout my time in Pittsburgh I would undoubtedly fail to enumerate them all. Therefore, rather than allowing such an unfortunate casualty of consideration to mar the warm feelings I hold for all that I have known as friend, I will simply say, your names are all inscribed on my grateful heart. My children, Clark, Elliot, and Hugo, have been a constant and welcome distraction throughout this process, and an inexhaustible well of joy in my life. At many turns over the past few years, I have been rejuvenated by their innocent optimism and boundless enthusiasm.

Finally, and most fervently, I must thank my eternal partner Juli. I cannot think of a more fittingly inappropriate place for the sentiments of my affections than in what will most certainly become a dusty old tome. Like a pair of names carved into a tree at some secret retreat, there is a private history spread across the pages of this volume. The words that fill it are also a calendar of hours, days, and years shared together—the birth of two children, the death of loved ones, feasts, famines, and untold hours of routine exertion. Together we have shared in this laborious undertaking and it is only fitting that we share in warmth of its conclusion. Therefore, in sealing away this chapter of our lives I am most excited that the next will begin the same way; together. Juli, you are my everything.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Tokens of the Past

A curious pair of lithographic portraits of George Washington (1732 – 1799) was exchanged between Major Andrew Billings (1743 – 1808) and Elkanah Watson (1758 – 1842) in 1800 (Fig. 1.1). The prints were of a cheap variety, copied by an unknown artist after an original etching by Joseph Wright (1756 – 1793) (Fig. 1.2). One of these prints survives in the collection of Washington's Headquarters Museum in Morristown (NJ), neatly framed alongside a signed letter in Washington's own hand that is addressed to Watson and has a small lock of hair attached to it (Fig. 1.3). The frame is designed to be viewed from both sides so that Washington's signature on the verso of the letter can be easily examined (Fig. 1.4). The back of the lithograph is also exposed, revealing a pair of hand-written inscriptions (Fig. 1.5). The first, written by Watson, reads:

> The God like Washington died 14th Dec, 1799. All America in tears.
> The within is the best likeness I have seen. The hair is of his own head, this will increase its value with time. It's my earnest request this may be preserved to succeeding generations. The hair was presented to me by Maj. Billings. Con.

Under this, a second inscription signed by Billings reads: “Certificate: This may certify that the within hair was enclosed by Gen'l Washington in a letter to me dated Newburgh, June '83 as his own hair. Jany. 1, 1800.”[1]

The inscribed date was simultaneously the first day of the new year and the dawn of the nineteenth century, a milestone that had been greatly dampened by Washington’s unexpected death only two weeks prior. On this unfortunate occasion, Watson supplied his friend with a favored lithograph of the old General, and Billings offered up a portion of the hair he had received years earlier. The two mourners assuaged their grief with the notion that this exchange might safeguard some portion of Washington’s enduring presence for future generations. Indeed, the letter, the lithograph, and the lock of hair were retained by Watson’s descendants for several generations before misfortune necessitated their sale in 1867.[2] Its twin, bearing the same inscription, was likewise passed among Billing’s descendants until it was also reluctantly offered for sale in 1917.[3]

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[1] The date of the inscription is difficult to read. It has been transcribed by various other authors as 1800, 1810, and 1816. The only date that fits out of those three is 1800, since Andrew Billings died in 1808. The third digit does not look like the preceding numeral one, leading me to interpret it as a compressed zero.

[2] I have been able to account for two prints belonging to each of signatories of this inscription, though many other examples with matching descriptions continue to be found. In order to raise money for the purchase of one of these originals, the Grand Lodge of New York produced and sold facsimiles of the lithograph and letter. I believe it is this secondary set of prints that is mentioned in Baker, *The Engraved Portraits of Washington*, 51., Bolton, *The History of the Several Towns, Manors, and Patents of the County of Westchester*, vol 1, 695., and Carson, *The Unique Collection of Engraved Portraits of Gen George Washington*. The assertions that similar duplicate was found in the drawer of an unused desk in the Niagara Frontier Lodge in 1895, accompanied by a lock of hair cannot be accounted for. Since the report is second hand, I believe the author is mistaken about the presence of the hair, having misunderstood the nature of the inscription. The fact that it was found in a masonic lodge implies that it was in fact one of these masonic facsimiles. See, “The Collector,” vol. 6., no 7. (1895), 116.

[3] The sales catalog explained that the seller, William Lanier Washington, had inherited it through the family line of Billings. I have verified the familial connection between Billings and W L Washington, but the attribution listed in the catalog contains an error. William Lanier Washington was related to Billings through marriage as the catalog stated, but the connection was not formed through a great aunt as stated, but rather his grandmother was the sister of Billings’ daughter’s husband. See, Washington, *Historical Relics of George Washington Inherited and Collected by William Lanier Washington*, 1917., 38.

Exchanging such intimate mementos as tokens of esteem and affection had been a popular practice since colonial times. In the 18th and nineteenth century, locks of hair became a particularly favored gift to express sympathetic bonds between friends and family.[4] These tokens were sometimes framed for display or kept more closely as an intimate companion, but more frequently they found their way into drawers, trunks, or albums from which they would be occasionally summoned. Personal effects, original letters, and likenesses of every variety congregated in these spaces and served complementary purposes, each providing alternative means of evoking the presence of an absent affection. These haphazardly assembled personal archives would often pass through subsequent generations, providing a tangible connection to long-deceased ancestors or prominent public figures.

In many ways the tokens exchanged above were typical of the commemorative culture of the time, but the earnest inscription employed in this case reveals heightened concern for the legibility of these objects in the immediate wake of Washington's passing. After all, this was the event that first inspired Watson to create this assemblage, but it also changed the significance of the objects that comprised it. Before this moment, Watson's affection for his humble pirated print had been a private affair. It did not require a formal declaration or signed certificate, much less a curated assortment of related objects. But only two weeks after Washington's passing Watson and Billings intuitively began to reframe their tokens of remembrance as something to be preserved for the benefit of future generations. This was not an isolated experience. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Washington was suddenly transformed from a waning national figure into a

[4] See Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America.* and Barnett, *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America*.

tragically absent American hero.[5] Disentangled from the political realities that survived him, Washington was celebrated by partisans of every persuasion. Eulogized in an impressive flood of hagiographic sermons, biographies, and imagery, Washington's memory became a treasured part of national heritage, and those who held some portion of it felt a new sense of responsibility for it.[6]

The urgency with which Watson cherished this cheap Washington print as the "the best likeness he had ever seen," reflects these concerns, but it also responds to some of the broader changes confronting the genre of portraiture in America at the turn of the nineteenth century. Over the preceding decades a burgeoning national portrait tradition had rapidly expanded in the wake of the Revolutionary War (1775 – 1783). Without institutional support for more ambitious work on the scale of European history painting, portraiture was by far the most abundant and culturally significant genre in America. While there were a few notable exceptions, such as John Smibert's (1688 – 1751) ambitious group portrait, *The Bermuda Group* (Fig. 1.6), nearly every early American artist that endeavored to create such works, like Benjamin West (1738 – 1820) and John Singleton Copley (1738 – 1815), pursued their carriers abroad.

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[5] Washington's public image was beginning to falter in the 1790s. The members of the dissenting Republican party, led by the editor of the *Aurora General Advertiser,* Benjamin Franklin Bache, routinely lambasted Washington as a "tyrant," "dictator," and "imposter." After signing the controversial Jay Treaty in 1794 to normalize British American relations, the opposition boiled over into a full-blown anti-Washington campaign. Some historians speculate that Washington's tarnished image may have significantly contributed to his decision to not seek a third term as president. See Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache's Attack on George Washington" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography,* 100, no. 2 (1976), 191-230 and Lorant, *The Presidency: A Pictorial History of Presidential Elections from Washington to Truman,* 38.

[6] The first Edition of Weems' inventive *Life of Washington* was published in 1800 and is emblematic of this approach. See, Christopher Harris, "Mason Locke Weems's Life of Washington: The Making of a Bestseller," *The Southern Literary Journal,* 19, no. 2 (1987), pp. 92-101.

Moreover, the revolutionary period was understood to be the defining moment of their history, and many of its participants were alive and willing to sit for nearly any artist who requested the privilege. And in turn, images depicting the faces of America's most prominent worthies began seeding a growing array of honorific pantheons. "Heads" were increasingly becoming the primary hanging décor of nearly every governmental building, for-profit gallery, and upper-class home. At the same time, prints like the one owned by Watson were likewise becoming a prominent feature in periodicals and printsellers' catalogs. This was a dramatically different landscape from the one that existed only a few decades prior when a small number of largely undertrained artists struggled to satisfy the desires of a narrow segment of colonial elites, all without the publishing infrastructure or patriotic impulse necessary to encourage the dissemination of these images to the broader public.[7]

By the end of the 18th century, Washington's portraits were on the very forefront of these developments. The fervor with which his many likenesses were reproduced and collected made them something of a sub-genre in this emerging form of American hero worship.[8] But his death at this pivotal moment, amidst a rapidly transforming lexicon of patriotic imagery, had a profound effect on the way his portraits were understood by the public. Like the eulogies and reminiscences that proliferated alongside them, Washington's likenesses became deeply associated with the idea of his absence. As visible manifestations of his now absent body, they physically confronted the public with the reality of his loss. But Washington was also a synecdoche for the entire founding

[7] For a discussion of the expanding portrait print market, See Pointon, *Hanging Head*, 53-78.

[8] Portraits of military figures had long been favored by collectors, and Washington's recent victories over the British were seen as irrefutable evidence of the new nation's mature international standing. Moreover, as the first president, he also stood as the figurehead for the entire democratic system.

generation, and his death on the eve of the new century coincided with the realization that his compatriots would inevitably soon follow. Against this, Washington's portraits seemed to promise a means to both preserve his corporeal form and ensure a tangible connection to the nation's origins.[9] In this way, a set of portraits that were originally intended to satisfy the humble task of capturing a suitable likeness of a prominent figure became saddled with the additional demands of a nostalgic nation seeking to preserve and transmit Washington's now deified presence to future generations. But alongside these amplified expectations was an attendant anxiety over the suitability of portraiture to accomplish this onerous task. As Marcia Pointon has argued, "questions of likeness are linked to questions of purpose,"[10]and as the diversity of purposes towards which Washington's portraits were utilized increased, questions regarding their "likeness" extended well beyond isolated concerns over their visual similitude.

This way of thinking about portraiture is much different from the rigid definitions that dominated early 20th century conceptions of the genre. In 1902, Alois Riegl (1858 – 1905) emphatically declared: "All portrait painting presupposes an objective individual whose physical and psychological nature is completely independent from the subjective perceptions of any given viewer [and] is fundamentally incompatible with a subjective pictorial conception."[11] R. G. Collingwood (1889 – 1943) turned this idea on its head in 1938, when he famously claimed: "When a portrait is said to be like a sitter, what is meant is that the spectator, when he looks at the

[9] Demand for these portraits was primarily satisfied by living artists who had painted Washington from life and copies of their portraits by other artists and printmakers. Gilbert Stuart produced nearly 1000 portraits throughout his career, but an impressive sixth of this output was comprised of copies after his Washington portrait. See, Marling, George Washington Slept Here, 8-13.

[10] Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity*, 17.

[11] Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, 345-6.

portrait, 'feels as if' he were in the sitter's presence."[12] While for Riegl likeness in portraiture was the result of an objective frame of reference, Collingwood defined it as an effect that was experienced by a subjective viewer. In 1960, Ernst Gombrich (1909 – 2001) expanded on this by focusing on "the viewer's share" in deciphering naturalistic imagery.[13] He explained that there are "certain privileged motifs […] to which we respond almost too easily" and that "the human face may be outstanding among them," arguing that a confluence of biological, psychological, perceptual, cultural, and experiential biases influenced an individual's perception of likeness.[14]

Recent scholars have expanded on the notion of the mutability of likeness and cultivated more nuanced approaches to these issues. Stephen Perkinson has persuasively demonstrated the historical flexibility of the genre:

> The number of ways in which an image can resemble its subject is potentially infinite, and the degree of resemblance that a viewer expects to find between image and subject is also infinitely variable. As a result, the criteria by which one gauges concepts such as "likeness," "resemblance," and "realism" are always culturally contingent.[15]

To this list of terms, I would add authenticity, because, as my research demonstrates, the means by which a portrait is proven to be connected to its sitter are equally culturally contingent.

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[12] Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 53.

[13] Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, and "The Face and the Mask" *Art, Perception, and Reality.*

[14] Gombrich, *Meditations on a hobby horse*, 9.

[15] Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King*, 8.

Perkinson's study demonstrated how changes in cultural expectations of portraiture are difficult to trace because earlier representational solutions are often slowly adapted to address new priorities.[16] Miles Orvell similarly argued that "things do not change all of a sudden or completely, and any period, including our own, is layered with past materials and conceptual frames that continue to influence the future."[17] As I will discuss below, dramatic changes were underway in the late 18th and early 19th century in the way portraits were produced, consumed, and interpreted. However, just as Perkinson and Orvell observed, the impact of these changes was gradual and transient, making them difficult to define in concrete terms.

I argue that Washington's portraits provide a salient case study for investigating these developments because of the way they overlap, survive, and respond to these changes. As a prominent example of a "past material frame" for the genre, the continued importance of these portraits in the patriotic landscape of the early 19th century provides a range of evidence about how they were adapted and reinterpreted to fit the changing priorities of later decades. Just as Pointon had predicted, the new demands placed on these portraits in the decades following Washington's death led to a great number of new questions. Did all of Washington's portraits provide a satisfactory encapsulation of his presence, and if not, why had some failed? Which of those available were best suited to the task and how had they succeeded? How did any particular portrait prove that its likeness was sufficiently authoritative? And, increasingly as the century progressed, which single image of Washington was most worthy of bearing his presence into the future?

---

[16] Perkinson illustrated this by demonstrating how the 15th-century European portraitists that first began to focus on recording the more particularized features of their sitters' faces "were adapting existing practices to new realities and possibilities, rather than leading the charge in an abrupt, even revolutionary, break from medieval traditions." Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King*, 18

[17] Orvill, *The Real Thing*, 10

Therefore, under this considerable pressure, one of the most prevalent examples of an emerging national portrait tradition became a prominent test case of the entire project. Throughout this process, the scrutiny applied to these portraits reveals a rare glimpse into the growing instability of 18th century notions of authenticity in portraiture for early 19th century audiences.

Washington's portraits have understandably received a great deal of attention from scholars of American art. Early historians like W. S. Baker (1824 – 1897), Charles Henry Hart (1866 – 1934), Mantle Fielding (1865 – 1941), and John Hill Morgan (1870 – 1945) undertook the laborious process of cataloging the impressive number of original paintings, prints, and sculpted likenesses of Washington and their many copies that proliferated throughout the 19th century.[18] Following the founding of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1962, affiliated scholars like Ellen G. Miles and Wendy Wick Reaves have continued this work while exploring the place of Washington's portraits in the larger context of late 18th-century visual culture.[19] Scholars who focused more generally on the larger careers of the artists who portrayed Washington have likewise thoroughly interrogated these portraits alongside each artist's larger oeuvre.[20] Moreover, while the above authors focused primarily on the period in which these works were created, others like Karal Ann Marling and Adam Greenhalgh have turned their attention to how

[18] See Baker, *The Engraved Portraits of Washington,* Hart, *Memoirs,* Morgan and Fielding, *The Life Portraits of Washington and their Replicas.*

[19] See Miles, *The Portrait in Eighteenth-Century America,* Reaves, *American Portrait Prints.*

[20] See Evans, *Gilbert Stuart and the Impact of Manic Depression,* Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame,* Poulet, *Jean Antoine Houdon*.

Washington's likenesses became entwined with the renewed patriotic nostalgia for the colonial era that came at the end of the 19th century.[21]

But surprisingly, much less research has been done on the reception history of these works in the immediate aftermath of Washington's death, as exemplified by Watson and Billings's exchange discussed above. The three case studies pursued in the body of my study complicate narratives grounded in the late 19th century by demonstrating that a different range of concerns and challenges were active in this earlier period. For this, I have greatly benefited from a range of scholarship that has focused specifically on the portraiture of this period. Marcia Pointon's studies on the mechanics of 18th- and 19th-century portrait production and distribution have been essential for grounding my case studies in the larger traditions. The work of Christopher J. Lukasik, on the perceived connection between appearance and identity in the early 19th century following the rising popularity of physiognomy in America, demonstrated the mounting stakes of accurate forms of representation.[22] Moreover, Wendy Bellion has done an excellent job of interrogating the connection between early American portrait practices and the larger political environment in which they functioned.[23]

Leveraging these frameworks, this dissertation examines the posthumous lives of Washington's portraits, well before a select few had entirely secured the dominant positions that they now hold. It was a time when those who had known Washington felt both empowered and compelled to testify to the superiority of their favored portrait and when those looking for his "best

[21] See Marling, George Washington Slept Here, Greenhalgh, *Not a Man but a God.*

[22] Stoichiță, *A Short History of the Shadow* and Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*.

[23] See Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*.

likeness" were driven to consider something as meager as Watson's cheap knock-off print. In the years that followed, the desire to preserve, multiply, and sacralize Washington's presence strained the portraits that vied to fill the space he had left behind. From the cacophonous mass of these many portraits, one authoritative portrait was needed to balance these competing demands, one hallowed authentic prototype to be infinitely repeated. While the particulars of the situation were unique to Washington's portraits, the debates that they inspired at a key moment for the genre also applied more generally, interrogating the ways in which portraits garnered confidence as authentic and authoritative representations of their sitters. In this small window between the expansion of portraiture as a public medium at the end of the 18th century and the development of photography half a century later, the public efforts to arbitrate the relative validity of Washington's portraits provide important insights into this shifting terrain.

1.2 Portraits and the Public

Portraiture was rapidly expanding on both sides of the Atlantic at the end of the 18th century.[24] This expansion threatened the exclusivity that the genre had previously held as a privileged component of elite society. In a catalogue detailing the extensive portrait collection of the 2nd Earl of Fife, James Duff (1729 – 1809), published one year before Washington's death, the Earl worried over how this might affect the way portraits would be treated in the future:

[24] See Pointon, *Hanging Head*.

> Before this century, very few people presented themselves to the painter, except those who were of great families, or remarkable for their actions in the service of their country, or for some other extraordinary circumstance, so that the field for inquiry was not extended, as lately, when every body almost who can afford twenty pounds, has the portrait of himself, wife and child painted. Those, therefore, who collect next century, even with the aid of the annual Exhibition, will hardly be able to find out the numerous bad painters, and uninteresting obscure persons so represented.[25]

While the Earl's comments smack of aristocratic privilege, he was right to point out that these changes undercut the prestige associated with being portrayed. With the barriers of cost and class no longer providing effective checks on the production of portraits the range of sitters increased dramatically. For elites like Duff, this meant that the mere existence of a portrait no longer indicated the historical or cultural significance of its sitter.

At the same time, the legibility of the portraits of the "great" and "remarkable" were also being threatened in other ways. Economic upheavals caused by industrialization forced many struggling nobles to divest of their ancestral portrait collections.[26] The Earl of Fife's descendants fared better than some of their colleagues, maintaining ownership of his collection until 1907.[27] As these newly orphaned portraits became dislocated from the architectural confines that had long

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[25] Duff, *Catalogue of the Portraits and Pictures in the Different Houses Belonging to the Earl of Fife*. Quoted in Pointon, *The Hanging Head*, 2.

[26] Pointon, *Hanging Head*, 13-36.

[27] "In the Sale Room," *The Connoisseur*, Editor J. T. Herbert Bailey Vol 18, (1907), 257.

sheltered them, they were also estranged from the very structures that had previously signaled their provenance. All the while, periodicals, illustrated biographies, and standalone prints transformed these scarcely seen originals into mass-market commercial goods and scattered them across both sides of the Atlantic.[28] With so many portraits circulating, increasingly unmoored from the traditional evidence of their authorship and authority, it became much more difficult to determine to what extent a given portrait warranted consideration and esteem as a legitimate portrayal of the person it purported to represent.

These issues were further compounded as an expanded and less practiced public was becoming active participants in the market. In the last quarter of the 18th century, collecting "heads" had become a fashionable hobby across Europe and the relative affordability of prints extended participation in this practice further down the economic ladder.[29] English poet Samuel Rogers celebrated the potential benefits of this rising interest in portrait prints:

> What though no marble breathes, no canvas glows,
>
> From every print a *ray* of genius *flows!*
>
> Be mine to bless the more mechanical skill;
>
> That stamps, renews, and multiplies at will;
>
> And cheaply circulates, through distant climes,
>
> The fairest relic of the purest times.
>
> […]

[28] Pointon, "Spaces of Portrayal" *The Hanging Head*, 13-52.

[29] This included an expanded interest in subjects not previously often privy to portraits such as the infamous. Collections were often divided into different classes, and while images of the people from the higher classes were abundantly available, portraits of lower-class subjects and criminals were much harder to acquire.

Thy gallery, Florence, gild my humble walls,

And my low roof the Vatican recalls![30]

Because prints were so economical, mobile, and generative, they offered many advantages over painting and sculpture for disseminating portraits throughout society. But in practice, these developments were somewhat more tumultuous than Rogers intimated.

The publication of James Granger's "Biographical History of England" in 1769 led to a meteoric rise in portrait print collecting.[31] Granger's book was similar to earlier catalogues meant to aid collectors of rare medals and prints, offering a comprehensive list of known portrait prints of English subjects along with details about the publications in which they could be found. The key difference with Granger's book was that it also outlined a system for collecting portraits that divided English society into a hierarchy with 12 distinct classes, ranging from the royal family to notorious criminals (Fig. 1.7), and encouraged collectors to compile their own miniature visual archives of the entire spectrum of English society. Following this system, portrait prints were "grangerized" from various sources into diverse, well-ordered, and personalized collections. The practice became so prevalent in England at the close of the 18th century that the cost of books that included a portrait print increased fivefold, with even rare editions under constant threat of having their portrait plates cut out to be pasted into someone's personal collection.[32]

As printsellers struggled to keep pace, collectors competing to locate rare subjects often satisfied themselves with second- or even third-hand copies. The unscrupulous capitalized on the

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[30] Rogers, *An Epistle to a Friend*, 14.

[31] See, Pointon, "Grangerizing," *The Hanging Head*, 53-79.

[32] Pointon, *Hanging Head*, 59.

situation by selling illicit prints that ranged in accuracy from vaguely captious to seemingly dubious to outright fictitious.[33] These amateur collectors married their mismatched prints into haphazard folios with little concern for their origins. Availability trumped authenticity for copyists and collectors alike in their frenzied efforts to satisfy demand.

On the other side of the Atlantic, these difficulties were even more pronounced. The nation's geographic isolation and nascent infrastructure initially restricted the popular adoption of many of these envied European practices. With a relatively small number of competent portrait painters and equally meager fine printing capabilities, the new republic was slow to reach the same level of portrait saturation as their trans-Atlantic counterparts. Even accomplished American artists like Gilbert Stuart (1755 – 1828) found it difficult to compete against the quality and affordability of imported prints, even when the source was a work by their own hand.[34] Moreover, the dual bottleneck of undertrained artists and low-margin rural economies, meant that large portions of the American populace seeking their own portraits were serviced by self-taught traveling artisan-entrepreneurs called "limners" who offered portrait painting along with a suite of other low-skill services and craft trades. The minimum condition required by America's aspiring rural gentry was satisfied by the simple contact these limners offered: "No likeness, no pay."[35] While amateurish portraits were produced in Europe as well, American limners were significantly more disadvantaged than their European equivalents. Often practicing with little or no training and

[33] Fictitious images of George Washington appeared in Europe at the outset of the Revolutionary War. It wasn't until five years later that a more reputable image was available overseas.

[34] Stuart was famously undercut by a print of his Landsowne portrait of Washington by a copy commissioned by the portrait's owner. Stuart subsequently made everyone who purchased a copy of his Washington portraits to sign away their printing rights first. Miles, *Memoirs,* 122.

[35] Jaffee, "A Correct Likeness" *Reading American Art,* 115.

servicing a less-discerning clientele, the quality of these works was comparatively more uneven while simultaneously accounting for a much greater proportion of the portraits being produced.

But as the 19th century progressed, concerns over the legitimacy of these untrained efforts were becoming more prevalent. In 1829, the commentator John Neal (1793 – 1876) marveled that despite the disadvantages faced by American painters, portraits had become "familiar household furniture" in "every village of our country."[36] However, he also cautioned that the ease with which these generally "wretched" pictures enjoyed their station was soon to change. He wrote:

> The day is near at hand—we speak in the spirit of allowed prophecy—when pictures that are now thought well of, by good judges, will not be tolerated by the multitude; when such portraits as we see covering the walls, not only of our academies and exhibitions, but those of our mother country, would not be allowed to show their face in the dwelling of a tolerably educated man.[37]

The new modes of production and consumption pioneered in the 18th century were eroding the public's faith in the innate authority of portraiture, and as these markets matured and stabilized, the consequences were becoming more apparent. Nineteenth-century collectors had more options and could afford to be more discerning. In response, artists and printmakers went to greater lengths to demonstrate the authenticity of their likenesses. Well-articulated claims about the correctness of a likeness, the appropriateness of an expression, the certainty of a connection to the sitter, the

[36] John Neal, "American Painters and Painting" *The Yankee and Boston Literary Review*, 1829.

[37] John Neal, "American Painters and Painting" *The Yankee and Boston Literary Review*, 1829.

reputability of an artist, or the security of a provenance, all had a real market value in demonstrating the authenticity of a portrait at the expense of its competitors.

But authenticity was a growing concern for other reasons as well. The spreading popularity of physiognomy at the close of the 18th century encouraged many to make extravagant claims about portraiture's capacity to communicate the internal nature of its subjects.[38] The Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater gave voice to the extremity of this romantic notion, asking:

> What is portrait painting? It is the communication, the preservation of the image of some individual, […] the art of suddenly depicting all that can be depicted of that half of man which is rendered apparent, and which never can be conveyed by words […] The best text for a commentary of man is his presence, his countenance, his form—how important is then the art of portrait painting?[39]

And indeed, throughout the first half of the 19th century, the importance of portraiture was undeniable. It was being produced in greater quantities, consumed by wider audiences, and interpreted with increased expectations. Hoping to deliver on Lavater's claims, portrait galleries and illustrated biographies proliferated in both scope and abundance.[40] The most prominent example of this widespread public interest in portraiture was the establishment of Britain's National Portrait Gallery in 1856, the first of its kind in the world. With stakes much higher than

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[38] Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*.

[39] Quoted in Verheyen, "The Most Exact Representation of the Original," *Studies in the History of Art*, 20 131. Lavater, *Physiognomy,* 2, 75.

[40] Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies: Three Case Studies." *American Portrait Prints*.

the privately assembled print folios that preceded it, the issue of authenticity had become the primary consideration guiding the Gallery's acquisitions.[41]

But, of course, as the Earl of Fife, Neal, and the founders of the National Portrait Gallery all agreed, not every portrait in this expanded market was equally valuable, even when they depicted an important sitter like Washington. Lavater argued that only a sufficiently authentic portrait could provide an insightful accounting of its subject, and even then, only for a sufficiently discerning viewer. But he also argued that attaining such authenticity was even more difficult for portraits of exceptional persons. In the 1797 English edition of his famous *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater voiced such concerns while explaining his dissatisfaction with an engraving after a portrait of Washington (Fig. 1.8):

> If Washington is the author of the revolution, which we have been witness to his undertaking and effecting with so much success, the designer [of this print] must inevitably have suffered some of the most prominent traits of the original to have escaped him. Every man has ideas beyond the reach of his action, and no one is able to concenter all his faculties, all his capacities in what he performs or what he produces—and for this strong reason the physiognomy of a celebrated man must always be superior to the best portraits of him that can be produced.[42]

[41] Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity*, 23-32.

[42] Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 333-334.

Washington's portraits pushed Lavater's claims to the extremes of both positions. On the one hand, the American public desired, perhaps more than they had for any prior subject, a portrait unquestionably capable of preserving his presence. But, on the other hand, there was the simultaneous hunger for evidence of Washington's unique supremacy. In his portraits, this manifested in the fear that Washington was simply too distinctive a character to be reduced to an image. Clearly, it would take a more compelling likeness than the one identified by Lavater to satisfy both of these concerns.

1.3 Abundance of Washington

Paradoxically, the difficulty of engaging with Washington's portraits as legible subjects for physiognomy, or even more basically, as authentic and meaningful records of his appearance, was only made more complicated by the abundance of Washington's portraits. Created with varying degrees of competence, spread over a large and uncatalogued geographic territory, and duplicated in an ever-growing torrent of more and less faithful copies, Washington's portraits were encumbered with nearly every hallmark of the emerging portrait traditions of the 18th century. Indeed, there were very few people at the end of the 18th century who were familiar with a large number of the original portraits or their provenance.[43] Even Washington's best-known portraits fared little better, surrounded as they were with an impressive range of contradictory anecdotes and popular myths.

[43] Use the case of Bushrod Washington misattributing Houdon's bust, despite being raised at mount Vernon where it is housed.

But assembling a suitable collection of verified and trustworthy portraits was only half of the problem because each portrait also represented a fundamentally different approach to the task. Eighteenth-century portraits were manifestly interpretive works that conjoined the idea of their subjects with their appearance into a meaningful form. Even the staunchest proponent of physiognomy would be left to answer which of these potential forms was most appropriate for communicating the idea of Washington. Was he best exemplified by a vigorous and youthful countenance or one worn by time and experience? Was it his career as a military figure or as a statesman that most deserved consideration? Should his expression be focused and determined or reposed and thoughtful? Was he best observed in an intimate manner by an artist with personal insights into his private mannerisms, or from afar while composed in his public bearing? Was his sculpted form preferable for rendering the volumes of his features and the full measure of his stature, or was the familiar expression and the flush coloring of life found in his painted likeness more important? Moreover, what was to be done if two portraits seemed to disagree on particular details? Each interpretation only added to the complexity of the task, and there were an impressive number of available interpretations.

Washington suffered through many more portrait sessions than he would have liked. Notoriously guarded, he was incredibly uncomfortable with the constant scrutiny that accompanied his prominent national status—and there were none more scrutinous than his portraitists.[44] Despite his personal distaste for the experience, Washington tolerated the inconvenience, knowing that his likeness held a high commercial value for the artists who were

[44] Lengel, *Inventing George Washington*, 7.

granted the opportunity to record it.[45] Therefore, it is not surprising that demand for a sitting was high and Washington quickly found himself beset by a seemingly unending stream of requests. In 1795, Washington wrote with resignation about the situation in response to yet another request from an artist hoping to obtain a sitting:

> I am so hackneyed to the touch of the painter's pencil that I am now altogether at their beck, and I sit like patience on a monument, whilst they delineate the lines of my face. […] At first, I was impatient at the request, and as restive under the operation, as a colt of the saddle. The next time I submitted very reluctantly but with less flouncing; now, no dray moves more readily to the thrill than I do to the painter's chair.[46]

In the same year Washington wrote these lines, he sat through a particularly grueling session for no less than four artists simultaneously—all members of the famous artistic family of Charles Willson Peale (1741 – 1827). Every available artist in the family had been called to arms to capitalize on the opportunity. The rival portraitist Gilbert Stuart later joked about the violence of the scene: "One aims at his eye; another at his nose; another is busy with his hair; his mouth is attacked by the fourth; and the fifth has him by the button. […] you who know how much he

[45] Stuart famously referred to his Washington portrait copies as "hundred dollar bills" because he could easily muster that price anytime he cared to produce one. The practice of selling copies of portraits of famous people was a common means of diversifying an aspiring artist's portrait-making portfolio. Simon, *The Portrait in Britain and America,* 97-133.

[46] Letter from Washington to Hopkinson, May 16th, 1795.

suffered when only attended by one, can judge of the horrors of his situation."[47] Punning off of the Peale family name, Stuart shuddered with mock concern that "they were *peeling* him." While this Peale family portrait-firing-squad was an extreme example, Washington was similarly "peeled" by the inquisitive examination of numerous artists throughout his life.

Washington is known to have sat for at least twenty-seven artists, most of whom received multiple sessions with him for each original composition that they produced, potentially amounting to several hundreds of hours spent under careful and systematic visual interrogation.[48] But he was not even safe from the prying eyes of artists when he got out of the "painter's chair." When he refused Joseph Wright's request for a sitting, having already sat for the artist on two earlier occasions, Wright contrived other means. Knowing that Washington regularly attended services at St. Paul's Church, Wright obtained the permission of the occupant of the pew immediately opposite him to utilize the position to take a clandestine portrait.[49] It was this likeness from which Watson's print was copied.

The amount of time Washington spent being observed pales in comparison to the time spent by the artists who strove to represent him. After these lengthy sittings, the canvases, sketches, and

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[47] Flexner, *Gilbert Stuart*, 126. While Stuart cites five total artists, other records only indicate the presence of four. For a more complete account see Morgan and Fielding, *The Life Portraits of Washington and their Replicas*, 366.

[48] Rembrandt Peale claims to have been granted three different 3-hour sessions with the president in 1795. It is safe to assume that if this was the length of time granted as a favor to a 17-year-old novice like Peale, that more prominent artists could have been granted much more. Houdon, for example, stayed at Mount Vernon for two weeks and certainly spent more than nine hours studying Washington during his visit. Additionally, while we do not know how many life portraits of Washington were executed through formal sittings in this manner it is clear that many artists were able to execute multiple portraits of Washington from life—Charles Willson Peale is thought to have painted at least fourteen different life portraits, each with its own set of sittings.

[49] Verplanck, "Notes and Queries," *The Crayon*, 4, no. 8, (1857), 246-247. This is an interesting narrative, though it has no support beyond this much later claim. I am at least curious if this story might have been fabricated to explain the somewhat awkwardness of the portrait being done in profile.

molds that had been produced would often be taken back to the studios to undergo several more rounds of manipulation as they were revised, refined, and reproduced before finally being distributed to a public hungry to possess an image of Washington's already iconic face.[50] To think of the hours of labor that must have been spent in this pursuit is staggering. John Hill Morgan's and Mantle Feilding's massive 1931 compendium of Washington's life portraits identified nearly 550 original portraits in circulation at that time.[51] This conservative number fails to account for a great number of lost works, or for the preponderance of knockoff prints, newspaper images, and other ephemera bearing Washington's face that seem to have littered the visual commerce of 19th-century America. In 1858, Henry Tuckerman described the pervasiveness of Washington's face in American visual culture:

> All over the land, at the close of the war, [Washington's] beloved image was substituted on banner, seal, parlor wall, journal, and bank note, for royal physiognomies. […] Liverpool ware, primitive magazines, the figure-heads of ships, the panels of coaches, engraved buttons, rude cotton prints, and melancholy samplers,—every object in the economy of trade and domestic life, was decorated, more or less truthfully, with that endearing and hallowed

[50] It was common throughout the early 19th century for Americans to display an image of Washington prominently in their homes. A Russian traveler, Pavel Svinin, remarked in 1811, "Every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his house, just as we have images of God's saints." Quoted in, Thistlethwaite, *The Image of George Washington,* 3-5.

[51] See, Morgan and Fielding, *The Life Portraits of Washington and their Replicas*, This wonderfully executed and well-documented text is frequently cited for details about Washington's life portraits. Limited to 1000 copies, it is a fine piece of printing with detailed descriptions and locations of many copies and prints.

> countenance now appropriately forming the postage stamp of the nation.[52]

The sheer number of Washington's portraits testify to the considerable efforts exacted to capture, preserve, and disseminate his physical characteristics. Throughout his life, Washington's face was scanned again and again by the probing eyes of artists; taken down from nearly every angle, measured with calipers, cast in plaster, and traced in silhouette. Every contemporary means and media available were brought to bear on this singular task of recording Washington's face. Yet despite this laborious undertaking, excavating Washington's physical appearance from his various images with any sense of certainty is a problem that continues to confound viewers who look for him in his life portraits.

1.4 Likeness and License

Given their quantity, it is not surprising to find that so many of Washington's portraits seem to contradict one another. In fact, many of these efforts were never intended to provide anything like an objective accounting of his features in the first place. While some of Washington's portraits relied on indexical procedures or were otherwise composed by artists striving for a certain level of physiognomic precision, 18th-century portrait artists were expected to aggrandize their subject's appearance, particularly with subjects of high social standing. In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War the first president of the Royal Academy, Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792),

[52] Tuckerman, portraits of Washington, 1858.

publicly argued that the particularities of the features that comprised an individual face were far from the beautiful forms toward which true art should be focused. He famously disavowed portraiture as an inferior genre that merely attempted to copy "accidents of nature." Reynolds wanted artists to pursue loftier designs:

> When the arts where in their infancy, the power of merely drawing the likeness of any object, was considered as one of its greatest effort […] But when it was found that every man could be taught to do this, and a great deal more, merely by the observance of certain precepts; the name of Genius then shifted its application, and was given only to him who added the peculiar character of the object he represented; to him who had invention, expression, grace, or dignity."[53]

For Reynolds, the blind pursuit of likeness was a dangerous distraction for artists. Because portraiture was seen as being intrinsically tied to the demands of likeness, it became the prime example of what he saw as a flawed aesthetic paradigm. Mere likeness fell short of what he saw as the real pursuit of the fine arts, which was to convey higher ideas of character and beauty.

Reynolds advocated for what he called "grand manner portraiture," which strove instead to render the sitter by judiciously adapting their features into more artistically relevant ideal types. He explained:

> If a portrait painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he has no other means than by approaching it to a general idea. He

[53] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 96.

> leaves out all the minute breaks and peculiarities in the face, and changes the dress from a temporary fashion to one more permanent, which has annexed to it no ideas of meanness from its being familiar to us. But if an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from general nature. It is very difficult to ennoble the character of a countenance but at the expense of the likeness, which is what is most generally required by such as sit to the painter.[54]

By elevating more idealized approaches to likeness, Reynolds encouraged both artists and patrons to think of portraits first and foremost as art objects. Though there were plenty of artists who didn't ascribe entirely to Reynold's argument, it greatly influenced contemporary debates over the role of likeness in portraiture and provided justification for more virtuosic artists to render their sitters' features more loosely.

Reynolds demonstrated how this worked in practice by examining the virtuosic portraits of Thomas Gainsborough (1727 – 1788). Reynolds argued that the artist's tendency to simplify the complexity of his sitters' faces into a porcelain-like mask, as can be seen in his portrait of Sarah Siddons (1755 – 1831) (Fig. 1.9), gratified viewers with a sufficiently pleasing work of art without diminishing the impression of likeness that it conveyed:

> Gainsborough's portraits were often little more, in regard to finishing, or determining the form of the features, than what

[54] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 72.

> generally attends a dead-colour; but as he was always attentive to the general effect, or whole together, I have often imagined that this unfinished manner contributed even to that striking resemblance for which his portraits are so remarkable. […]. It is pre-supposed that in this undetermined manner there is the general effect; enough to remind the spectator of the original; the imagination supplies the rest, and perhaps more satisfactorily to himself, if not more exactly, than the artist, with all his care, could possibly have done.[55]

Therefore, an artist could conceivably accomplish the demand for a likeness without following the particular details of the face too closely because, the imagination of the sitter's friends would instinctively supply the missing details.

But in the very next sentence, Reynolds mused about the potential drawbacks of this approach:

> At the same time it must be acknowledged there is one evil attending this mode: that if the portrait were seen, previous to any knowledge of the original, different persons would form different ideas, and all would be disappointed at not finding the original correspond with their own conceptions, under the great latitude which indistinctness gives to the imagination to assume almost what character or form it pleases.[56]

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[55] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 241.

[56] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 241.

While Reynolds was more concerned here about the possibility that someone who had seen a portrait by Gainsborough might not recognize the original sitter later, the implications for historical portraiture are quite clear. As Washington's portraits took on the role of preserving his presence to generations of people who would never look at him in person, the indeterminacy which Reynolds advocated was not well-suited for the task. In the 18th century, Reynolds worried that by pursuing an overly naturalistic approach to "gain" a likeness, artists would risk "losing" the intellectual and aesthetic merits of the work. However, by the late 19th century, the artistic achievements of portraits of historical figures like Washington became secondary to evidence of the "truthfulness" of their likeness.[57]

1.5 Gilbert Stuart's Washington

The tensions between contemporary demand for portraits that were both visually striking and accurately drawn are most clearly exemplified in Gilbert Stuart's iconic portrait of Washington. Of the many artists who attempted to portray Washington, few were better positioned to satisfy the public or more committed to the task. In fact, Stuart had justified his departure from Europe on the very notion that if he succeeded in capturing a suitable likeness of Washington, he would be able to comfortably support himself entirely through the sale of its copies.[58] Indeed, even

[57] Gombrich has argued that images can neither be true nor false and it is not my intention to contradict this assessment; however, in the case of portraiture there are often cultural conventions that are used to assess the level of confidence a viewer should be willing to invest in a portrayal. Moreover, the words "truth" and "accurate" were frequently used in conjunction with "likeness" throughout the 19th century.

[58] Evans, *Gilbert Stuart and the Impact of Manic Depression*, 64.

before he scheduled a sitting with Washington, Stuart had a list of 20 subscribers committed to buy a copy of the resulting portrait.[59] But despite the popularity that these portraits enjoyed both during and after Washington's death, they were ultimately unable to satisfy all of the conditions that were later desired of them.

Following Copley's example, Stuart had moved abroad at the outset of the Revolutionary War, where he quickly cultivated an international reputation that rivaled the greatest portrait painters of Europe. Stuart thrived in this post-Reynolds portrait market with a signature style that favored painterly spontaneity over cautious delineation. While Copley chose to remain in London to pursue portraiture and cultivated a following in the competitive world of history painting, Stuart eventually sought his fortunes in the less crowded American market. When he returned in 1793, his artistic credentials flattered his affluent American customers who valued both his European training and his American origins. His style was up-to-date with contemporary English fashion and marked by a distinctive virtuosity and bold palette that immediately outclassed the dated colonial style of portraiture practiced by many of his American competitors.

Stuart painted two different life portraits of Washington. He was apparently so unsatisfied with the first that he destroyed the original after producing the second, which he considered superior. However, this first likeness survives through a few copies that he produced from it in the interim (Fig. 1.10). This portrait was characteristic of Stuart's work, which often took full advantage of a common portraitist's conceit by allowing certain details of his subjects' faces to hide under nondescript or virtuosic passages of paint.[60] Stuart actively embraced the liminality of

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[59] Evans, *Gilbert Stuart and the Impact of Manic Depression*, 133. and "The Stuart Portraits of Washington." *Scribner's Monthly*, 1876.

[60] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 265-282.

the painted surface to obscure details that might detract from the general effect of their compositions, often taking this a step further by loosely blending his pigments with visible raking brushstrokes. His portraits frequently exhibit passages, like those found here in Washington's cheeks, where it is almost impossible to conclusively reconcile whether a particular swirl of color or unexpected tone was intended to indicate a facet in his sitter's appearance or if it was an incidental flourish of the materials used to compose it. He further intensified this slippage by strategically placing bright globs of unmixed paint to indicate highlights. These stark white "dollops" contrasted sharply with the handling of the materials in adjacent areas, as seen on the tip of Washington's nose. Here Stuart used not only gradations of color and tone, but also distinctive application techniques, to dramatize the effect of the highlight. Stuart's portraits often straddle this line, seamlessly oscillating between a carefully defined likeness and a florid array of paint, challenging his viewers to arbitrate between them.

The subtlety of Stuart's portraits imbued them with a sense of performative singularity, but in this case, this effect greatly complicated his plan to sell copies. While his style masterfully conveyed an impression of vitality and movement, the indeterminate nature of its execution meant that it was not well-suited as a model for the copyist. Ironically, the very characteristics that made Stuart's portraits so desirable to his clients worked against his ambitions to multiply it in a consistent and systematic manner. In fact, Stuart's second attempt, the so-called Athenaeum portrait (Fig. 1.11 & 1.12), was even more loosely executed than his first. Worried that he might inadvertently spoil the invaluable likeness, Stuart refused to add to the canvas outside of his sittings

with Washington.[61] And yet, Stuart ultimately succeeded in producing over 100 copies of this challenging portrait, though many have commented on the unevenness of the results.[62] It is curious that Stuart was able to sell so many copies of this portrait despite the clear mismatch between its particularity and its reproducibility.

The portrait's unfinished state amplifies Stuart's propensity for loose brushwork and indeterminate volumes. There is little sense of depth or curvature in Washington's face, which is rendered almost as it were a single continuous plane. This surface is only interrupted by a projecting nose and two receding eyes. Washington's lips and the wrinkles around his eyes are distinctly flat, appearing more drawn than modeled. The lack of more subtle shading on his eyelids paired with the dark line marking their lower edge makes them appear especially thick and heavy. Even the shape of Washington's cheeks is only hinted at by adding a rouge cast rather than delineating them through light and shadow. In similar fashion, the shadow on the right side of his face only alludes to the complexity of volumes that remain obscured on either side of it. It lends a similar effect to one found in the observation of astral bodies like the moon, where the intense difference between illuminated and shaded portions of astral bodies and the absence of any sources of reflected light make them appear flat. In such images, the most descriptive indication of their topography is strictly isolated along their terminus, or the thin transitional boundary between them that traces the contours of an uneven surface (Fig. 1.13). Stuart's composition follows a similar

[61] The portrait had been directly commissioned by Martha Washington but Stuart continually refused to finish and deliver the original canvas, claiming that Washington had granted him permission to keep the original canvas. Eventually he sent her a copy of it to satisfy the commission. Evans, *Gilbert Stuart*, 64.

[62] Despite being an exceptionally prolific portrait painter, these copies accounted for a full one-sixth of Stuart's output from 1796 to his death. Geenhalgh, "Not a Man but a God", 288.

logic, with the flatness of the bright face and the shadowed neck most enlivened in the slim transition between them.

Even with the portrait's marked lack of descriptive details, many contemporary viewers found the delineation around Washington's mouth suspect. Stuart himself explained that this was the unfortunate result of an incredibly uncomfortable pair of dentures that Washington had recently received which distorted his face in a peculiar fashion.[63] It is interesting that this portrait became so popular despite containing such a prominent and widely discussed distortion in the face.

As Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* became more widely known and discussed after the first English translation appeared in 1789, commentators on portraiture increasingly desired portraits that could flatter while maintaining plausibly accurate likenesses. Many patrons began to expect portraits to not only preserve a sitter's appearance, but also to provide a legible expression of their inner character through a loosely codified set of facial indicators. The presence of such a distortion inhibited this process. It is possible that in the case of Washington this distortion was more forgivable since any portrait of him would necessarily have to rely on some form of prosthesis to fill out his mouth. Even the most ardent proponents of physiognomy never suggested that Washington should be depicted without a set of dentures. [64]

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[63] Stuart, "The Stuart Portraits of Washington." *Scribner's Monthly.*, Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States.*

[64] Several decades later, John Adams, who similarly suffered substantial tooth loss, famously refused to wear dentures. Much to the chagrin of those that struggled to depict him, this included his portrait sittings. Adams was unapologetic, stating in a letter in 1819, "The age of painting and sculpture has not yet arrived in this country, and I hope it will not arrive very soon. Artists have done what they could with my face and eyes, head and shoulders, stature and figure and they made them monsters as fit for exhibition as Harlequin or Punch. They may continue to do so for as long as they please. I would not give sixpence for a picture of Raphael or a statue of Phidias." John Adams to Mr. Binon, Feb., 7 1819. Quoted in Dawson, *The Historical Magazine, and Notes and Queries,* also see, Ring, "The Dental Health of President John Adams," *New York State Dental Journal,* 70, iss. 7, 36-7.

But Washington's distended mouth may have also contributed to Stuart's unwillingness to finish the original canvas. In the substantially flattened Athenaeum portrait, the distortion caused by the dentures more easily blends into the flatness of the rest of the face and is only observed in the way it extends the silhouette of his lower cheeks outward. This makes the profile on both sides of his face, from temple to chin, look like two parallel vertical lines—a far cry from Charles Willson Peale's popular ovular renditions (Fig. 1.14), or even Stuart's own first attempt, which both taper slightly the top and bottom. In Washington's earlier portraits he is consistently depicted as having a rather square face, a feature that seems to have become more prominent as he aged. However, here the expected subtle convergence toward the chin is greatly reduced as the effect of the dentures prompted Stuart to exaggerate this natural tendency, in a sense caricaturing something barely discernable in Washington's features into something much more distinctive.

Stuart further accentuated the geometric simplicity of this portrait by leveling Washington's eye line and lips along horizontal lines, which are all sharply perpendicular to the dominant verticals at the sides of his face. Likewise, the nose, which projects slightly to the left is mirrored on the right by a nostril that extends nearly the same distance in the opposite direction. The resulting shape remains surprisingly symmetrical as it follows the center line descending from the midpoint between Washington's eyes, before terminating in a thin shadow that mirrors the horizontal line of his pressed lips. By mating the orthogonal lines of the face along a right-angled grid, every independent feature of Washington's face reasserts the overall squareness of the whole. Underneath Stuart's virtuosic brushstrokes, Washington's features are mapped onto the canvas in a systematic fashion that is both legible and memorable.

The replication of this effect is instantly recognizable in Stuart's copies, despite their many other differences. In the version owned by the Everson Museum of Art (Fig. 1.15), the soft

handling of the Athenaeum portrait has been replaced by a stiffer plastic form. With a higher level of finish, the heavy eyelids exhibit a stronger sense of volume and the shading along the sides of his face is likewise more complex. The tension around Washington's mouth has also become more pronounced with a distinctly stretched appearance. Though the silhouette of the original is retained here, there is a stronger impression that Washington's jaw is jutting uncomfortably forward. Overall, it is almost startling how different these two versions appear. And yet, the most substantially unifying feature between the two is how the distinctive rectangular shape and cartesian arrangement are easily discernable in both.

Despite the artist's popularity, there was a lot working against Stuart in promoting his Athenaeum portrait. He had arrived in America late in Washington's life and had to compete against well-established portraits by other artists. In fact, there could hardly have been a less opportune time to try and promote a portrait of Washington as his public acclaim was at an all-time low.[65] At the same time, the original canvas from which he worked was poorly delineated and contained a noticeable distortion around the mouth. But most problematic of all was the striking variation manifest in its many copies. The vast majority of those who so readily adopted Stuart's portrait did so through one of its many reproductions. Few would have seen the original, which was retained by the artist until his death. While even a copy by Stuart's own hand was

[65] The members of the dissenting Republican party, led by the editor of the Aurora General Advertiser, Benjamin Franklin Bache, routinely lambasted Washington in the press at this time as a "tyrant," "dictator," and "imposter." After signing the controversial Jay Treaty in 1794 to normalize British American relations, the opposition boiled over into a full-blown anti-Washington campaign. The Aurora republished a series of forged letters that had previously circulated during the war in which Washington allegedly divulged his continued loyalty to the British crown and active distain for democracy. These supposedly "lost letters" were a part of an earlier disinformation campaign enacted by the British to discredit Washington's leadership during the Revolutionary War. Some historians speculate that Washington's tarnished image may have significantly contributed to his decision to not seek a third term as president. See, Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache's Attack on George Washington" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 100, no. 2, 191-230. And Lorant, *The Presidency: A Pictorial History of Presidential Elections from Washington to Truman*, 38.

noticeably removed from the original life portrait, more often, the copies that circulated were based on secondary sources, executed by a number of copyists, and disseminated through prints of varying quality.[66] These later artists often strained, as Stuart did himself, to maintain fidelity to the fluid styling of the original.

Given these difficulties, I contend that the resulting iconic nature of this likeness is best explained by the distinctive characteristics of the face introduced by the distortion of the jaw. Rather than the almost intangible and difficult to emulate qualities of Stuart's painting technique, the seemingly accidental geometry of the Athenaeum portrait was unconsciously preserved in even the most rudimentary of copies (Fig. 1.16). Virtually every detail and proportion has been changed in James Barton Longacre's copy after Benjamin Trott (Fig. 1.17), yet the parallel sides of Washington's face mark it as unmistakably reliant on Stuart's original. While the current ubiquity of this image certainly plays a role in how easily it is for most Americans to readily identify various versions of it as a representation of Washington, it is telling that even when stripped down to its basic schematic components, a striking sense of the original remains (Fig. 1.18 & 1.19). The simplicity of the design lends itself well to reproduction, providing a model that translated well into the kind of scaled-down black and white prints that would ultimately provide the most likely site of encounter for a large number of Americans.

[66] Many of these copyists successfully passed their copies off as original Stuarts. Stuart, "The Stuart Portraits of Washington." *Scribner's Monthly*.

1.6 Portrayal and Erasure

In fact, Stuart's likeness was so successful in implanting itself into the minds of the many who became familiar with it in the following decades that it threatened the memory of the man himself. As this happened, the disconnect observed between Stuart's portrait and Washington's body troubled some viewers even as they embraced the work. By 1823, the popular American author John Neal observed that the memory of Washington's person had oddly been displaced by his portraits. In his novel *Randolph,* one of Neal's characters explained:

> Stuart painted him; and though a better likeness of him were shown to us, we should reject it; for, the only idea we now have of George Washington, is associated with Stuart's Washington. […] How strange it is!—Thus we get accustomed to a certain image, no matter how it is created, by what illusion, or under what circumstances; and we adhere to it, like a lover to a mistress. If George Washington should appear on earth, just as he sat to Stuart, I am sure that he would be treated as an imposter, when compared with Stuart's likeness of him, unless he produced his credentials.[67]

This last line is often used to imply that Stuart's portrait contained an unrecognizable likeness of Washington. However, Neal's rhetoric here actually hinged on a clever reversal of the way that Washington's portraits would have been understood while he had been alive. Instead of the portrait

[67] Neal, *Randolph,* 63-64.

being discredited for failing to resemble its sitter, Neal teased that it was now the absent sitter who must emulate the portrait to be properly identified.

While Neal pointed to the absurdity that knowledge of Washington's features was becoming threatened by the prominence of his portraits, he explained that the public demanded a portrait that confirmed the grace and heroism that they attributed to the sitter. According to Neal, the popularity of Stuart's portrait was not the result of its correspondence to Washington's body but rather due to its correspondence with Washington's romanticized memory. The very next lines in *Randolph* discuss a less fortunate portrait still hanging in Washington's Virginian estate:

> At Mount Vernon, there is a picture of him, just after his marriage with Mrs. Custis. I have studied it with attention. It is that of an ordinary man. There is not a single feature, or expression of greatness in it. Yet it is said to have been a remarkable likeness. I have often thought of the probable reception which that picture would meet with, if exhibited, now, as the portrait of Washington. It would be laughed at.[68]

Neal articulated an expectation shared by many commentators at the time: for a portrait to claim to be an authentic image of Washington, it had to represent something more than an "ordinary man." He hinted that even those who had personally known Washington might now prefer a heroic portrait over an accurate one.

Stuart's portrait, in addition to being sufficiently heroic and geometrically simple, was also easily recognizable and memorable. Indeed, many of Washington's contemporaries complained

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[68] Neal, *Randolph*, 64.

about the difficulty they had in remembering and describing Washington's appearance. In 1784, Joseph Mandrillon described Washington as, "imposing in stature, noble and well proportioned, a countenance open, calm and sedate, but without any one striking feature, and when you depart from him, the remembrance only of a fine man will remain."[69] The Marquis de Chastellux similarly described Washington as "mild and agreeable, but such as to render it impossible to speak particularly of any of his features, so that in quitting him, you have only the recollection of a fine face."[70] Neal's assessment that the supposedly accurate likeness of Washington at Mount Vernon had the unremarkable face "of an ordinary man" echoes these sentiments. Much as Weem's most whimsical anecdotes became touchstones of Washington's biography in place of their more mundane and "naturalistic" counterparts, Stuart's portrait became a convenient and memorable shorthand for the more difficult-to-grasp nuance of Washington's living features.

But while all of this explains how Stuart's portrait became so popular, it also explains why it had difficulty acting as the most authentic embodiment of Washington's presence. As Wendy Steiner has rightly pointed out, portraits both denote and designate their sitters.[71] However, the mechanics of the operation depend heavily on what the viewer brings to the encounter. As the audience for portraits of American founding heroes became temporally estranged from the persons that they portrayed, it became clear that there was a problematic difference in the way portraits signify intimate acquaintances and unfamiliar historical figures.

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[69] Verheyen, "The Most Exact Representation of the Original" *Studies in the History of Art*,132.

[70] Verheyen, "The Most Exact Representation of the Original" *Studies in the History of Art*, 132.

[71] Steiner, "The Semiotics of a Genre: Portraiture in Literature and Painting," *Semiotica*, 111-119.

For those familiar with the subject of a portrait, the perceived likeness of the portrait establishes the designation through the impression of affinity experienced by the viewer.[72] In such cases, any accompanying written attribution of the sitter is redundant because the subject will be readily identified. Likewise, the specific conditions or methods used to produce a portrait are of little consequence since, as Collingwood argued, the perceived authority of the likeness is proportional to the impression of affinity that it produces. If the viewer perceives an affinity between the portrait and the sitter, no further evidence is necessary. Such a portrait also remains comfortably distinct from the person to which it refers. It is supplementary to the viewer's own experiences, a second-class token of the subject's familiar corporeal presence. As such, a portrait of an intimate acquaintance acts more as a visual mnemonic that is only fully animated in conjunction with the viewer's own recollections. Therefore, any dissimilarities encountered in the portrait can be easily dismissed as an artistic flourish or even a conscious attempt to convey a sense of grandeur and idealism to flatter the memory of their sitter.

But for those who do not know the sitter, as with distant historical subjects, the signification works in the opposite direction. The title of the work now designates the subject and the likeness *presents* the subject to the viewer. In this way, the portrait simulates a desired firsthand encounter, simultaneously describing and presenting the subject. In this instance, it is the portrait's provenance, or some other type of evidence outside of the work itself, that affirms the tangibility of the portrait's connection to its subject. Without any first-hand experience of the individual in question, it becomes more difficult to maintain the same critical separation between the signifier and the signified. The portrait itself becomes the primary agent in place of the absent and unseen

[72] Collingwood *The Principles of Art*, 53.

sitter. Under these circumstances a portrait achieves authority only inasmuch as it satisfies the perceived promise to grant the viewer, at least in some limited way, an authentic encounter with the original it purports to represent. In this case then, the reputation of the artist, judgments offered by knowledgeable experts, or the methods employed to produce a portrait, become central considerations. Moreover, in this case, the viewer is no longer equipped to identify any discrepancies found in the execution of the portrait. Despite the audience's awareness that some measure of dissimilarity is a natural consequence of the genre, they have no way of determining what features might be erroneous.

However, in practice, the process is even more complicated. In cases like Washington, where his image became so ubiquitous, even those that never knew him in life would eventually develop a set of expectations for a representation of him through their accumulated experience with his portraits. Most contemporary viewers are in this situation today. Frequent encounters with Washington's portraits allow many Americans to experience a sense of correctness when looking at a familiar portrait like Stuart's and a corresponding sense of unfamiliarity when looking at a less known portrait like Rembrandt Peale's (Fig. 1.20). In fact, some contemporary viewers who are confronted by a poor copy after Stuart (Fig. 1.17) could likely identify areas of the likeness that strike them as deficient. Here we have almost come full circle as this process strangely parallels how Washington's portraits would have been experienced by those who were familiar with him from life, except now this familiarity is no longer the result of any experience with his person, but with his portraits.

Washington's prominence caused the effects of this transposition to be felt more acutely than any other example. With greater patriotic imperative to preserve his presence, increasing capacity to duplicate his portrayals, and an emerging nationalistic incentive to elevate his persona,

Washington's portrait became the most important cornerstone of the American national portrait tradition that would develop over the course of the 19th century. At the same time, they were rooted in the representational paradigms of their earlier historical moment. As the case studies investigated in this dissertation demonstrate, the audiences that attempted to make use of them in the decades following Washington's adapted and reinterpreted them in a variety of ways. In due course, they foregrounded certain formal qualities and types of evidence while dismissing others in their quest to engage with an authentic portrait of the absent hero.

1.7 Conclusion

In chapter two I examine the development and reception of the first high quality illustrated biography of American subjects, *Delaplaine's Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters,* which was published by Joseph Delaplaine (1777 – 1824) in 1815. Biography was becoming an extremely popular genre alongside the rising circulation of portraiture at the end of the 18th century. By the 19th, Americans desperate to assert the historic relevance of their nationhood alongside their European counterparts found biography to be an effective medium.[73] Delaplaine, and his later imitators, attempted to combine portraiture and biography into large-format volumes with a level of execution that corresponded with the seriousness of these ambitions. In an attempt to distinguish his costly book from the meager efforts of his competitors, Delaplaine went to great lengths to assure his audience of the authenticity of

[73] For example, Thomas Jefferson requesting a large moose to send to Europe to counter Comte de Buffon's degenerative hemisphere thesis, Thomson, *The Legacy of the Mastodon.*

the portraits that it contained. He enlisted experts and agents across the country in an expensive and laborious campaign to identify the most suitable portraits available for each of his subjects to serve as prototypes for the book's illustrations. His efforts to identify a suitable portrait of Washington were greatly frustrated and he conceded defeat. While *Repository* ultimately proved to be a commercial failure for Delaplaine, it remains a significant achievement in early American publishing. The project's lofty aims prompted him to consider the issue of authenticity more directly than his contemporaries, and the corresponding difficulties that he encountered foreshadowed later developments. At the same time, the critical reception of the book explored the related roles of portraiture and biography in providing authoritative accounts of their subjects, which in turn, expanded on these concerns in provocative ways.

The third chapter deals with a posthumous composite portrait of Washington painted by Charles Willson Peale's son Rembrandt Peale (1778 – 1860) in 1823. Nearly a decade after *Repository*, anxieties over the fading memory of the revolutionary moment were steadily growing. Taking advantage of his position as one of the last living artists who had painted Washington from life, Peale hoped to authorize a new image of Washington that could dispel the doubts that surrounded his earlier portraits. Like Delaplaine, Peale claimed that all of Washington's life portraits failed to adequately represent him. By reinterpreting Reynolds' aesthetic theories, Peale claimed to have combined the best elements of all of Washington's portraits into a single perfected "standard likeness." I argue that Peale's composite approach was also heavily informed by his background in natural history. Peale's aggressive campaign to promote his portrait concentrated on discrediting the work of his competitors while appropriating the goodwill that they possessed for his own work. Peale supported his own claims with a substantial number of personal testimonials that he solicited from leading citizens that had known Washington personally. His

eventual goal was to leverage these resources to gain a congressional commission for an equestrian portrait of Washington to be placed in the Capitol Rotunda to formalize the acceptance of his new likeness on the national stage. Peale's portrait ultimately failed to achieve this outcome, and despite the praise that it received in his own time, it fell into disrepute by the early 20th century. This chapter looks back at the theoretical justifications of Peale's project to understand the way his project navigated issues of authenticity at the very moment when Washington's portraits were threatening to replace his living memory.

In chapter four, I consider the reception history of Jean-Antoine Houdon's (1741 – 1824) portrayals of Washington. Houdon was one of the most celebrated sculptors in Europe during Washington's lifetime and made the arduous journey to the U.S. in 1785 to study Washington from life in anticipation of a major Congressional commission for an equestrian statue. While at Mount Venon he took a life mask of Washington and produced a terracotta bust portrait that would eventually vie with Stuart's painting in claims to authenticity. Later he made the first full-length statue of Washington, a standing image in marble that was installed in the Virginia State Capitol in 1796, while Washington was still alive. Contemporary investigations of these works lean heavily on the importance of the life mask to the authority of their likeness. Strangely, though, the life mask was unremarked upon at this time. It was not until much later in the 19th century that the life mask become increasingly linked to claims about the authenticity of his works. I examine how knowledge of the life mask's existence spread slowly in the first half of the century, before eventually becoming a touchstone in marketing rhetoric used to promote copies after Houdon's work by other artists. By the end of the century, the life mask had become the dominant means of exploring the connection between Houdon's sculpture and Washington. At a time when none of Washington's closest associates remained to arbitrate the authenticity of his portraits, the public

looked for other kinds of guarantees. In this post-photographic moment, the narrative of the life mask proved to be an especially enticing kind of evidence. I compare the importance granted to the mask in later periods to the reception of some of his other works as well as the functions of life masks generally to Houdon's studio practices. I argue that not only does this later emphasis placed on the importance of the life mask not comport with its earlier history, but it also reveals an important shift in the way the public approached the issue of authenticity in portraiture in the second half of the 19th century.

In this project, I endeavor to take up the challenge issued by Bruno Latour to "look at the way in which someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact, and to recognize the first author's ownership and originality."[74] However, rather than focusing on "ownership and originality," my research investigates the types of arguments and evidence that persuade someone to recognize a portrait as "authentic." In each of the cases that I pursue, different versions of Washington's portraits were taken up as authentic representations of his person and the evidence that they relied on to encourage others to do the same was equally varied. Watson hoped to ensure the legitimacy of his print by means of an inscription stating his preference for it and compounding it into a collection of other similarly authentic tokens of Washington's presence, including an original signed letter and a lock of hair. Delaplaine utilized the testimonies of knowledgeable experts and the exceptional quality of his illustrated biography to substantiate the validity of the portraits contained in *Repository*. Building on this, Peale attempted to combine the diffuse authority of Washington's many contradictory portraits into a single image backed by unimpeachable public figures and official governmental sponsorship.

[74] Latour, "Visualization and cognition," *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present,* 5.

Later in the century, the types of evidence that the American public had previously found persuasive had become ineffective and some portraits failed to compel many to take them up or pass them along. Consequently, they became, as Latour put it, less of a "fact." New types of evidence became increasingly important, culminating in a perceived relationship between Houdon's sculpture and Washington's life mask. The changing priorities demonstrated by these case studies, therefore, not only highlight how concepts of likeness and authenticity are culturally determined, but they also imply that a portrait's very ability to present the appearance of its subject may be tied to the same cultural horizon.

2.0 'No Model for Correct Imitation': Joseph Delaplaine's Authentic Portrait Prints

2.1 A New Kind of American Illustrated Biography

In 1814, the Philadelphian entrepreneur Joseph Delaplaine set out to publish the first finely printed illustrated biography of American subjects under the name, *Delaplaine's Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished Americans* (Fig. 2.1).[75] This ambitious volume sat at the crossroads of early American publishing. The biographies that preceded it were modest-scale, sparsely-illustrated, single volumes or similarly rudimentary productions of the ephemeral press. In the decades that followed the publication of *Repository's* fist volume, several luxuriously illustrated, multi-volume, encyclopedic national biographies began to be published in America. Projects like Joseph Sanderson's 1819 *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* and James Longacre's 1833 *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* were directly modeled on *Repository*. Though circulating less widely than these later works, Delaplaine's book not only demonstrated the potential viability of such grand scale biographies, but it also articulated the underlying historical and patriotic imperatives that such works were tooled to address. The scale of the publication was a major gamble, and would ultimately prove unsustainable. Delaplaine invested considerable resources into the project to match the seriousness with which he regarded the task, producing a book with unparalleled production values from an American press. However, Delaplaine found that his potential customers were more reluctant to

[75] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository*.

help bear the cost than he had hoped. Unable to recuperate his investment quickly enough to offset his mounting debts, *Repository* proved to be a financial disaster for Delaplaine and was discontinued after the third half volume was published in 1818. As the market matured and with slight variations of his formula, Delaplaine's successors would fare better—proving the salience of his conception, if not soundness of his execution.[76]

Before he began *Repository,* Delaplaine had already distinguished himself as a risk-taking businessman with a flair for self-promotion. Following his marriage to Jane Livingston in 1809, he took control of a small fortune which he quickly put to work in a variety of ventures. In the highly competitive, low-margin, world of early 19th-century American book publishing, Delaplaine found inventive ways to distinguish his products, often by outspending his competition. For example, when he set out to publish a Latin schoolbook in 1810, he circulated advance page proofs to every local expert he could find to solicit favorable recommendations which he then printed in the preface of the finished book (Fig. 2.2).[77]

Publishing the recommendations of experts was a common mode of advertising at the time and one Delaplaine would claim as vital to his success of his illustrated biography. Stemming from the continuing 18th century practice of obtaining letters of introduction to attract the notice or support of a social superior, signed recommendations were applied broadly in early-19th-century America.[78] However, Delaplaine appears to be the first American publisher to distribute page

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[76] Marshall "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies."

[77] Marshall "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 34.

[78] Delaplaine had utilized this expanded role in 1810 when he obtained the signatures of 22 associates to vouch for the quality of his character and experience while seeking an appointment at the Northern Liberty Bank (Pennsylvania Historical Society). Likewise, purveyors of everything from medicine to museums published recommendations in the press to affirm the quality of their wares. Dr. T. W. Dyott's contemporaneous recurring two column advertisement for "Approved Family Medicines" devoted substantial print space to include a "testimonial" of approbation undersigned with the names and addresses of 42 Philadelphians.

proofs of a book before publication so that he could include such recommendations in a first edition printing. This process greatly increased production costs by requiring the press to be set up twice before the first edition was ready to be sold. Delaplaine speculated that this added expense would be offset by increased sales. While it is difficult to measure the impact that these recommendations may have had in enticing potential customers, Delaplaine successfully sold through the first edition in less than two years. He continued to collect letters praising the book after publication so that by the time he was ready to print the second edition in 1812 he had expanded the number of recommendations from 9 to 36.[79] Using a similar tactic in 1813, he printed a joint letter signed by well-known Philadelphian artists Rembrandt Peale and Thomas Sully (1783 – 1872) in which they committed to oversee the selection of engravings to include in Delaplaine's upcoming lavishly-executed Bible.[80] In what would become a recurring practice, he then used these printed endorsements as stationery for his correspondence and directly solicited subscribers through the post (Fig. 2.3). While this Bible project never materialized, his approach was consistent with his promotion of the Latin schoolbook.

In both cases, Delaplaine demonstrated his deference to the approval of experts, which would become a key feature of his process while developing *Repository* as well. He frequently sought the advice of experts to settle a range of decisions regarding the book's composition. But most publicly, he also circulated proofs of his portrait prints to friends and family of his subjects in order to gather statements of praise and approbation, which he then used to persuade subscribers

[79] Compare *Epitome Historiae Sacrae, Ad Usum Tyronum Linguae Latinae,* Philadelphia: 1810 to *Epitome Historiae Sacrae, Ad Usum Tyronum Linguae Latinae,* Philadelphia: 1812.

[80] Marshall "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 35.

of the validity of his efforts.[81] By the time Delaplaine began work on *Repository*, he had successfully executed quite a number of large-scale projects.[82] Encouraged by his early successes, Delaplaine's designs became increasingly grandiose. Of all of Delaplaine's projects, *Repository* was the most ambitious. Upon his death less than a decade later, it was the only project mentioned in his obituary.[83]

Delaplaine had two main sources of competition for *Repository*. The first was foreign illustrated biographies like the historian Thomas Birch's (1705 – 1766) 1747 *The Heads of Illustrious Persons of Great Britain* (Fig. 2.4). Birch's massive two-volume book had been recently revised into a new single volume edition in 1813, measuring an impressive 17 inches tall. English-illustrated biographies like Birch's were greatly appealing to America audiences even without the inclusion of American figures. The English publishing industry enjoyed many advantages which allowed them to dramatically undercut their American counterparts. This disparity was even more pronounced with higher quality publications like illustrated biographies. Wielding greater capital reserves, production capability, and broader circulation, English printers monopolized the fine printing market in America, where domestic publishers struggled to marshal the resources necessary to attempt similar volumes at a reasonable price.

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[81] A good example of this is found in Caldwell, "The Author Turned Critic," 35.

[82] The most impressive of these was a multi-volume American edition of the *New Edinburgh Encyclopedia*, with expanded entries tailored to American interests. In 1812, he also began publishing the monthly illustrated magazine, the *Emporium of Arts and Science.* Through these projects, Delaplaine made contacts with several Philadelphia based artists and oversaw the conversion of numerous paintings into prints for illustration and loose-leaf sale. By 1813, he had entered into a cost sharing partnership with the artist Thomas Birch to offer large format European-style prints depicting American naval battles under the brand "Delaplaine's National Prints." See Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 37.

[83] "Obituary" May, 31 1824 in *Index to Biographies (Newspaper Clippings)*,p. 151. PHS Gaa. 46.

The solution for most American publishers was to compromise the format in order to get an affordable product to print. These domestic biographies were the second source of competition for Delaplaine. Periodicals like the *Port Folio* and the *Analectic Magazine* successfully integrated illustrated biography alongside their other articles in order to entice subscribers. However, the quality of the supplied portraits was often uneven and the biographies were invariably short. Earlier publishers had not yet succeeded in scaling up these modest offerings into quality standalone volumes. For example, in 1815 two different anthologies of American naval biographies were published which recycled full entries that had been previously published in periodicals.[84] In both cases, the portraits that had previously accompanied the biographies were not available to the authors and consequently were excluded. The expense of securing replacements would have made the quickly compiled anthologies unviable.

Even more structured and comprehensive publications like John Kingston's popular 1811 *The New Pocket Biographical Dictionary* cut production costs wherever possible (Fig. 2.5). Kingston's book was the antithesis of Delaplaine's project in nearly every way. The palm-sized volume was densely typeset without paragraph breaks and little separation between entries. It squeezed an impressive 235 entries into just over 300 pages, with subjects ranging from living to historical, both foreign and domestic. Fewer than one in ten subjects were American and its single illustration was a stipple engraving of Washington after Gilbert Stuart, an image so readily recognized as to make its inclusion more ornamental than essential. Kingston admitted that his audience would have preferred more portraits in his volume noting:

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[84] *Naval Biography, Consisting of Memoirs of the Most Distinguished Officers of the American Navy; to Which is Annexed the Life of General Pike* (Cincinnati: 1815) and American Naval Biography Compiled by Isaac Baily (RI: 1815)

> It was the custom among the ancient Romans to preserve, in wax, the figures of those, among their ancestors, who were of noble birth, or had been more nobly advanced to the chair of honour by their personal merits and rare exploits. Sallust relates, that Scipio, and other great men, by beholding those likenesses, found enkindled in their breast so ardent a thirst after virtue as could not be extinguished, till, by glory of their own actions they had equaled the illustrious objects of their emulation.[85]

But Kingston was less than apologetic about their absence. He explained that while such these "means and motives" were laudable, biography offered a much more potent medium for moral instruction than such "heathen" traditions like portraiture. Rather than contemplating the virtue of the illustrious dead like the ancients before a cult statue, Americans were better served by examining the accounts of their deeds, virtues, and vices demonstrated in their biographies.

Delaplaine consciously positioned *Repository* as a counterpoint to works like Kingston's. Delaplaine likely examined Kingston's popular book directly while developing his plan.[86] Like Kingston, Delaplaine agreed that the primary function of biography was moral education, but he also wanted *Repository* to provide more than a collection of virtuous prototypes worthy of emulation. He also wanted to showcase the achievements and national character of the United States in monumental terms.

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[85] John Kingston, *The New Pocket Dictionary*

[86] *Repository* even suspiciously includes a quotation in its preface that was prominently featured in Kingston's book. The similarity of the shared quotation is emphasized by the way both authors have truncated the passage in question at the exact same point mid-sentence.

Delaplaine recognized that the format of the book was central to its meaning.[87] *Repository* would be printed in quarto folio, measuring 11¾" x 9½" with ample margins, high quality etchings, and several volumes. In addition to the portraits, Delaplaine also included two frontispieces. But *Repository* was not simply to be an example of fine printing. The book's quality of construction would demonstrate the seriousness of its purpose and grant authority to its contents. Delaplaine meant to pull American biography out of the obscurity imposed by its longstanding humble execution and place it firmly on the international stage. When Delaplaine struggled to attract subscribers, he doubled down on his plan and produced a lavish 33-page prospectus, executed in the same grand format proposed for *Repository* complete with three sample portraits and a biography of Christopher Columbus. The prospectus itself was an accomplishment. A reviewer in the *Analectic Magazine* declared that it, "surpasses any thing of the kind that has yet been produced in this country."[88]

The format of the book had to be suitable to the class of persons it sought to exemplify. Rather than following the apparent constraints of the market, Delaplaine appealed to the patriotic sensibilities of his audience to enshrin the worthies of their shared national heritage with all the solemnity of the heroes of antiquity. Delaplaine implored his subscribers:

> Can we witness the avidity with which the greatest men treasure up pictures, or the vast expense at which they purchase old coins, medals, busts, and medallions containing likenesses of the

[87] Delaplaine's initial plan was only a modest improvement over Kingston's book. In April of 1813, he proposed to publish high-quality loose portrait prints accompanied by brief one-sheet biographies. This plan was ultimately scrapped in favor of a much more ambitious serial volume with lengthy biographies. See, The Evening Post, May 7 1813.

[88] The Analectic Magazine, Aug. 1814; 4, 175.

> illustrious personages of antiquity, without being convinced of the importance of transmitting to posterity, in a shape so respectable as to ensure permanent care, the portraits of those individuals to whom we owe all that we possess worthy of being noticed by after-ages.[89]

Delaplaine saw the founding of the United States in historical terms, imagining future generations unacquainted with the lives and characters of its most prominent agents. *Repository's* editor, Dr. Charles Caldwell (1772 – 1853), later defended against criticism of the book by likewise pointing to its future destiny, predicting, it would be "preserved and valued as a NATIONAL MONUMENT, and a CHOICE RELIC," long after competing journals were "WORM-EATEN and FORGOTTEN."[90] By dedicating the purpose of *Repository* to this future public, Delaplaine invited its purchasers to indulge in the romantic fantasy of memorializing their own moment in history. And the extravagant format of the book was instrumental to this illusion.

2.2 Theaters of War

Delaplaine did not invent the idea of a finely executed illustrated biography, but his decision to create an American version had implications. While the Revolutionary War had brought considerable attention to the new republic, America was still struggling to shed its provincial status. While the nation was once again in direct conflict with Britain during the War

[89] Delaplaine, *Prospectus*, v.

[90] Caldwell, "The Author Turned Critic," 34.

of 1812 (1812 – 1815), many of Delaplaine contemporaries saw biography as another theater of conflict. Citing the enduring popular belief that the western hemisphere had a degenerating effect on the species that inhabited it, Delaplaine appealed to his audience's national pride, exhorting:

> For the fulfillment […] of our duty on this subject, let us […] portray to the world, with the pen and the pencil, some of the most distinguished and worthy of our countrymen—representing them faithfully as they are, in body, mind, and action. Let fair comparison be instituted between them and European characters, and a decision formed on grounds of justice. Without intending an insinuation unfavorable or offensive to the people of other countries, we cannot hesitate to express the conviction, that Americans will have no cause to blush for the issue."[91]

Delaplaine understood that for this comparison to flatter his American subscribers, he had to deliver a book that matched the production standards of his foreign competitors. The geographic validity of the new world would be proven not only through military conflict or the establishment of a new form of governance, but also by providing sufficiently grand honors to commemorate the lives of those instrumental to these achievements.

Delaplaine was not alone in this assessment. Americans greatly admired the portrait collections found in Europe and desired to emulate them. An American traveler in England wrote with jealousy in 1808:

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[91] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository,* v.

> Portrait painting is the fort, as it has always been the passion of this country. Happily for the inquisitive stranger every rich man has all his progenitors and relatives on canvas. The walls of every public institution are crowded with benefactors and pupils, and no town hall is left without the heads of the corporation, or the representatives of the borough. The same impulse that prompts us to gaze with avidity on the persons of our cotemporaries, if there be any thing prominent in their character, or peculiar in their history, leads us to turn a curious and attentive eye on the likenesses of the 'mighty dead,' whose souls as well as faces are thus in some degree transmitted to posterity. Next to my association with the living men of genius who render illustrious the names of Englishmen, no more sensible gratification has accrued to me from my residence in this country, than that of studying the countenances of their predecessors; no employment has tended more effectively to improve my acquaintance with the history of the nations, to animate research, and to quicken the spirit of competition.[92]

Motivated by similar desires, many Americans were excited by the prospect of producing a work of comparable quality to European models focused exclusively on American subjects. The editor of the Port Folio, Nicholas Biddle (1786 – 1844), was enthusiastic about how *Repository* would impact these international dynamics in his review of Delaplaine's prospectus. He saw the timing

[92] *The Port folio*, 1808, v. 3 p. 135.

of *Repository* as especially fortuitous, since it paralleled a similar project recently announced in England under the direction of Edmond Lodge (1756 – 1839) (Fig. 2.6):

> It is a little remarkable that, without any interchange of sentiment or intention between the editors or proprietors, and even without their possessing the slightest knowledge of each other, a work, similar in material point to Delaplaine's Repository, has just been commenced in Great Britain, under the superintendance of Edmond Lodge, Esq. Nor can it be regarded otherwise than as highly creditable to our artists, as well as eminently flattering to the taste, the laudable curiosity, and the liberal desire of knowledge which characterize the people of the United States, that the *first call* for such a work *here,* should be contemporaneous with *that* of the *most wealthy and enlightened of the nations of Europe.*[93]

The seemingly good-natured tone of Biddle's assessment obscures the fact that this account was written at the height of the War of 1812, just one month before British troops would set fire to the national capital.

While Biddle admitted that fine examples of illustrated biography had already been published abroad, crediting Birch's book by name, he saw the projects of Delaplaine and Lodge as representative of a new kind of illustrated biography—featuring a new commitment to presenting "accurate and well executed portraits, accompanied with full Biographical Memoirs."[94]

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[93] *The Port folio*, 1814, 116.

[94] *The Port folio*, 1814, 116.

Indeed, the composition of these two biographies was different from earlier entries in the genre. Delaplaine and Lodge focused not only on the quantity of the persons presented in their works, but also on the quality of honors bestowed on each person represented. Birch's earlier book contained an impressive number of entries, with over 100 subjects spread across two volumes. But consequently, little effort was spent deliberating which portraits should attend each biography. The biographies themselves were incredibly brief, averaging around two pages each. In contrast, Lodge's first volume would contain just 30 entries, with an average length of nine pages per biography. Delaplaine focused on just six subjects, making *Repository's* entries twice that length and nearly ten times as long as those contained in Birch's book. Delaplaine and Lodge were able to cut down their number of entries so dramatically in part because they both planned on their projects expanding across as many volumes as the public would support. This allowed them to sidestep the need to be comprehensive and instead focus more deeply on a smaller selection of persons.

This serial format focused on a significantly more manageable set of subjects. This method was adopted to ensure that proper consideration could be given to every aspect of the design. Central among these concerns was the need to provide authentic and well-regarded portraits of the included subjects. Earlier single volume biographies had to economize their efforts in some way to allow for their comprehensive scope, which invariably impacted their portraits. Elite works like Birch's succeeded through the quality of their printing and the quantity of their images while less efforts were expended to judiciously select each given prototype. Budget works like Kingston's often simply dispensed with illustrations altogether. Both Delaplaine and Lodge presented a greatly reduced set of subjects, but in exchange, they were much better able to articulate the basis upon which the included portraits were selected. The way both authors prioritized the authenticity

of their portraits over the quantity of their entries reflected growing concerns about the potential consequences of duplicating spurious portraits at a time when printed reproductions were becoming more ubiquitous and portraiture was being increasingly interrogated through the lens of physiognomy.

2.3 Authenticity in Biography and Portraiture

Delaplaine thoroughly embraced the tradition of honoring national worthies through portraiture and frequently cited classical precedents to justify his project. He saw the function of biography and portraiture as intimately related. One thing that made Delaplaine's project distinct from earlier American illustrated biographies was the way he attempted to balance the complementary function of these two genres. He argued:

> As a permanent monument what would avail personal portraits alone? […] For the purposes to which this publication is directed, something more is requisite: the moral being must be described as well as the physical—and the personal portrait be accompanied with a characteristic biographical sketch of the man intended to be commemorated. Neither can be perfectly satisfactory by itself—the union of them only leaves nothing to be wished for."[95]

[95] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository*, viii

Portraiture and biography provided a different perspective into the nature of their subject. Delaplaine explained, "While the text shall communicate to remote posterity what, at a former period, the leading men of America thought and performed, the portraits accompanying it will give a view of their features and general aspect, their costume and air. Thus by the combined operations of the type and the graver will a correct image of the whole man be exhibited to view."[96] Whatever deficiencies might be found in one component would be overcome by the inclusion of the other.

The portraits included in *Repository* were not meant to act as mere illustrations, as they had been employed in Birch's book; rather, they increasingly took center stage as a primary medium of communicating identity. This relationship was also signaled in the frontispiece (Fig. 2.7). Here an allegorical figure of the United States presents the busts of Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, and Jefferson, to a seated figure representing biography. The busts inhabit the dominant position at the top of the grouping and act as the source for what the seated figure subsequently writes in her book. Here, the nation presents the faces of her worthies which in turn serve as the inspiration for their corresponding patriotic biographies.

This was echoed by Charles Caldwell, who had personally written most of the biographical accounts in *Repository.* Shortly after the first half volume was published, Caldwell felt his audience might be having difficulty understanding the inversion that had occurred, so he reiterated, "This publication should be considered as somewhat resembling a book of maps or elegant engravings, where ornament being the principle object, the typography yields to the graphic art

[96] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository*, iii.

[…] the writer doing little else than preparing suitable explanations for the productions of the engraver, and furnishing the printer with matter on which to exhibit his skill."[97]

While this primary emphasis on portraiture was new, Delaplaine's contemporaries already understood biography and portraiture as serving similar purposes. The entire genre of illustrated biographies was conceived with this complementary purpose in mind. It was likewise common for biographers to colloquially define their works in artistic terms as "character studies," "biographical sketches," or "portraits." But Delaplaine's strategy in promoting *Repository* leveraged this slippage even further by using the question of authenticity in portraiture to demonstrate how a carelessly composed illustrated biography not only failed to represent its subjects, but also spread misinformation by representing them incorrectly. Since his goal was to create an historically important book, publishing inauthentic portraits would undermine the entire premise of *Repository*. However, he emphasized his efforts to obtain and reproduce high quality and accurate portraits not only to alleviate this concern, but also to imply that a comparable level of care was placed on other aspects of the book, including the biographies. This was a clever strategy because the standards for attributing authenticity to a biography were much more nebulous. Therefore, it would be difficult for Delaplaine to concisely demonstrate to potential customers the specific steps that he used to adequately ensure their quality in advance.

Other biographers also recognized the tenuous nature of the authenticity of their works. In fact, so many writers freely and openly admitted to issues arising from the constraints of the genre that apologies for these limits had become something of a recurring trope in contemporary biographies. This was especially prominent in the type of short-form publications against which

[97] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic*, 11.

Delaplaine hoped to distinguish himself. Such biographers often felt uncomfortable declaring their brief works to be satisfactory or complete accounts of the characters they sought to represent. The biographies and character studies circulating in the 1810s were littered with regrets over lack of knowledgeable sources, poignant anecdotes, or available page length. Their authors defensively referred to their works as "mere sketches," or otherwise presented them as preparatory efforts to be supplemented with fuller and more comprehensive accounts in the future. One anonymous author explained the difficulty of writing a satisfactory biography through the analogy of portraiture:

> To draw a full and complete portrait of this eminent man would be an arduous task, and far above the feeble pen now employed in sketching a few of its lineaments. […] History can alone with truth portray the entire man; since history collects from remote resources, descends into the details of things, and combines out of scattered materials of particular acts and exploits those general, and, withal, those luminous views which alone are adapted to the portraiture of eminent characters. Even in history something will be lost or defective, because genius often acts by foreign instruments, moves by an imperceptible line, pervades a system unseen, gives to a train its first spark and communicates an influence which cannot be traced.[98]

[98] "Sketch of the Character of the Late General Ral Schuler," In *The Port Folio*, vol 3 no 2 (Feb. 1810), 84.

The expectation that biography should somehow encapsulate the entirety of its subject was a losing proposition, because any notable occurrence left absent from its pages only served to emphasize the innumerable analogous omissions undoubtedly made alongside it.

Delaplaine wanted to promote *Repository* as a solution to this lamentable failing in other works, and portraiture was the tool on which he leaned most. While biographers might have been sheepish about the authority of their productions, portraitists often enjoyed ready praise for their capacity to preserve and convey the presence of a sitter. Portraits could be much more economical and those who could achieve a striking likeness in only a few strokes were praised rather than disparaged. And though portraits of prominent figures would sometimes receive similar criticisms to biography for failing to fully capture some of the intangible qualities that distinguished their subjects, they were applauded more frequently for their ability to bring into focus attributes seen only rarely in their living models.

Delaplaine made securing authentic portraits for reproduction a central theme in his promotion of *Repository*. He claimed that, "pains have been taken and heavy expenses incurred" to guarantee that the engravings "consist of portraits executed by the best engravers; from paintings of the most celebrated artists, either done immediately for the purpose, or selected for the fidelity of their resemblance to the originals, from pictures already in the possession of private families or public institutions."[99] This was a daunting task. By 1816, Delaplaine estimated his total investment in the project had surpassed $11,000.[100] Much of the "pains and expenses" to which he referred involved an extensive campaign to seek out potential portraits scattered over a daunting

[99] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository*, iii. And Delaplaine, *Proposal*.

[100] Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," note 44.

geographical expanse, identify the best possible likenesses, and contract with artists to compose satisfactory reproductions.

The stakes were high for Delaplaine since the purpose of his book was to stand as an enduring historical monument. He could not change his mind after it was printed, or assuage criticism should he make an unpopular choice. The contemporary periodicals with which he competed were under no such constraint. When the editor of the Port Folio was informed of a better portrait of the recently slain Captain James Lawrence (1781 – 1813), he did not allow the discovery to delay printing his biography alongside a copy of the inferior likeness. He explained the decision to his readers:

> The annexed portrait was already in the hands or our engraver when we discovered that it was practicable to obtain a more recent and faithful resemblance of this gallant officer. Unwilling, however, to withhold any memorial of a character which has so much of our own and the public esteem, we insert this likeness, reserving for a future number a more particular portrait, accompanied by a copious biography.[101]

In similar fashion, biographical periodicals also frequently appended their articles with corrections and additions submitted by their readers after publication. Delaplaine had planned to overcome this challenge by providing space for such corrections in later volumes, but the price of the volume implied a product worthy of more care than the ephemeral press.

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[101] *The Port folio,* Aug. 1813, 117.

There were additional advantages to focusing primarily on portraiture over biography. As the above author described, biography is an additive medium whose authority becomes stronger through subsequent revisions and addition as "remote resources" slowly accreted over time, the implication being that a more correct and complete account of the subject is always possible to assemble in the future. By contrast, portraits became more difficult to produce over time. The effects of age become more heavily marked on a subject with the passage of time which could obscure the youthful moment of a sitter's fame. And once a subject has passed away, their body was forever beyond the reach of the portraitist. While this tension was less of a concern for periodicals that were meant for immediate consumption, it was something with which historical works like *Repository* had to contend. His project had to navigate the ideal intersection in which it was possible to compose both a suitable biography and portrait. The relatively short history of European presence in the Americas imposed a strict limit on the scope of the project. One author emphasized this constraint when he asked of the project, "Has our country produced a sufficient number of great and good men, who deserve to be thus enshrined? Have we literary men and artists qualified to honor, in this way our distinguished men?"[102] This would become an even larger issue for Delaplaine moving forward. While the first volume of *Repository* contained only deceased subjects, successive entries would begin including living subjects as well. With portraiture favoring living subjects and biography favoring the dead, it may not be surprising that Delaplaine focused his efforts on the former.

The temporality of portraiture also justified the timing of Delaplaine's project. In his prospectus, Delaplaine worried over the lack of suitable portraits of historical figures, warning that

[102] *The Portico*, 1816, 508.

a similar fate could befall American divinities if works like his were not encouraged.[103] He used portraiture in order to justify the need for his generation to commit themselves to sustaining such a grand scale national work:

> Men living at this day have it in their power to ascertain from personal knowledge the truth of the characters, and the fidelity of the various resemblances it is intended to contain; but nature must, in her ordinary course, soon lay them to dust, and deprive posterity, if the present effort were neglected, of the satisfaction arising from their evidence.[104]

To speak with authority about the identity of these soon-to-be-unknowable illustrious Americans, *Repository* would have to bear the approval of those who knew them in life.

Delaplaine's vocal commitment to the authenticity of his portraits also served to strengthen the validity of his biographies. The arduous process of obtaining authentic portraits acted as a highly visible narrative of him worrying over the authenticity of the entire project. A prospectus published in *The Eclectic Review* assured potential customers that, "It is not in the portraits only that the publisher means to be unsparing of labor and expense: every other part of the work shall be of a quality to correspond with them. For this purpose he has called in gentlemen of well tried and acknowledged talent, erudition and taste, to write the biographical parts […]."[105] This pattern remains consistent throughout the many promotional materials that Delaplaine produced for the

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[103] Delaplaine, *Prospectus,* vi-viii.

[104] Delaplaine, *Prospectus,* x.

[105] Select Literary Information, The Eclectic Review, Nov. 2014, 536.

book. Concern over the authenticity of the portraits was always the opening act, followed by a promise for authentic biographies for which the details of the process was left much less clear. In this way, Delaplaine utilized the cross-pollination of the two genres to transfer confidence in the authenticity of his portraits to the authenticity of his biographies.

2.4 The Washington Problem

Delaplaine's responsiveness to his audience's desire for authentic likenesses was clearly demonstrated by his efforts to find the best possible prototypes. In his prospectus he explained his process: "Before the picture he designs for publication is put into the hands of the engraver, it is submitted to the inspection of persons acquainted with the original, and if it fails to exact unanimous recognition of resemblauce [sic], he rejects it, and procures another to be painted, at his own expense, by some eminent artist."[106] One year later, Delaplaine blamed the continual delay of publication of the first volume of *Repository* on his commitment to the quality of the portraits, explaining, "The proprietor of this work has been under the necessity of rejecting several Portraits from their badness of engraving. It was always his determination never to suffer his work to appear, till he became satisfied that its execution would be honorable to himself, and creditable to the country."[107] Delaplaine's concerns were amplified in the case of Washington's portrait. Of all the

[106] "Repository prospectus" *The Eclectic Review* Nov. 1814, 536.

[107] Aurora, Nov. 2, 1815.

people to be included in *Repository*, Washington was by far the most important and Delaplaine was especially conscious of the need to get that entry right.

Rembrandt Peale later recalled how Delaplaine had visited his studio while attempting to ascertain which portrait of Washington should be included in *Repository*. This was a logical place for Delaplaine to start given the Peale family's long history with Washington's portraits their convenient location in Delaplaine's native Philadelphia. Moreover, Charles Willson Peale's museum contained the most important collection of portraiture in the U.S. at the time.[108] Rembrandt Peale later gloried over his own contribution to Delaplaine's project:

> When Mr. Delaplaine was about to publish his Gallery of American Characters, I assembled in my studio all the portraits of Washington we could collect; among them, Houdon's Bust, which I placed in such a selected light, as to bring out the most characteristic parts, & to throw into shadow those which I thought were the least expressive. Judge Bushrod Washington, among the number who were invited to the examination, on glancing at it, as he entered the room, exclaimed that he never before had seen so much of likeness in it, although he possessed a bust from the hands of Houdon himself.[109]

[108] See chapter 3 below.

[109] Peale, *1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture*, 10.

Peale recommended that Delaplaine should have an engraving made from the profile of the bust, which he considered to offer the "most authentic likeness."[110]

Delaplaine was not entirely convinced. He had initially planned to reproduce Gilbert Stuart's beloved portrait, but in the months leading up to publication he reconsidered. Despite the popularity of Stuart's image, Houdon's bust (Fig. 2.8) better fit his selection criteria. Houdon was an unquestionably celebrated artist, the bust was modeled from life, and was the product of an official governmental commission. The pedestrian statue with the same likeness had been installed in Virginia's Capitol in 1796, where it had received near universal acclaim. Moreover, the experts he had invited weigh in on the issue preferred the authority of its likeness.

Following the guidance of Peale and George Washington's nephew Bushrod Washington (1762 – 1829), Delaplaine ultimately commissioned Joseph Wood (1778 – 1830) to draw a profile of Houdon's bust, which was adapted into an engraving by W. S. Leney (1769 – 1831) (Fig. 2.9). In addition to the classicizing profile view, Wood draped the shoulders of the bust in a Grecian Chiton. The same convention was followed with the portrait of Alexander Hamilton (c. 1755 – 1804) that appeared in *Repository*, which had also been copied from a sculpture. Both of these engravings included no base support for the bust, no hint of a supporting surface, and no background. These omissions make the likeness appear more like the low relief of an ancient coin than an 18th century bust. Peale found the resulting portrait to be "inaccurately executed," and indeed the print does appear to distort some aspects of Houdon's profile.[111] In 1833, Asher Durand

[110] Peale, *1859 Winterhur Washington Lecture*, 10.

[111] Peale, *1859 Winterhur Washington Lecture*, 10.

(1796 – 1886) published a copy of Leney's engraving that corrected Wood's profile by copying the physiognomic details directly from the Houdon (Fig. 2.10).

Regardless of any dissenting opinions, Delaplaine never reported to have any issue with Wood's rendition. He maintained that a proof of the final engraving, "has been submitted to the inspection of Judge Washington, who has pronounced it an accurate likeness of his uncle."[112] But he also began to reconsider his choice of portrait for Washington soon before publication. He circulated a new broadside revealing a different tactic:

> As there are many persons who believe that the most faithful likeness of George Washington is that which was painted by Stuart, while others, equally numerous, perhaps, prefer that of his bust by Houdon, the publisher has thought proper, in order to render universal satisfaction, and to enable our citizens to possess the best resemblances of the great and good man, to have an engraving executed [from both].[113]

Houdon's bust and Stuart's portrait had both achieved high acclaim and broad distribution. At the same time, because each was executed in a different media, they were able to coexist without competing directly against each other.[114] Each likeness was produced by masters of their craft, each was composed through direct firsthand observation of Washington's person, and each had a long and proven history satisfying American audiences.

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[112] Delaplaine, *Prorposal,* quoted in Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 40.

[113] Delaplaine, *Prorposal,* quoted in Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 40.

[114] Cite government commissions from 1832 mandating commissions for sculpture to copy after Houdon and paintings to copy after Stuart. Annuls.

Delaplaine ultimately did commission a print of Stuart's Washington (Fig. 2.11), but it was sold loose rather than bound alongside Wood's print.[115] However, even after deliberating extensively over the issue and providing his audience with two irrefutably authentic portraits of Washington, the final lines of *Repository* were surprisingly equivocal about the capacity of a portrait to accurately portray the nature of truly great men like Washington. The chapter on Washington closed out the book and is punctuated by humble defeat:

> The pencil and the chisel have vied with each other in a laudable attempt to perpetuate his likeness. But the project has failed. Although a distinguished statuary and the ablest portrait painter of the age have patiently exercised their genius in the trial, Washington has never been correctly delineated. His likeness was concentered in himself alone, and those who have never beheld it there, will search for it in vain on canvass or in marble. He was, in the true sense of the term, an original. But no model for correct imitation. He never himself copied any one; nor has any artist been able to copy him.[116]

While this statement clearly takes poetic license to set Washington apart from other men, it does so through concepts that are not easily translated into our post-photographic moment. There is no parallel for this situation in the world of photography. The camera captures both the common and the exceptional with the same dispassionate motion. The work of the eighteenth-century

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[115] As discussed elsewhere, Marshall erroneously claimed that the print was included in the pages of *Repository*.

[116] Delaplaine, *Delaplaine's Repository*, 105-106.

portraitists was another matter entirely. These artists slowly composed arrangements of pigment and mass through a series of practiced movements. Fashioning a likeness was a carefully choreographed performance—a form of visual alchemy that transformed graphite, paint, clay, or stone into a living resemblance. They stood at once as a literal description of their sitter's features and a symbolic summation of their character. The resulting objects had real power. Like the cult statues of the ancient world, they allowed for an expanded range of social practices beyond those involving their corporeal prototypes.[117] Illustrated biography, like *Repository*, extended the functions of portraiture with their own set of associated social and commercial stakes. The diverse range of contemporary functions attributed to portraiture combined with the unique demands for authenticity in a work like *Repository* engendered an unresolvable cacophony of oppositions. Thus, Delaplaine's lofty aims made it problematic for him to identify a singular portrayal of Washington as sufficiently comprehensive.

2.5 Sources of Authenticity

The question of how Washington's different likenesses proved themselves to be fitting copies illustrates the dynamic ways in which portraits garnered authority in the early republic. The answer came in many forms. Stuart and Houdon both had cultivated a following through their larger body of work, though neither was able to secure unanimous approbation. Charles Willson Peale's portraits had the advantage of his long personal familiarity with Washington, and by

[117] Illustrated biography, for example, is in itself a particular type of social practice dependent on the reproducibility and transmission of character through text and images, with associated social and commercial stakes.

extension, the number of sittings that he was able to obtain. On the other hand, prints after John Trumbull's (1756 – 1843) portrait, painted from memory while he studied in England, had the advantage of being the only image made by someone who had seen Washington available on that side of the Atlantic for many years. Each of these portraits helped, in their own way, to distribute ideas about Washington's person to an audience much wider than the few who were able to know him intimately in life. In this capacity their varying qualifications had little impact on their perceived authenticity.

Yet when it came to projects like Delaplaine's, this heterogenous collection of objects was problematic. It wasn't enough for Delaplaine to select *an* authentic portrait of Washington; he needed to identify the one most worthy to present his features to future generations. This goal necessitated a means of weighing one portrait against another. The fact that he ultimately couldn't authorize a singular exemplary image points to the difficulty of the task. In earlier generations across the western world, the role played by Delaplaine would have been filled by official authorizing agents like the crown, the academy, or the church. At the same time, portraiture was becoming increasingly available as a means of engaging with historical persons. By the early 19th century, illustrated biographies and portrait galleries circulated portraits in a new form of public space that was slowly replacing the exclusive celebratory pantheons of earlier decades—one that was more nationalistic than aristocratic. Portraiture's expanding social role combined with its weakening institutional foundation placed considerable stress on notions of authenticity. As the ability of such institutions to exercise near-exclusive control over the genre eroded in the expanded markets of the 18th century, no clear replacement had yet emerged. In America, where such institutions had no history of regulating portraiture, the effects were even more pronounced. In

their absence, Delaplaine was left with a very difficult task of authorizing a set of official images from the ground up.

The novelty of Delaplaine's position is clarified by comparing his process in authorizing portraits to a contemporaneous project developed through more traditional channels of authority. Delaplaine's English competitor Edmond Lodge had recently contributed biographical accounts to be published alongside a collection of drawn portraits of the court of Henry VIII (1491 – 1547) by the hand of Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 – 1543) (Fig. 2.12). The drawings reproduced in the book had been unknown until they were rediscovered in 1727 in some forgotten Bureau by Queen Caroline of Ansbach (1683 – 1737). Efforts to publish prints after the drawings began as early as 1740, but the King's librarian had difficulty finding a competent engraver for the task. Work on the project stalled until it was revived again by Caroline's grandson, George III (1738 – 1820) in 1792, with engravings of all 84 drawings being issued for purchase serially through to 1800. These separate engravings were subsequently compiled into a single volume at George III's request and was overseen by his official Keeper of Drawings and Medals in 1812. Lodge was hired to compose a handful of short passages to append to the most prominent persons so that the collection of prints could attract attention under the guise of an illustrated biography.

This project enjoyed several advantages over Delaplaine's that go beyond the superior British publishing capabilities mentioned above. The lengthy project was well-funded and allowed to develop at a leisurely pace over the course of more than 70 years. It also enjoyed the benefit of having the original source material readily at hand. These drawings were conveniently executed by a highly respected artist and representative of a large swath of noteworthy persons in the immediate circle of Henry VIII. It was the royal prerogative to cultivate such abundant reserves of artistic material that even these significant works could be misplaced without causing any alarm.

It was also the royal prerogative to have a collection managed by professional staff practiced in orchestrating such projects. Moreover, with the volume being authorized under the name of the King himself, there was little doubt as to the authority of the images contained within.[118]

In the absence of these traditional channels, Delaplaine had stepped in as a new kind of authorizing agent, one beset by an equally new set of challenges. Unlike the case above, much of his efforts were spent simply identifying and gaining access to potential portraits, and for those that he found, their quality and reputation often required careful consideration. But Delaplaine also encountered difficulties when dealing with portraits that were originally rooted in these earlier channels of authority.

For example, while looking for a suitable portrait of Columbus, Delaplaine questioned multiple experts about where authentic prototypes could be found in America. He learned that the only copy of a preferred likeness on his side of the Atlantic was in the possession of Thomas Jefferson (Fig. 2.13). Jefferson himself had commissioned the copy when he had been abroad in France in 1789, along with the portraits of three other famous explorers.[119] The prototypes for these copies were selected by his business associate Philip Mazzei (1730 – 1816). By consulting published inventories of different prominent institutional collections, Mazzei was able to locate a frequently copied portrait of Columbus in the collection of the Grand Duke of Florence.[120] The portrait's provenance was conveniently documented. The original portrait was first collected

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[118] See *The Works of Horatio Walpole*, Vol. 3, 70-72 and Dyson, 'The Engraving and Printing of the "Holbein Heads" ', *The Library*, 5:3, 223-36.

[119] Jefferson to Mazzei, Paris, January 12, 1789, in PTJ, 12:245.

[120] Jefferson to Trumbull, Paris, January 12, 1789, in ibid., 14:440. Letterpress copy available online from the Library of Congress.

sometime after 1537 by Paulus Jovius (1483 – 1552), a wealthy Italian physician and proprietor of a Florentine gallery devoted to portraits of illustrious men under the sponsorship of Charles V (1500 – 1558). Jovius had a reputation for judiciously only selecting portraits that he felt held "true likeness." This portrait was so renowned that Cosimo I de' Medici (1519 – 1574) commissioned a copy of it for his own collection in 1552 (Fig. 2.14). The exchange was subsequently inventoried in Giorgio Vasari's (1511 – 1574) *Lives.*[121] It was from this copy that Jefferson's version derived.[122]

Mazzei's decision to choose this portrait as the basis for Jefferson's commission echoed the earlier evaluations of Jovious and Cosimo. This likeness prospered under the care and sponsorship of these respected collections. It enjoyed high visibility in a catalogued royal collection and circulated beyond the confines of its gallery in the form of numerous painted copies and prints.[123] Given the prestige of the source, Jefferson was absolutely convinced of his painting's authenticity. When Delaplaine contacted him to inquire about the painting, Jefferson enthusiastically endorsed it, recounting the circumstances around its selection at length. He encouraged Delaplaine to utilize it for *Repository*, readily agreeing to make his copy available for reproduction.

Throughout their collaboration, Jefferson was surprisingly accommodating to Delaplaine's increasingly insistent demands. He had already subscribed to a few of Delaplaine's previous ventures which may have predisposed him to treat his requests more seriously. However, the

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[121] Quoted in Have we a portrait of Columbus, 21.

[122] Daly, "Have we a Portrait of Columbus," *Bulletin of the American Geographic Society*, 25, no. 1, 1893. 1-65.

[123] It may have even been the first print of a portrait of Columbus.

lengths to which he went to aid Delaplaine likely also represented genuine enthusiasm for the project. The well-traveled former president excelled as both a custodian of rare images and an expert consultant. True to the claims of his advertisements, Delaplaine sent proofs of several engravings to Jefferson for approval, and also requested advice on the style of biographies best suited to such a work. Jefferson responded with frequent and lengthy correspondence throughout 1814 and 1815, debating the merits of potential portraits, identifying alternatives, and even cutting prints out of rare books from his own library to loan to the project.[124]

However, even though Delaplaine had found a fitting prototype for Columbus and obtained permission to make an engraving, he delayed finalizing his decision, explaining, "I am compelled to be particular, because my work ought to bear a generally approved stamp of authenticity."[125] He initially contacted Jefferson on April 16, 1814. In July he proposed to send an artist to copy Jefferson's version at Monticello. This never came to fruition. Perhaps the plan was frustrated by the ongoing warfare around Baltimore and Washington. In August, Jefferson suggested that Delaplaine might be able to locate another praiseworthy portrait of Columbus in Theodor de Bry's (1528 – 1598) *Grand Voyages* (Fig. 2.15). When Delaplaine was unable to locate another copy of this particularly rare and expensive volume, Jefferson opted to send a sketch of the portrait in his own untrained hand (Fig. 2.16). Delaplaine responded a few weeks later to ask Jefferson's opinion on still another print of Columbus. This print was found in Juan Bautista Muñoz's *Historia Del*

[124] Upon receiving the prints back, he complains to his book binder that they had been significantly soiled in the process. See Jefferson collection, 5:213.

[125] Jefferson to Delaplaine, Monticello, May 3, 1814, in L&B, 14:132-33. Polygraph copy available online from the Library of Congress. Also Aug. 28th.

Nuevo-Mundo (Fig. 2.17), and was greatly preferred by one of Delaplaine's other consultants, Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton (1766 – 1815).

The diffuse nature of portraiture in America at this time required Delaplaine to cast a wide net while soliciting information about potential portraits. He did not have easy access to the kind of massive and well-inventoried European collections of which Jefferson had taken advantage. Instead, he contacted several local experts who themselves had a fragmented knowledge of the entire corpus of potential imagery. In this case, Delaplaine found himself in a position where his two primary advisors were at odds, each having access to a different set of images by which to adjudicate. Delaplaine relayed Barton's case for his preferred portrait to Jefferson in hopes of reaching a consensus:

> Dr. Barton spoke in high terms of the print & presumed it bore the stamp of unquestionable authority, as the work was undertaken at the instance of the King of Spain, and as an account of the print and painting, which he conceived favourable, was given by the Author of the book, which I now transcribe for you lest the work should not be in your possession. Several gentlemen enjoying a literary name with us attempted its translation, each differing from the other, and neither satisfying me. My object is, of course, to ascertain, positively, whether the painting from which the engraving is taken, bears the marks of genuine authenticity. I fear it does not, because from what I can gather from the account, the picture was in some degree effaced by time when it was presented to Antonio del Rincon, who, at the suggestions of Columbus[']s son Fernando supplied the

> defects and made such corrections and alterations, as he conceived would exhibit the best resemblance of his father, and in this state it went to the engravers' hands.[126]

He asked Jefferson, "to have the goodness to examine this subject & compare the supposed genuineness of this portrait with that in De Bry's work, which, I strongly suspect, from De Bry's account of it, is of more satisfactory origin."[127] Jefferson promptly responded with his own translation of the passage in question, declaring the narrative surrounding the painting to be historically sound and pointed to other sources that corroborated some of the details. While Jefferson had never seen the portrait in question, he wrote out a full comparative analysis of what he saw as Delaplaine's three best prototypes, in which he dismissed Muñoz's print out of hand as, "a copy of Rincon's original, taken in the 17th century by an indifferent hand, with conjectural alterations suggested by the verbal description of the younger Columbus of the countenance of his father."[128]

Delaplaine appears to have been persuaded against this print, promising in a letter to Jefferson in October to renew his plans to send an artist to Monticello, but this time seeking to copy the print by De Bry. This was the last mention of the subject in their correspondence until late December, when Delaplaine sent along copy of a new prospectus that publicly thanked Jefferson for making his portraits available for engraving. However, unaccountably, when *Repository* was published a few short months later, the portrait that ultimately attended the entry

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[126] Joseph Delaplaine to Thomas Jefferson, aug. 17, 1814.

[127] Joseph Delaplaine to Thomas Jefferson, aug. 17, 1814.

[128] Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Delaplaine, Aug 28th 1814.

on Columbus was based instead on Muñoz's print (Fig. 2.18), the very one that Jefferson had rejected as the weakest option.

Without any definitive evidence, it is difficult to conclude why this might have happened. Did Delaplaine struggle to get an artist to visit Monticello? Was he unsatisfied by the drawing that they returned with, or the quality of the subsequent engraving? Was he ultimately persuaded by Barton to utilize his favored image instead? Whatever the reason, Delaplaine's nearly yearlong and exhaustive investigation culminated in this late stage substitution. In the end, Delaplaine still settled on an image with a verified pedigree of approbation, even if he had not personally considered it the best source a few months earlier. The substitution ultimately reflects a process that was mired in conflicting opinions and constrained by limited access to key resources.

Washington's portraits presented a substantially more difficult task. Here Delaplaine had near unlimited access to potential examples, to the point that even compiling a list of his options would have been a daunting task. The number of experts was also exponentially greater, with each of Washington's living acquaintances endorsing their own favorite likeness. There were also no predominate institutional forces that could certify one example over any others. Washington never presumed to weigh in on the issue himself and seems to have favored a great number of them given the impressive quantity of different renditions of his own likeness that he displayed at Mount Vernon.

Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, despite the extraordinary efforts of Washington's contemporaries to preserve his likeness, there was a simultaneous unwillingness to accept a *mere* portrait as a satisfactory representation of a man of such revered and heroic dimensions—producing a conflict between the desire to preserve and multiply his presence, on one hand, and the desire to protect the rarity of the original, on the other. During his lifetime,

Washington's portraits were only peripheral to his living body and, therefore, were not yet burdened with the task of providing the sole record of his appearance. After his death, they became the only means of ensuring the persistence of his vital essence against his irreversible physical absence. As these portraits transitioned into a world without Washington, their connection to him was put under considerably more strain. Given these tensions, it is difficult to imagine that Delaplaine's project could have ever completely satisfied his audience. However, the ways in which *Repository* fell short and the debates that ensued following its publication offer a productive glimpse of some of the many competing approaches embraced by his contemporaries.

2.6 Responses to Repository

Despite Delaplaine's extensive efforts, *Repository's* launch was marred by a lukewarm critical reception. The *Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronical* published a particularly scathing 17-page review shortly after the first volume was published. The anonymous review has been attributed to the former president of Princeton, Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith (1751 – 1819).[129] Smith had a personal vendetta against *Repository's* editor, Charles Caldwell, which likely provoked the venomous tone of the review. While motivated by a personal disagreement, Smith's critique and Caldwell's subsequent response cut to the heart of contemporary debates about representations of character in the first decades of the 19th century in America. Many of the numerous criticisms levied by Smith had to do with the quality of Caldwell's prose, but the thesis

[129]Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biographies," 42.

of his attack was that the book failed to achieve its own goals. The feature of the book that Smith identified as most problematic was that the biographical sketches did not qualify as such. Either in response to Delaplaine's evasive promotional strategy, or to isolate Caldwell's writing for criticism, Smith accused *Repository* of having its priorities backwards, with, "more regard […] given to the qualification of the engraver than to those of the biographer."[130] In fact, for Smith, the pretensions demonstrated by the illustrations and fine printing of the book only served to magnify the danger posed by the biographies. Yet even with the focus of the debate squarely on the literary component of *Repository*, the language and arguments employed by both sides leaned heavily on concepts commonly applied to portraiture.

Smith's most prominent argument was that the accounts recorded in *Repository* were historic, rather than biographic, because they focused on the public role of their subjects instead of the details of their private lives. Contemporary debates surrounding both portraiture and biography were predicated on the assumption that certain views, expressions, acts, or utterances were useful, while others were not. Through language that combined aspects of portraiture and natural history, Smith explained what was lacking:

> All the attributes of the human species are associated according to the ordinary rule of proportion; and in which the peculiarity of individual features is lost in the general outline of national physiognomy. Every people, at the same time, possess marks of character which distinguish it from all its neighbors; in just the same manner that one individual differs from all the rest of his species.

[130] Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronical, Sept., 1816., 193.

> […] Mineralogical *history* would tell us that every crystal of the same species possessed an equal number of sides: mineralogical *biography*, if we may use the expression, would take up a single crystal and show us how the particular relative position of those sides was calculated to reflect the light with the minutest shades of difference from the reflections of all others.[131]

For Smith, the public life of an individual belonged to the domain of history, tracing only the general outline common to all in a society. Biography's value was in revealing the inner dynamics of its subjects through an examination of their private lives, telling, "how a person comports himself with his friends in the private circle, and with his family by the fire-side."[132]

The problem was not that Caldwell had been too brief in his biographic sketches, but rather that he had missed the mark entirely. According to Smith, the type of data presented in *Repository* was incapable of penetrating into his subjects' distinctive natures. Distracted by the trappings of an incidental national species, the author failed to discern the particularized attributes of the individual. It is striking how Smith's justification for this position echoes the ideas proposed earlier by Lavater:

> It is in these insignificant affairs that a man drops the artificial gravity of public character; and forgets the impropriety of showing himself in the nakedness of natural disposition: it is in these, therefore, that biography finds her appropriate occupation; and very

[131] *Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronical*, Sept., 1816., 195.

[132] *Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronical*, Sept., 1816., 195.

> frequently, one brief anecdote, or one short observation, will place a person full before our eyes; just as the summit of a pyramidal solid will give us an idea of its configuration quite down to the base; or as the exhibition of a short arc will enable us to ascertain the whole circumference of a circle.[133]

According to Smith, it was the "accidental" particularities, which only manifest themselves in a rare unguarded moment, that reveal the true character of a person.[134] Such anecdotes reveal a crack in a subject's public mask that affords a glimpse at the hidden core. The task of the biographer was, therefore, to find such a view that exposes the subject in the "nakedness of natural disposition."

The distinction Smith cited between the genres of history and biography had been laid out decades earlier by the English author and critic Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1785). In a popular entry of Johnson's biweekly periodical, *The Rambler*, Johnson noted the potential social benefits afforded by well-executed biographies. In particular, Johnson advocated for the superiority of the rising genre of biography over the established genre of history because the "narratives of history […] afford few lessons applicable to private life."[135] By focusing instead on matters of private life,

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[133] *Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronical*, Sept., 1816., 197.

[134] A similar idea was applied later in the century by Giovanni Morelli to identify the distinguishing mark of an artist in the marginal forms of their work.

[135] A section of this article had even been quoted by Delaplaine in both an early forward of the first volume of *Repository* and the introduction of the second. Samuel Johnson, The rambler, Vol. 2, 14th ed. no. 60, p 36.

biography more readily stirred a reader's passions, enumerated "every diversity of condition," and conveyed indispensable "moral knowledge."[136]

However, while many of Smith's key criticisms of the biographies in *Repository* echo Johnson's critique of historical writing, there was an important dimension to Johnson's argument that Smith failed to adopt. Johnson was not simply interested in shifting the focus of biography to the private lives of public figures, but rather, he was fundamentally challenging the premise that historically significant figures were inherently biographically significant in the first place. For him, the events or actions that granted someone historical notice were categorically different from those that revealed praiseworthy character. He explained that, "The scholar who passed his life among his books, the merchant who conducted only his own affairs, the priest, whose sphere of action was not extended beyond that of his duty, are considered as no proper objects of public regard […] But this notion arises from false measures of excellence and dignity, and must be eradicated by considering […] what is of most use is of most value."[137] Counter to the popularity of heroic biographies, Johnson argued, "there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful."[138] Johnson understood the appeal of famous biographies and did not entirely condemn the practice, but he cautioned: "It is not improper to […] gain attention by a celebrated name; but the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic

[136] Samuel Johnson, *The rambler*, Vol. 2, 14th ed. no. 60, 36.

[137] Samuel Johnson, *The rambler*, Vol. 2, 14th ed. no. 60, 38.

[138] Samuel Johnson, *The rambler*, Vol. 2, 14th ed. no. 60, 37.

privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue."[139]

In Johnson's formulation, there is a tension in the very premise of *Repository,* which attempted to serve as both a collection of biographies and a pantheon of national worthies. Delaplaine hoped to argue for the greatness of American achievements through the faces and lives of its most famous actors. There was no room in this context for him to admit the failings in his subjects or to include biographies of less known persons. Smith had no problem accepting the premise that the names that appeared in *Repository* were excellent examples worthy of moral emulation, but he did take issue with the overly hagiographic tone of the writing and the clear avoidance of details relating to personal affairs.

Smith's application of Johnson's distinction between history and biography was deeply rooted in contemporary ideas about physiognomy. For Smith, the "artificial" character worn in public was indeed useful for understanding the "general outline of national physiognomy," or the ruling "species," that circumscribed a particular individual. His claim that a person's public character was unsuitable for the aims of biography may have derived from his own research about the application of physiognomy to explain racial difference. In 1810, Smith had published an exhaustive study on the issue of variations in complexion and appearance among different ethnicities. By tracing the effects of a variety of conditioning forces like climate and social organization, Smith concluded that, while character and appearance were directly related, they were also mutable. He illustrated this by pointing out what he perceived to happen to members of one social group when they integrate with another. He claimed that Anglo Americans captured by

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[139] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, Vol. 2, 14th ed. no. 60, 38.

Native Americans in infancy eventually became nearly indistinguishable from their captors. They became darker in complexion, adopted the native "characteristic gait," developed wild dispositions, and even formed the "same swelling of the features and muscles of the face." Such anecdotal transformations convinced Smith that any physiognomic differences between the two groups depended "principally on the state of society."[140] Smith theorized that if infants from two different societies were raised under the same social conditions, the "principal differences […] between the two races, would in a great measure, be removed."[141] If such differences in appearance and disposition were the result of environmental factors, how could they reveal the particularities of an individual? Therefore, the public character of an individual was impressed upon them by the forces in a society that shaped a common "national physiognomy," while the private character sought by the biographer was only found in the areas of life where these forces were less pronounced.

Following a similar logic, many biographies focused on details relating to the private lives of their subjects. Delaplaine had himself earlier proposed that *Repository* should balance the public and private lives of its subjects. He promised before publication that the material for the biographies would be composed, "not only by indefatigable research in the public archives of the country, but by the most earnest inquiries into domestic records, in order that the characters may be displayed, each in its two-fold aspect, of a citizen and a man—in the thorny and dangerous paths of public exertion, and in the minute details of private life."[142] But Delaplaine never intended

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[140] Smith, "original," 172.

[141] Smith, "original," 174.

[142] *The Eclectic Review*, Nov, 1814, 536.

to write the biographies himself, and it is impossible to determine how much he oversaw the process once Caldwell was given the task. While Caldwell did include a few passages related to his subjects' private lives, these departures were notably rare.

This was a divisive issue for reviewers of *Repository.* One reviewer applauded the bold decision to depart from the "models set by other biographers," arguing that narrating the mundane aspects of a subject's life was a failing borrowed from the conventions of the novel and that such accounts were, "well enough for a circulating library," but certainly "unfit for aid in forming the character of a nation."[143]

Caldwell responded directly to Smith's criticism by publishing his own 39-page response with the audacious title, "The Author Turned Critic; or The Reviewer Reviewed; Being a Reply to the Feeble and Unfounded Attack on Delaplaine's Repository" (Fig. 2.19). Here, Caldwell addressed Smith's "vulgar error" that public figures are best known through the lives they live after they retire from public life, countering:

> The real man is principally composed of his moral and intellectual faculties; and he is most truly seen, if not seen *only,* when these powers and faculties are most actively engaged. The mere figure of flesh, resigned to its physical imbecilities and waywardness, with all its higher qualities relaxed, *is not the man.* Almost as well you might say that the man is faithfully represented by the body when asleep, or even by the corpse after life has forsaken it. […] It is when his powers and attention are slumbering, that he exhibits the character

[143] *The Portico,* p. 515.

> common to the human race: his individuality arises from their concurrent action.[144]

For Caldwell, "the man" was not revealed after his armor was discarded, but rather as he was armed and animated in fulfilling a higher purpose. Caldwell believed that humanity was distinguished from the animal world through divinely endowed "moral and intellectual faculties."[145] These faculties only "awaked" when focused on an important task or otherwise pressured. Therefore, accounts of what Caldwell termed "little domestic affairs" did not elevate any person to a state worthy of consideration. This assessment ran counter to Lavater, who had in fact argued that the best time to study a person's form was in a state of death.[146]

Caldwell illustrated his response to Smith by arguing that, "A narrative of the life of George Washington, the farmer of Mount Vernon, would exhibit an exceedingly defective picture, or rather no picture at all, of the life of the same individual, as commander in chief of the armies of America, or in his capacity as president of the United States."[147] This statement parallels the pronouncement at the end of *Repository* that all of Washington's portraitists had failed to delineate him, providing in a sense, "no picture at all." He argued similarly that Smith's obsessions with the inconsequential details of a subject's personal life was the same as demanding to "know the cut and quality of Ceasar's robe," warning that those seeking answers to questions like these were not likely to become like Caesar. The issue at the heart of these debates was what constituted the proper

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[144] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 12.

[145] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 12.

[146] See Lavater, "Observations on the New-Born, the Dying, and the Dead" in *Physiognomy,* 133-138.

[147] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 11.

data set for effective biographies, and according to Caldwell, to look to Caesar's cloak for knowledge of him is to miss the mark. The meaningful features of Caesar, Washington, and other public figures were those associated with their bold and consequential actions, not their incidental creature comforts. In order for either biographies or portraits to present an accurate picture, it must capture these essential characteristics.

Caldwell also took particular issue with Smith's claim that a single anecdote could stand in for the whole. Caldwell argued that defining character required more than selecting a single opportune moment. Caldwell claimed:

> As well might you have asserted, that, by looking at the tip of a man's nose, or the point of his great toe, you can form a correct idea of his size and figure, his strength and ability. Character does not consist in any single act; nor is it developed by it. That act may be the result of accident. Real character is disclosed only by a series of daily and habitual actions, flowing from a settled and permanent source.[148]

Permanence and the elimination of accidental details had been key reasons why Lavater had originally settled on using silhouettes since the profile line remains stable as a person aged and resisted the influence of fleeting expressions. Yet in Caldwell's account of character, there was an added demand to account for vitality, animation, and willfulness; elements that did not register in Lavater's profile line. In this conception, the very habitual patterns of expression avoided by the silhouette became the significant features for representation. For Caldwell, biography did not result

[148] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic*, 30.

from looking through a keyhole to see some secret truth hidden away from view, rather it was the result of a discerning eye that could separate commonly exposed manifestations of moral and intellectual character from a sea of extraneous details.

Caldwell's defense of biography was in line with 18th-century aesthetic theory when he appealed to the idea of discernment. A strikingly similar argument was advanced in relation to painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his 11th *Discourse*:

> Besides those minute differences in things which are frequently not observed at all, and, when they are, make little impression, there are in all considerable objects great characteristic distinctions, which press strongly on the senses, and therefore fix the imagination. These are by no means, as some persons think, an aggregate of all the small discriminating particulars; nor will such an accumulation of particulars ever express them. These answer to what I have heard lawyers call the leading point in a case […] The detail of particulars, which does not assist the expression of the main characteristic, is worse than useless, it is mischievous, as it dissipates the attention, and draws it from the principal point."[149]

To drive the point home, Reynolds reframed his argument in terms of natural history by extending his criticism to a painting in which the artist had strived to "represent every individual leaf on a tree." Reynolds explained the artist's error: "I am very sure that an artist, who looked only at the general character of the species, the order of the branches, and the masses of the foliage, would in

[149] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 192.

a few minutes produce a more true resemblance of the trees, than this painter in as many months."[150] According to Reynolds, resemblance is not granted by an indiscriminate accumulation of data, but rather by focusing on the governing principles that underlie the dataset.[151]

This same line of thinking was also used by biographers when confronting the arduous task of distilling a mountain of personal correspondence, secondhand observations, and popular knowledge into a legible account of a person's character. In 1817, one American author mused about this in very similar terms to Reynolds:

> In the present rage for biography, the legitimate end of this species of writing seems to be neglected. Many of the writers deliver themselves, as if they were in a court of justice, and under an obligation to declare the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But even on such occasions, the rule of evidence does not require the disclosure of any fact which is irrelevant [sic] to the subject of discussion. So in relating the life of a deceased person, the biographer should not indulge in the detail of idle, indecent or impertinent anecdotes.[152]

Biography, like painting, was not served by simply supplying the "aggregate of all the small discriminating particulars." Both activities relied on learned discernment to judge what evidence was relevant.

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[150] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 199.

[151] Reynolds's critique could easily be extended to Lavater's hypothetical "silhouette from all angles," as another example of an undiscerning system of representation that fails to see the forest for the leaves.

[152] "An Authors Evening," Port folio Jan. 1817, 29.

While both Caldwell and Reynolds agreed that some details must be overlooked in pursuit of the "leading point," they had very different ideas about how these competing details were to be arbitrated. Caldwell appealed to frequency and consistency as a metric for assessing "settled character," a move that complements the medium of written discourse well. Each event selected by the biographer adds to a generally homogenous composite representation of the subject, demonstrating consistency in actions across a number of different situations. Reynolds, on the other hand, argued that a painter needs to be guided by the features that "press strongly on the senses," giving rise to what he terms the "general effect." Part of his reasoning stems from a perceived difference between writing and depicting. He explained:

> A painter must compensate the natural deficiencies of his art. He has but one sentence to utter, but one moment to exhibit. He cannot, like the poet or historian, expatiate, and impress the mind with great veneration for the character of the hero or saint he represents, though he lets us know at the same time that the saint was deformed, or the hero lame. The painter has no other means of giving an idea of the dignity of the mind, but by that external appearance […] He cannot make his hero talk like a great man; he must make him look like one.[153]

The process of painting a portrait spans hours of observation, over the course of which pigments are slowly built up into a single immobile form, which, in turn, unfolds before the viewer in an instant. Yet the portraitist was tasked with more than simply condensing the sum of this protracted

[153] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 60.

interaction into a single image, the resulting image must also offer a formal solution that brings the "leading point" of the sitter's character into view in the "shortest and surest way."[154] Therefore, the tendency toward idealization exhibited by many contemporary portrait painters was not simply an attempt to flatter their sitters, but was also justified as an expression of their inner nature. Reynolds argued that, "the painter has no other means of giving an idea of the dignity of the mind, but by external appearance which grandeur of thought does generally, though not always, impress on the countenance."[155] With faces, just as it was with trees, "if an exact resemblance of an individual be considered the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains."[156]

This line of thinking was not exclusive to the visual arts. A very similar argument was used in 1810 to criticize the inclusion of an unsavory anecdote in James Cheetham's (1772 – 1810) *The Life of Paine*. The reviewer bemoaned that Cheetham talked about a period of Thomas Paine's (1737 – 1809) life in which he indulged "his thirst for liquor to the greatest excess" and "became so filthy in his person, so mean in his dress, and so notorious a sot that all men of decency in Paris avoided him." The reviewer argued such an anecdote was both disturbing and irrelevant, explaining, "the narrative is like a portrait of the Dutch school, every wart and excrescence, every blotch and sore of the original is accurately transferred to the canvas."[157] The reviewer credits Cheetham for producing such a "minute and particular" narrative based on personal knowledge

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[154] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 194.

[155] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 60.

[156] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, fourth discourse, Burnet ver. P. 71.

[157] *The Port folio*, vol. 3, 224.

and the information from Paine's close compatriots, admitting that such "particularity and anecdote" would be pleasing, if not for the "disgust and horror," elicited by some of the examples chosen. Moreover, these distractions were all the more inconsequential since they "evidently neither caused nor accompanied […] any decay of the intellectual powers." For this reviewer, such an "exact resemblance" of Paine threatened to unjustly diminish a reader's assessment of his higher attainments.

But if Cheetham had indulged in too crude a characterization, Caldwell's biographies were perhaps too sanitized. Even given license to idealize biographical subjects, the extent to which Caldwell praised his subjects caused several of his reviewers to blush. Caldwell's biographies were intensely eulogistic and prone to hyperbolic praise. Smith accused Caldwell of carrying, "quite too far the principle of speaking nothing except good of the dead."[158] He saw this as a common problem for biographies of prominent figures, for which it was, "almost inconceivable that Washington, for instance, should ever have relaxed the tension of his muscles into any thing like a common laugh."[159] Yet Smith argued that impartiality was the duty of the biographer, "neither to be too much dazzled by their excellences, nor too little affected by their demerits."[160] Another reviewer similarly complained, "No person can long contemplate, with pleasure, a picture which is all light, without any mixture of shade."[161] The issues for both of these authors was that such mythologic biographies elevated their subjects beyond the possibility of imitation. The above

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[158] *The Analectic Magazine*, 202

[159] Smith, "original," 198.

[160] Smith, "original," 202.

[161] *The Portico*, Oct. 1816, 291.

reviewer explained, “By placing the hero on an eminence, to which it is impossible to climb, by human effort; by describing him, such as no man ever was, or ever can be, all emulation is destroyed; all desire to excel is lost, in the acknowledged impossibility of the attempt.”[162]

As John Barrell has pointed out, even Reynolds began to question the role of the ideal and the beautiful in his aesthetic theory near the turn of the century. Late in life Reynolds mused, “whether this civilized age does not demand a new code of laws.”[163] It is interesting to note these doubts first surfaced in his writing when he was examining the pleasing complexity of the worldly character presented by Shakespeare, who often mixed tragic and comedic modes or balanced intellectual and sensual desires. Of this apparent transgression, Reynolds marveled that the characters, “please by means contrary to the established rules of art.” In a radical departure from the aesthetic theory laid out in his *Discourses,* Reynolds’s concluded that “art in its most perfect state is when it possesses those accidents which do not belong to the code of laws for that art.”[164]

These concerns echoed a growing practical cynicism that attended the rise of heroic national biographies like Caldwell’s. Without demonstrating familiar knowledge of the subject through details of their private life, insightful anecdotes, or admissions of their faults, there was little to prove the biographer was versed enough in their character to adequately demonstrate it. Such biographies often conveyed honors appropriate to their subject’s class and position, whether or not they had assembled the evidence to justify them. A humorous article from 1815 described

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[162] *The Portico*, Oct. 1816, 287.

[163] Quoted in Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting,* 160.

[164] Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting*, 162.

this dilemma by advertising a fictitious biographic archive that came prepared with the "history of the lives of all sorts and conditions of men." The satirist explained:

> It will save many a good, honest, dull fellow the trouble and expense of chewing his pen, scratching and hammering his head and beating his brains for qualities which he will otherwise have to invent (because never possessed by the person whose life he is employed in writing) for fictitious incidents to supply the place of real ones, and for a highly respectable and honourable parentage and family for those who may be at a loss to tell even who was their father. The work is divided and subdivided into sections, which comprehend the different classes of mankind—so that when a man wishes to have his life written, and does not know very well where he shall find materials with which to supply his biographer the said biographer need only to look into that class of the work to which his proposed subject belongs, and he will find his life and opinions ready to his hand.[165]

Through parody, the above author accuses biographers of supplying fictitious narratives to smooth over the volatility of the post-revolutionary social order. By elevating parentage, exaggerating actions, or even inventing witticism, a biographer could very easily supply what was expected rather than what was found. Like portraiture, biography incentivized idealism while demanding a tangible commitment to accuracy. As we have seen, approaching either extreme threatened the

[165] Fag, "A New Plan for Writing Lives," *The Port Folio*, Feb., 1815, p. 196.

validity of any characterization; too much ideality threatened to call into question its authenticity, while too much banality threatened its social potency.

Aligned with these concerns was the question of medium. With a recognized danger of falsehood, Smith took issue not only with the *Repository's* lack of personal anecdotes, but also with its lack of the subjects' own language. He argued that by transcribing noteworthy sayings or lines of correspondence, biographers benefited by exhibiting character "under his own hand and seal."[166] Since biographies were naturally composed of words, why should the biographer impose themselves when the subject's own voice could be used instead? Smith argued that, "It is impossible to give any just notion of a person's turn of mind by attempting to express his thoughts in our own phraseology: and unless the biographer before us can prove that the soul of the dead sages he commemorates have absolutely *transmigrated* into his own body, we will not believe that he has given us any adequate idea of their respective character."[167]

This again paralleled the arguments of Lavater regarding portraiture. One of the principal reasons for his preferring profiles was that they could be produced without reliance on the practiced illusionism of an artist. The first stage of forming a silhouette consisted of projecting a shadow on a support surface. For Lavater, the relationship between the shadow and the figure was more natural and representative than one produced through traditional portraiture. Fearing that the contaminating presence of the artist's hand could inflect the resulting image, Lavater preferred to reduce this action to the tracing of a shadow on a two-dimensional surface, where direct comparison with the shadow could affirm the accuracy of the likeness. In the decades that

[166] Smith, "original," 197.

[167] Smith, "original," 199.

followed, plaster casts in the form of raw life masks and death masks would become a popular alternative to the traditional bust for similar reasons. Smith's appeal for authors to rely more heavily on the words of biographical subjects questioned the capacity of descriptive language to reveal a subject's character. By presenting the subject's words in place of their own narrations, an author diminished their agency in the biography in a similarly fashion to an artist who traces shadow or casts a mask, replacing their own representation with the trace of their source.

In defense, Caldwell returned again to the example of Washington stating, "Suppose you were to attempt to construct the character even of George Washington, out of materials derived from his conversations, his witticisms, or his *familiar letters* […] the character of the first of men would appear inferior to that of many dabblers in literature; or of a flippant demagogue, or a beer-house politician."[168] Washington had not been well known for his written wit, and therefore, an account that relied too heavily on "his own phraseology" might fail to elevate him to the position he deserved. Caldwell argued that while the subject's own words might prove useful to describe the character of literary men, it was markedly less suitable for men of action like Washington. He argued that:

> It is only the character of a man of letters, of a table companion, or of one particularly devoted to conversation, that, in *your method*, you would be able to faithfully delineate. Merely to describe the actions of such a man, and call the product his biography, would be injustice to him; because he has never performed any actions worthy to be described. His life has been spent principally in the exercise of

[168] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 13.

> his pen and his tongue. It is from these sources, therefore, that you must derive materials for the construction of his character. To attempt *his* biography in your own words alone would be wrong.[169]

Different characters required different forms of characterization and in the case of Washington, finding the appropriate style of representation was central to conveying his unique national persona.

2.7 Returning to the Portrait of Washington

Smith and Caldwell had dramatically different ideas about the goals and essential characteristics of biography. These differences also seem to have carried over into their understanding of portraiture as well. Smith took issue with the assertion that the individual could exceed the limits of a representational system. He was particularly critical of Caldwell's closing comments regarding the failure of Washington's portraits:

> The last paragraph of that article is all but idolatrous. The ancients, with all their superstitious apotheoses, were never so extravagant as to think that the countenance of a departed patriot was incapable of being imitated by chisel or the pencil; but on the contrary, had a perfusion of copies, from both these implements of art, in order to keep them as near them as possible the looks of those whom they

[169] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 13.

> exalted demi-gods. Not a single Greek would have been guilty of such hyperbolical eulogium […].[170]

For Smith, Caldwell's conclusion could not be interpreted as anything but the epitome of his seeming tendency toward excessive glorification. But to deny the validity of all of Washington's many revered portraits went beyond all reasonable poetic liberties.

Ultimately, Smith willingly accepted the *Repository's* portrait of Washington while taking a prejudicial stance against its biographies. On the other side, Caldwell staunchly defended the composition of the biographies while mourning failings in the portrait. While neither author explicitly states why they approached Washington's portrait in such different ways, we can extrapolate from the positions they more clearly espoused in regard to the biographies. Smith desired biographies focused on the private lives of its subjects, while they were in a state of repose. For him, culture shaped a great deal of a person's appearance and actions. By contrast, character was innate and more deeply rooted, something to be revealed in a few prized moments where a subject's instinct betrayed their composure. Therefore, the best sources for a biographic account were those with the least inflection of artifice. He preferred to rely, as much as possible, on the subject's own words or evocative anecdotes as abstracted microcosms of the missing whole. By arguing that each of these diminutive details could correspond in type and substance to the subjects from which they derived, Smith allowed for biographies of any scale to present themselves as authentic and worthy representations.

It is perhaps not surprising that such a view of biography would accompany an approval of Washington's portraits. Each portrait resulted from a specific encounter between Washington and

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[170] Smith, "original," 204.

the artist who created it. During these sessions the sitter was expected to submit to the investigation of the artist in a state of rest while often engaged in polite conversation. The resulting images were, in a way, visual anecdotes of these encounters and the circumstances of these sittings were often preserved and discussed as another layer of their meaning. Moreover, if a brief statement was sufficient for biographic representation, then it follows that even a quick sketch might satisfy the demands of physiognomic representation. A mere sliver of a likeness might be enough if it was sufficiently characteristic or insightful. Each portrait, so long as it deferred as much as possible to the form of its subject, presented a valid sample of the individual.

Caldwell had countered that the format of a particular biography had to be tooled to the specific nature of the character it sought to represent. The subjects listed in *Repository* were the most eminent and respected heroes in America. Delaplaine had conceived the scale and quality of the book in response to the prestige of these subjects. Moreover, the book aspired to represent the national heritage of America through the glory of its exemplars. Caldwell's biographies were accordingly heroic, idealized, devoid of any human failings. He focused squarely on his subjects' public lives and iconic actions, when their moral and intellectual faculties were most focused. He likewise argued that the mundane details of their lives were worthless in the pursuit of understanding these higher faculties, or as Reynolds had described it, "the leading point." Character was not something innate, to be revealed in any chance moment, but it was developed over time, as consistent actions became settled and permanent. Therefore, Caldwell preferred exhaustive biographies that emphasized the firmness of these attributes over the course of multiple events.

This conception of biography placed considerably more pressure on the authority of portraiture. It was not enough to capture a characteristic likeness of the subject without elevating

the image to the ideal appropriate to the sitter's attainments. Afterall, it was not the face of the mundane human form that was meaningful, but the faculties by which they were animated. Portraits were predominantly inactive, with their subjects generally shown in a state of rest. They were also tied to the limited scope of their execution, depicting their subjects during particular moments of their lives. They could not telescope time, as a biography could, to reveal consistency across a range of situations. These challenges were apparently not disqualifying for the portraits of most people, but Washington's perceived singular greatness was such that such compromises were unacceptable. For Caldwell, the only medium fit to convey Washington's character had been his own corporeal form.

It is unclear how seriously Caldwell held to his claim about the validity Washington's portraits, but when Smith challenged him on it, he reasserted it stating that "Houdon wants animation" and Stuart had "fallen short."[171] As much as his assessment of the portraits is consistent with his biographical commitments, it is also similarly related to the larger context within which *Repository* was operating. At a time when portraits were circulating in new ways alongside the rising genre of illustrated biographies, their connection to the institutions that traditionally acted as their stewards eroded. This was even more prevalent in America where these institutions were slow to develop. Washington had no official image, so it was left to those that survived him to settle on one image or another. Each of his acquaintances enjoyed equal claim to the authority of their own experience and perception of Washington, making their preferences equally valid. Moreover, these portraits were not always directly comparable with one another. They captured different aspects of Washington's many public roles, both martial and political. They were also

[171] Caldwell, *The Author Turned Critic,* 22.

spread over a large territory with copies of varying quality taking the place of many rarely seen originals. The corpus of Washington's images was simultaneously near-unlimited and inaccessibly dispersed. The difficulty of tracing this network of portraits, and their copies, frustrated any assessment of a particular portrait's authenticity. The conflict was often avoided so long as each person could follow his own preferences. However, as fear of the eventual death of all those who had known Washington began to set in, the desire to settle on a national likeness became imperative. Delaplaine's repository had been the first serious attempt at this project, and highlighted many of the difficulties associated with the task. In this environment, it was not only possible, but likely, that a person as significant as Washington could be the focus of an incredible number of portraitists, yet ultimately leave behind no singularly satisfactory image.

2.8 Conclusion

Delaplaine's *Repository* leveraged the allied genres of portraiture and biography to honor America's heroes in a lavish illustrated biography. He argued that such projects were necessary to ensure that the lives and faces of America's most prominent early contributors would be preserved for future generations. To this end, Delaplaine made a concerted effort to provide his audience with the most authoritative portraits that he could obtain. From the very beginning Delaplaine understood that he needed to remain flexible in his selection process. His engravers would realistically only be able to gain access to a limited subset of potential originals, and the serial nature of *Repository* meant that he needed to efficiently locate reasonably suitable portraits for any

subjects he hoped to include in a later volume.[172] Even still, his various attempts to identify and copy satisfactory prototypes were frequently frustrated by issues of access and competing notions of authenticity in early American portraiture. In response to these difficulties, Delaplaine adopted a selection process that was strategically tailored to balance the desires of his audience, the realities of the market, and the specific demands of his project.

Therefore, Delaplaine ultimately only promised to produce "good engravings" after portraits by "celebrated artists" that had achieved a reputation for the "fidelity of their resemblance" among knowledgeable experts.[173] Delaplaine frequently deliberated with his consultants about what qualities made one portrait more authentic than another. And yet, even as Delaplaine emphasized the efforts with which he pursued authentic prototypes in his advertisements, he consistently avoided publishing the substance of these debates. Delaplaine obscured the messy task of arbitrating between competing portraits from his audience by masking the process under a baseline criterion that was much simpler to satisfy. This ensured that as long as the final print was deemed to be "authoritative" by one of the consultants that he enlisted, it was fit for inclusion in *Repository,* even if he might have personally preferred a different one for other reasons.[174]

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[172] Delaplaine often had difficulty getting access to the portraits that he identified as being his first choice. It is easy to see how a more stringent selection criteria could have painted him into a corner, making the entire project impossible to deliver on. He had extensive correspondence with Thomas Jefferson while trying to arrange a chance to gain access to Gilbert Stuart's portrait of him. Stuart apparently refused to respond to Delaplaine, ultimately requiring Delaplaine to send his own agent to paint Jefferson from life for inclusion in the second half volume of *Repository.*

[173] Delaplaine, "Proposal"

[174] This is why when Delaplaine was ultimately unable to get access to his preferred portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Gilbert Stuart, he was not conflicted about commissioning a new life portrait as a substitute for Stuart's. This again highlights the difficulty of accessing portraits at this time. Delaplaine and his associates knew of Stuart's painting through prints and painted copies, however, Delaplaine wanted his engravers to work from originals. After nearly a

As a result, *Repository* focused more on multiplying a judiciously selected set of verified and praiseworthy portraits than on arbitrating the finer nuances that distinguished the vast multiplicity of prototypes available to him. In most cases this strategy had been sufficient, but it ultimately left him ill-equipped to effectively tackle the challenge presented by the public's conflicting preferences regarding Washington's portraits. Here the preeminence of the subject and the deep-rooted opinions of the public made any hope of establishing consensus in support of one portrait virtually impossible. Yet, when faced with this challenge, Delaplaine did not attempt to persuade his customers to favor his chosen portrait.[175] To do so would have required that he publicly define his selection criteria in a way that would have made the task of finding suitable portraits for his other subjects more difficult.[176] Instead, he side-stepped the issue entirely by breaking with the format of the other entries in the volume and offering his customers two portraits instead of one.[177] This ad hoc solution was reasonable because Washington was frequently presented as an exceptional case in patriotic discourse. By granting Washington two portraits Delaplaine simply reinforced this notion while excusing himself from entering the stalemated

year of trying to get in touch with Stuart, even soliciting Jefferson to compel the artist to relinquish the painting, he simply had to admit defeat.

[175] There are a number of arguments Delaplaine might have made here, such as pointing to the official governmental commission that was awarded to Houdon, how the formal qualities of sculpture that might be more suitable for adaptation into a print, or the existence of a life mask that corroborates the bust.

[176] While Washington had many potential portraits to choose from, others included in *Repository* like Columbus had relatively few. If Delaplaine diminished any life portraits of Washington in favor of another, he threatened to undercut the marketability of his other portraits, many of which were only justified on their verified status as a "life portrait."

[177] It is unclear whether Delaplaine ever bound a print after Gilbert Stuart's portrait as claimed by Goodman, but Delaplaine did promise to do so and indeed produced a loose-leaf version of such a print. It is possible that the print was included as a loose print alongside copies of *Repository*, or was simply made available separately. It is worth noting that the copy of *Repository* cited by Marshall housed at the Free Library of Philadelphia does not contain a print after Stuart as he indicated.

debates surrounding his portraits. Fortunately for Delaplaine, the other entries in *Repository* failed to elicit such a tumultuous public response.[178]

But it is important to emphasize that this lack of similar controversies surrounding his selections should not be interpreted to indicate that the public was unconcerned with the comparable authority of different portraits in other cases. In fact, such concerns were the entire justification for Delaplaine's focus on certifying the authority his likenesses. It is likely, however, that it was only in the case of Washington that a broad section of the public was sufficiently versed in the potential prototypes to have an informed opinion on the matter which could come into conflict with Delaplaine's selection.[179] In this way, questions of authority in Washington's portraits, as well as other examples of early American national portraiture, were not exceptional because they constituted an entirely distinct category of representational practice from other forms of domestic portraiture. Rather, they were exceptional because of the sustained focus given to the issue of authority in them on the national stage. It was only on the national stage that the increased number of potential prototypes, the greater demand for propagated copies, and the larger shared national stakes of authorizing a particular portrait, pushed these issues to their fullest consideration. It was also here that the various artists and promoters like Delaplaine stood to most profit if they could articulate a marketable solution to questions of authority in portraiture.

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[178] It is difficult to be sure what the extent of this response was. The only evidence we have is Delaplaine's own statements that cite dissatisfaction with his selection and explain his proposed remedy.

[179] Considering how much effort Delaplaine expended investigating potential portraits of Columbus, it is unlikely many Americans would be familiar enough with the obscure examples that he identified, many of them from rare foreign books, to contradict him. This might help to explain why Delaplaine was ultimately able to choose an image of Columbus that Jefferson had considered inferior.

In the end, *Repository* brought the issue of authority in early American national portraiture out to be debated among his various consultants and across the pages of numerous periodicals. But *Repository's* circulation was limited and Delaplaine never pushed the issue of authority beyond what was necessary to promote his illustrated biography. As the century progressed, a succession of similarly minded, creative entrepreneurs would continue to propose new projects that grappled with questions of authority in portraiture through the interrogation of Washington's likeness. In the next chapter, I will discuss a prominent example from the following decade that resulted in a controversy with a much larger reach than those inspired by *Repository*—a controversy whose issues remained relevant into the 20th century.

3.0 Authenticity and Authorship in Rembrandt Peale's Posthumous Composite Portrait

3.1 A New Washington

In the last chapter, I discussed how Joseph Delaplaine endeavored to locate and identify the best possible prototypes for the portrait prints that would accompany the biographical entries in *Repository.* However, despite the seemingly straightforward goals of his project, he ultimately had difficulty satisfying his audience with either his portraits or his biographies. Disagreements over the proper composition of a biography proved to be interwoven with concerns over the authenticity of portraiture. The debates that followed *Repository's* publication explored the role of the biographer through analogies based on the practices of portraitists. The scope of overlapping concerns shared by both genres was impressive, touching on topics ranging from ensuring the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their representations, to discriminating between incidental and essential characteristics of their subjects and demonstrating the tangibility of their connection to the person they proposed to portray. Throughout this process, Washington featured prominently as a test case for why one strategy of representation might be preferable to another. In the end, despite Delaplaine offering his customers two favored likenesses of Washington, *Repository's* editor declared neither to be sufficient, arguing instead that Washington's singular greatness was simply beyond the capacity of portraiture to adequately convey.

In 1815, Samuel Stanhope Smith had called this last claim "extravagant," "idolatrous," and "superstitious," but by the 1820s similar anxieties were becoming more widespread.[180] Delaplaine had conceived of his project as a solution to an anticipated future problem by imagining a time when the living memory of the America's recent past had long faded into history. And indeed, only a decade later, the horizon of this imagined future was already coming into view. The revolutionary generation was growing older and their children were now raising yet another generation of Americans who had not lived through the nation's formative years. At the same time, the approaching 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence inspired many to reflect on the lives of America's founders with a new historical awareness. As the world that Delaplaine had predicted began to take shape, his failure to resolve the issue of authority in Washington's portraits became increasingly problematic. In a matter of decades, all who had known Washington personally would inevitably die, leaving behind a diverse collection of portraits as the only tangible record of his appearance.

As long as artists who had painted Washington from life still lived, they could continue to facilitate commissions for new works based on their original portraits. But once they were gone, any new monument or public commission that required a likeness of Washington would necessarily have to be modeled on one of the available prototypes. But without the benefit of surviving associates of Washington to guide their selection, later generations would be in an even worse position than Delaplaine to reach a satisfactory conclusion regarding their relative authority. By the 1820s, the window for action was closing. If Congress moved forward with a prominent public commission in conjunction with the upcoming 50th anniversary celebrations in 1826 or the

[180] See Chapter 2.

centennial of Washington's birth in 1832, the prototype that they selected would receive their implicit endorsement which would likely set a precedent for future commissions, even if it was not considered the most authentic by knowledgeable experts.[181] If the theoretical issues foreshadowed by *Repository* were left unresolved by those best qualified to address them at this critical juncture, it would inevitably fall to the politicians decide.

However, before this could happen Rembrandt Peale revealed a new portrait in 1823 that he claimed contained the most authentic likeness of Washington ever executed (Fig. 3.1). Peale called it a "National Portrait & standard likeness," which he described as the summation of all of Washington's previous life portraits. It was a composite view produced in consultation with previous life portraits that sought to combine the many facets of his character and accomplishments into a single image.[182]

Several worthy studies have been conducted by historians like Wendy Bellion and Egon Verheyen that explore this portrait as an interesting, if somewhat humorous, example of these intersecting frontiers of early American portraiture and entrepreneurial entertainment.[183] Peale's history of bombastic promotional rhetoric and the seeming outlandishness of his premise have made these scholars reluctant to take Peale's central claim of authenticity seriously. Therefore, investigations of this portrait often apply same the kind of skeptical distance as is used for other

[181] This ultimately did happen to some extent. When the issue was debated in Congress in 1832 for a commissioned portrait to honor the centennial of Washington's birth, objections to the use of Stuart's portrait as the prototype were quickly silenced by appealing to their earlier agreement in favor of Stuart's for an earlier commission. But the effect of this precedent was greatly weakened by the debates inspired by Rembrandt Peale's 1824 portrait, which will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. See register.

[182] Letter to Jefferson Jan 8, Peale Family papers, 356.

[183] See Bellion, *Citizen Spectator* and Verehyen, "The Most Exact Representation of the Original,"

early American fantastical amusements like the phantasmagoria, spirit photography, and the exhibitions of P. T. Barnum.

I agree with the many of the conclusions drawn by these studies and concede that certain aspects of Peale's portrait and his promotional tactics were strongly informed by his desire to tap into his public's excited willingness to engage in a wide array of patriotic fantasies. However, I argue that there is value in considering the strategies and goals of the composite portrait more closely and with less skepticism. In this chapter I will consider how this portrait represents a legitimate response to a long-standing and intractable problem of authenticity in early American national portraiture. While Peale proposed a radically new approach to the problem, his solution was rooted in contemporary aesthetic frameworks, studio practices, and a deep understanding of the issues that confronted Washington's portraits. His composite sought to overcome the contradictions that inevitably manifest among a large body of competing portraits in order to provide a single, corrected model for imitation. The resulting object was intended to be more than simply another concerted attempt to provide a compelling and accurate image of Washington's features at a given moment in his career. Instead, Peale's composite provided an emblematic visage that claimed to stand as a comprehensive visual historical record of Washington for future generations.

3.2 Peale's History with Washington's Portraits

The most obvious reason to seriously consider the validity of Peale's project is that there was perhaps no one who was more invested in the situation at the time. By 1823, Peale had a wealth of experience with the many issues surrounding Washington's portraits and was uniquely

positioned to recognize the extent of the problem and to propose a new solution. First, Peale was well-versed in the role of portraiture as both a civic honor and a historical medium under the tutelage of his entrepreneurial father Charles Willson Peale. The elder Peale was a prominent Revolutionary era polymath who flourished as a somewhat eccentric artist, naturalist, inventor, curator, and promoter. C. W. Peale had also further distinguished himself as a successful businessman with an almost uncanny ability to turn his wide-ranging intellectual interests into financially beneficial business ventures. With a zealous commitment to the principles of democracy, C. W. Peale opened a museum in Philadelphia with the goal of promoting scientific knowledge and Republican values among his fellow citizens.[184] From a young age Rembrandt had worked in his father's museum which prominently featured an extensive portrait collection called the "Gallery of Illustrious Persons," which were displayed alongside a growing collection of natural history specimens. C. W. Peale framed the portraits as an analogous set of civic specimens which he hoped would both preserve knowledge of history's primary actors and encourage his fellow citizens to emulate their examples and, as he put it, to "expand the mind and make men better; more virtuous and liberal."[185]

The analogous roles proposed by Peale's father between portraiture and scientific specimens also foregrounded the importance of the fidelity of his portraits' likenesses. Well before Lavater's claims regarding the legibility of a person's outer appearance had swept America, naturalists like Peale and his father had already adopted a similar approach. The classification

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[184] Sellers, "Peale Museum," 25-34.

[185] See Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*. The quote is found in Horace Wells Seller's transcript of Charles Willson Peale's Autobiography in the Peale-Sellers Papers at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia: 379. Quoted in Hart, "To increase the Comforts of Life," 257.

system used in the Peale museum followed the precepts of Carl Linnaeus's taxonomies and the notion that it was only through the visible phenomenological world that the character of each specimen could be rationally discerned.[186] The naturalist Robert M. Peck referred to this period in natural history as a "Rhetorical Revolution" in which, "a new language of tone and gesture […] transformed the body into a truthful evidence of interior self."[187] Peale was himself an active practitioner of this "new language," and understood that the visual qualities exhibited by these portraits were not incidental to their social function.[188] Rather, the ascribed authenticity of their likeness was the primary feature that allowed them to serve as a similar kind of "social specimen," to be interpreted as evidence of their sitter's identity.

The Peale museum was also one of the few American venues devoted to displaying such a pantheon of portraits before the turn of the century. While this collection included several notable Europeans, it was primarily composed of American subjects.[189] Decades before Delaplaine's *Repository,* this portrait collection was the most prominent early American prototype for a gallery of national heroes and provided a model for how portraiture could be used to connect citizens to their nation's history. In the first half of the 19th century, numerous pop-up portrait museums would attempt to build on the Peale museum's successful formula, including one made by Delaplaine,

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[186] Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design," 38-78. and, Sellers, "Peale Museum," 25-34.

[187] Gaudio, "Surface and Depth," 68.

[188] In 1803, he published a treatise on the recently unearthed mastodon skeleton displayed at the family museum. Peale went to great lengths to deduce the creature's essential characteristics by analyzing the composition of its bones. One of the most interesting passages in this treatise concerns the orientation of the creature's jaw bone. Here Peale erroneously argued that the structure and position of the lower jaw indicated that the creature had been carnivorous. It is striking how similar this argument is to those offered by Lavater when dealing with the relationship between external indicators of internal identities. See Thomson, *The Legacy of the Mastodon,* p. 43-49.

[189] Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design," 51.

and eventually, P T Barnum.[190] The way that the portraits functioned in the Peale museum, therefore, also anticipated the types of social demands that would be placed on images of America's founding generation in the 1820s.

Rembrandt Peale was also intimately familiar with an impressive number of life portraits of Washington in circulation at this time and the potential issues that attended them. His own father was the first artist to have painted Washington from life (Fig. 3.2) and had executed several prominent versions thereafter.[191] Moreover, through Peale's various professional capacities as a portrait painter, exhibition organizer, and museum director, he frequently engaged with many of the portraits of Washington in circulation. And crucially, Peale had painted Washington from life himself in 1795. By the 1820s, he was one the few living artists who could claim to have had that privilege.

The circumstances surrounding Peale's 1795 life portrait are particularly noteworthy in regard to his later composite because they foreshadowed many of the issues that his later portrait would attempt to resolve. Around this time, Peale's father was actively directing any portrait commissions he received to his children in an attempt to help them develop their own careers. Therefore, when C. W. Peale received a commission from the former director of the US Mint for a portrait of Washington, he passed it along to his 17-year-old son Rembrandt. However, the opportunity to paint a portrait of Washington from life was so enticing that, in typical fashion, the resourceful patriarch further extended the opportunity to benefit the fortunes of several additional

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[190] In fact, the backbone of Barnum's collection for his American Museum was acquired directly from the Peale family when they liquidated their own museum. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*. For Delaplaine, see, Marshall, "The Golden Age of Illustrated Biography."

[191] C W Peale received at least five separate sessions of sittings with Washington from which he produced numerous copies, variations, and prints. See, Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design," 49.

members of his family as well. In the end, four members of the Peale family attended the sitting with Washington, including both Rembrandt and his father.

However, despite painting side-by-side, the portraits that resulted from this session convey drastically different impressions of Washington.[192] The elder Peale produced a characteristic portrait that accounted for Washington's advancing age while retaining the heroic idealism of his former efforts (Fig. 3.3). He did not shy away from rendering the sagging forms of Washington's aged neck and even allowed the light to catch the edges of his plump jowls. Yet, he also expertly softened this highlight so that it attracted less attention, resting between the cooler tones of the face above and the bright white collar below. His portrait likewise balanced a few distinctive wrinkles in the forehead and around the eyes against the smoothed complexion around his mouth and cheeks. The finished painting demonstrates all the precepts of the artistic school in which he had raised his son: featuring a deep commitment to clear and accurate drawing, executed with tight brushwork, and tempered by a healthy dose of flattery.

Rembrandt Peale's portrait from this session was reworked several times in the decades that followed as he continually reworked the canvas in attempts to improve the likeness (Fig. 3.4). Therefore, a stronger sense of the original may be preserved in an early copy (Fig. 3.5). Here, Peale's likeness of Washington appears significantly older than his father's. To the young artist, unpracticed in idealizing his sitter, it must have been difficult to see past the well-weathered

[192] There are many authors that discuss this portrait session at length including Peale himself. See Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 21-22, and Morgan, *Life Portraits of Washington*, 365-366. It bears noting, that despite the stylistic differences between the two portraits, they are surprisingly consistent in their placement of Washington's features, hinting that the formal differences between them stem more from stylistic considerations than any tangible inaccuracies in their underlying layout.

features of the 63-year-old first president.[193] Yet Peale's portrait is far from amateurish, and he even seems to have purposefully emphasized these details with unflinching naturalism, tracing every crease of skin with near-obsessive attention. Where his father had judiciously hidden much of Washington's sagging cheek in shadow, Peale modeled it prominently under full illumination, with a similar sharp focus extending to the rest of Washington's features. Washington's skin is stretched tautly over his cheekbones and the minute curves of the flesh around the mouth and Peale's short brush strokes emulate the effect of light playing across his pores. The highlights blend in naturalistically with the surfaces upon which they are found, shining sharply from the eyes and lips while diffusing across the more matte surface of the rest of his face.

The striking contrast exemplified in these two portraits prefigured the dilemma encountered by later audiences of such life portraits. With equal standing as authentic life portraits and produced under identical circumstances, the obvious dissimilarities exhibited between them seem to naturally inspire questions of the relative fidelity of their likenesses. If the two canvases failed to resemble each other, how can their audience be certain that either accurately resembles Washington? But, as Peale later observed, this situation also paved the way for his later attempts to develop a composite portrait as a solution to these seemingly incompatible differences, recounting:

> Washington gave me three sittings. At the first and second my father's painting and mine advanced well together—being at my right hand *his* was a little less full than *mine.* In the third sitting,

[193] Much later in life, Peale admitted that "nothing is more embarrassing to a young artist than the painting of wrinkles," and as a very early example of Peale painting an elderly subject, it is possible that he was even referring to this portrait. Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 49.

> perceiving that he was beginning to repaint the forehead and proceed downwards, as was his custom, I feared he would have too little time to study the mouth and proceeded upwards. The result of this decision was that there was something in the upper part of my father's study that I preferred, and something in the lower portion of mine which better satisfied me. At subsequent periods I made several studies to combine them.[194]

Acknowledging the challenges of the portrait process in which sittings were limited and time was often short, Peale attempted to combine the best elements of his own portrait with that of his father multiple times before he began his 1823 composite, though these earlier experiments were apparently unsuccessful.[195]

In the decades that followed this experience, Peale remained deeply interested in the issue of Washington's likeness. He hung his own Washington portrait proudly over his studio door and actively pursued information relating to other versions.[196] When he visited Houdon's studio in Paris in 1808, he interviewed the artist about his famous rendition and learned that he had taken a life mask of Washington at Mount Vernon.[197] Peale soon developed a reputation as an expert on Washington's portraits, and was often called upon to help identify the provenance of various

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[194] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 22-23, Quoted in Morgan, *Life Portraits of Washington,* 369.

[195] Admittedly, this account was written well after Peale had already finished his 1823 composite, and therefore may have been retroactively influenced by the solution that he ultimately arrived at.

[196] Letter Jan 1817, in Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale,* vol 3, 468.

[197] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 11-12

examples.[198] Already by 1813, Peale's expertise on the subject and his access to a relatively large number of examples had made him an ideal resource for Delaplaine while preparing *Repository.*[199] And as a consultant on that project, Peale was enlisted into Delaplaine's quest for authentic historical portraits, the very issue that his later composite was engineered to address.

Peale's involvement in *Repository* has not yet been explored in the scholarship surrounding his composite portrait, but there are striking parallels in both projects' goals and strategies that

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[198] The Peale Family Papers contain many instances in which Rembrandt is asked to identify the provenance of a particular portrait of Washington. In the 1850s, his Washington portrait tour was popularly attended, and in 1860, the director of the Mint awarded him a Memorial Medal of Washington in recognition of his relationship to portraits of Washington. See National Archives, James Ross Snowden to Rembrandt Peale, Philadelphia, June 22, 1860.

[199] Details of this meeting are scarce. The only first-hand documentation that connects Peale and Delaplaine is a short paragraph written by Peale late in his life in which he reminisced about helping Delaplaine select the best portrait of Washington, which was discussed in the last chapter. The details of the encounter are rather thin, lacking even an approximate date. However, we can fill out the context of this meeting somewhat by examining the events that happened around it. This is worth briefly sketching out because it hints at a more substantial relationship between the two than previously considered. The first advertisements for *Repository* appeared in the Delaware Gazette on June 30, 1814, and it explicitly stated that the preparatory drawing for the Washington print had already been completed and, "submitted to the inspection of Judge Washington." The final print is dated that same year. But I argue that Peale most likely meet with Delaplaine sometime around July of 1813. This was the month in which Delaplaine began to claim that Peale and Thomas Sully had agreed to act as the principle contributors to his proposed illustrated Bible. Peale later claimed that he had not been involved with Delaplaine's Bible project, and the project itself was never completed. However, there is evidence to suggest that not only did the three parties reach some form of agreement around this time, but that this agreement was also related to the two artists' contemporaneous involvement in Delaplaine's efforts to produce portrait prints. Before Delaplaine had settled on the ambitious format of his *Repository* in 1814, he was proceeding with a more modest plan. On May 7, 1813, he announced the upcoming publication of a series of loose-leaf portraits depicting "eminent men," each of which would be accompanied by a one-page biography in *The Evening Post.* Throughout that summer, Delaplaine was actively looking for suitable portraits to have engraved for this project. The first print announced in this series was after a portrait of Benjamin Rush that had recently been painted by Thomas Sully. The print was promised to be ready for purchase by July. Delaplaine would have had to work directly with Sully to gain access to copy the portrait, at which time, the possibility of collaborating on the Bible project may have been discussed. It is likely that Delaplaine would have begun planning for a print of Washington around the same time. Both prints would ultimately be incorporated into *Repository.* Moreover, the letter that Delaplaine used to promote his illustrated Bible was dated July 15th and specified that it originated from Philadelphia. Delaplaine, Peale, and Sully were all in Philadelphia around this date, as was Bushrod Washington, who was the only other documented witness to the collections of Washington's portraits that Peale had assembled. If the lower limit for the timing of this meeting is March, when the Bible was being advertised without mention of Sully and Peale, the upper limit is August because that was the month that Peale moved to Baltimore to open his own museum. Therefore, even though Peale did not later recall being involved with Delaplaine's Bible project, the fact that Delaplaine was in contact with Sully around this time and that his advertisement identified a plausible working relationship between the two artists indicates that some kind of agreement was likely formed among the three parties. If Peale had opened his studio to Delaplaine in July to examine a collection of Washington portraits, this would have been the ideal time for Peale, Sully, and Delaplaine to discuss the possibility of further working together on the illustrated Bible.

indicate that Peale's later efforts were directly informed by the experience.[200] Even Peale's description of Delaplaine's earlier process of arbitration, in which Peale had "assembled in [his] studio all of the portraits of Washington [they] could collect,"[201] is remarkably similar to the language Peale later used to describe his preparations for the composite portrait, when he again assembled, "every portrait, bust, medallion and print of Washington that [he] could find […] to excite and resuscitate [his] memory."[202] Moreover, despite Peale's extensive experience with Washington's portraits prior to this event, it is unlikely that he had been in a comparable situation before Delaplaine orchestrated it: surrounded by every available rendition of Washington in one room, attended by an assembly of knowledgeable experts, and charged with the singular task of selecting the most authentic. In many ways, this scenario must have echoed the problematic results of his earlier portrait session with Washington, but now, rather than simply being presented with the differences exhibited by two relatively similar versions, Peale was surrounded by a much broader range of potentially contradictory prototypes. It is easy to imagine how this larger collection of likenesses, along with the debates that they likely inspired among those in attendance, would have brought the issue of authenticity into greater clarity for Peale by exposing the full range of variations in contour and expression that distinguished each potential prototype. Perhaps

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[200] Despite Peale's involvement in *Repository*, his relationship with Delaplaine appears to have soured soon after this exchange. Delaplaine became a direct competitor with the Peale family in 1819 when he opened his own portrait gallery only a few blocks down the street from the Peales' Philadelphia Museum. Hereafter, whenever the Peales wrote about Delaplaine, they did so with a noticeable dose of condescension. C. W. Peale was openly critical when discussing Delaplaine's portrait gallery with potential sitters, claiming that Delaplaine would exhibit anyone's portrait who was willing to pay for the privilege (see Peale Family Papers,) Rembrandt Peale was likewise critical of Delaplaine's intention to limit the number of prints that he produced to create an artificial scarcity and inflate their value (see Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 10). This bad blood provides a motive for why Peale may have been reluctant to align himself with Delaplaine.

[201] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 10.

[202] Lester, *The Artists of America*, 210.

it was also here that Peale first began to contemplate what qualities would be found in an ideal portrait of Washington.

Even the solution that Peale claimed to have proposed during this encounter relied on the same type of interpretive intervention that he would later employ in his composite. Peale claimed that Bushrod Washington's ultimate endorsement of Houdon's bust for *Repository* was not simply the result of his pre-existing preference for the sculpture; but rather, it was the result of Peale's own clever curation. Peale placed the bust in "a selected light" that highlighted its "most characteristic parts" while obscuring the portions he deemed to be "least expressive."[203] He claimed it was this intervention that prompted Bushrod to appreciate the likeness of the bust in a wholly new way. Pointing to the presence of both accurate and inaccurate portions in Houdon's bust, Peale argued that it was only by applying his uniquely developed ability to discern between the two that he was able to decode the sculpture and reveal a more compelling view previously hidden underneath these tensions. Peale accomplished this through the strategic projection of light and shade on a single three-dimensional work; his composite, on the other hand, would depend on more proactive editorial decisions in order to compile a range of prototypes into a single image.

The strongest indication that Peale's experience with *Repository* informed his later efforts is the fact that he quickly adopted many of Delaplaine's tactics to promote his own earlier Washington portrait. In 1817, just two years after the publication of *Repository*, the Governor of North Carolina, William Miller, wrote to ask Peale for information regarding a possible commission for two portraits of Washington for the state's legislative hall.[204] As expected, Peale

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[203] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 10.

[204] There is no indication that Peale ever moved forward with a commission from William Miller and there is no account of how he responded to Peale's claims.

recommended his own 1795 portrait as the most suitable prototype, but he did so in a very peculiar way. He explained to Miller that he esteemed his portrait to be, "invaluable as probably the best likeness of [Washington] in existence […] particularly since my own opinion of it has been confirmed by that of Judge Washington & a number of persons sufficiently intimate with him."[205]

Here, Peale utilized the same argument that Delaplaine had used to promote the portraits that he had selected for *Repository,* citing the approbation of knowledgeable experts to authorize his portrait as the best possible prototype for a new portrait. Even more directly, Peale attributed preference for his image to Bushrod Washington, who was the very same person quoted by Delaplaine as preferring Houdon's bust. Because we know that Bushrod visited Peale's studio alongside Delaplaine and was charged with the task of determining the relative quality of Washington's portraits, it is possible that the praise Peale claimed to have received from him occurred at the same time. But even if Peale was referring to another encounter with Bushrod, his adoption of Delaplaine's strategies strongly indicates that his involvement with *Repository* had a lasting impact on his thinking about his Washington portrait that it likely guided his approach to the later composite.[206]

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[205] Letter Jan 1817 in Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale,* 468.

[206] It is also important to mention that Peale made no mention of a composite process at this time, or at any known time prior to it. Peale would later claim to have made several attempts at a composite before settling on the one he unveiled in 1823. This is substantiated by the narrator of John Neal's *Randolph* who mentioned Peale working on a composite likeness of Washington earlier. The book was published in the summer of 1823, and the author was a friend of Peale's, having even posed as one of the figures in his grand scale history painting *The Court of Death* only a few years earlier (See Lester, *The Artists of America,* 223). Therefore, it makes sense that he would have been aware of such a project, even if Peale had not yet widely exhibited any of these earlier attempts. It is also possible that Neal's narrator was refereeing to the same canvas that Peale later revealed, simply reworked over time in the same fashion as his original 1795 portrait of Washington. Either way, it seems most likely that Peale's experimental composites all date from after his involvement in *Repository.* We also know that Peale followed the outcome of Delaplaine's project closely and even carefully copied a sketch of the final image for his own records. (see APS Sellers collection).

3.3 An Unlikely Likeness

Given Peale's unique background with Washington's portraits, he was undoubtedly one of the most qualified experts on the subject when he returned to the issue of Washington's portraits in 1823. However, the solution that he ultimately proposed was both novel and shocking. Rather than emulating Delaplaine and selecting from the available prototypes, or even promoting his own life portrait as he had done only six years earlier, Peale now produced an entirely new portrait that he provocatively put forward as the most authentic. He presented this composite as the summation of all previous efforts, a judiciously curated selection of correct components by one of the last living experts. In order to properly contextualize this claim, we must first examine the scope of his project and the objections raised by his critics.

It is important to note that portraits based on past recollections, familial relations, and even speculative invention were not an uncommon occurrence in early 19th-century portraiture, especially in cases, like this, where a sitting with the subject was now impossible to obtain.[207] However, such unfortunate circumstances inevitably undercut the authority of a portrait's likeness, particularly if another life portrait of the subject was available. In order to claim full authority over a subject's appearance, 19th-century viewers expected portraits to be from life.[208] Peale's portrait

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[207] Notes on Early American Lithography, American Antiquarian Society, April, 1922, p. 69. Discusses Bass Otis's popularity providing such services.

[208] A great discussion of these expectations is found in Paul Barlow's investigation of the founding of the NPG. He describes how the Gallery's restricted collecting practices were much debated at the time. Yet, despite the difficulty that the mandate for obtaining only "original life portraits" placed upon their ability to acquire worthy subjects, the Gallery remained committed to this requirement in order to better facilitate a slippage between the portrait and its subject. See Paul Barlow, "Facing the Past and Present: The National Portrait Gallery and the Search for 'Authentic' Portraiture," In *Portraiture: Facing the Subject,* Joanna Woodall Ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 219-238.

was neither a life portrait nor a direct copy of a particular authentic source, but some kind of amalgamation of the two. As such, it relied instead on a complicated negotiation of agency that wed Peale's singular expert status to the accomplishments of his predecessors in order to re-establish the authority of Washington's waning material presence in the 1820s. But for those who encountered Peale's portrait in 1823, the details of its creation often proved less interesting than the ascribed veracity of its likeness, which many felt free to judge for themselves at face value.

Encouraged by the portrait's initial reception, Peale pressed forward and began an aggressive campaign to establish it as the best prototype going forward.[209] He toured the portrait in Baltimore, Washington, and New York, where he solicited letters of approbation from living associates of Washington, asking them to publicly declare their preference for his image through written testimonials. Echoing Delaplaine's earlier strategies, Peale obsessively collected and cataloged every scrap of supporting sentiments that he could acquire which he then presented as corroborating evidence alongside his painting and in his various promotional materials.[210] In order to further solidify his claim, Peale also leveraged his family connections to initiate a resolution in the Senate for the purchase of the canvas to hang prominently in their chamber.

But all of these activities were just stepping stones toward Peale's ultimate goal: a commission for a grand scale equestrian portrait of Washington based on his standard likeness to

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[209] According to Peale, one viewer was so impressed with the work that he began to proselytize about it in the street, exclaiming, "I have just been looking at Washington—he is risen from the dead!" see, Peale, *Portrait of Washington* (Philadelphia, 1857), 2.

[210] The original copies of these letters were compiled by Peale into a folio which he often displayed in conjunction with his painting. It is mentioned among the items offered for auction along with many of Peale's other effects shortly after his death. It was bought on this occasion, but was subsequently broken apart, with many of the letters entering autograph collections. A second source for these letters is preserved in a manuscript that was also maintained by Peale, where it seems he transcribed the letters in full as they arrived, alongside poetry and odes dedicated to Washington, see Peale, "Letterbook." An example of his promotional materials can be seen in Peale, "pamphlet."

be placed in the Capitol's rotunda (Fig. 3.6).[211] Executed in heroic scale, installed in the most prestigious location in the national Capitol, under an official congressional commission and sustained by the sworn testimonies of Washington's closest living allies, no other portrait of Washington could ever hope to stake a more comprehensive claim to authenticity over Washington's appearance.

Unfortunately, these later plans never came to fruition.[212] Many scholars have interpreted Peale's inability to obtain the full scope of his ambitious plan as evidence of a conceptual failure for his project.[213] But it is important to remember, that despite failing to gain this commission and the attacks of a few prominent contemporary detractors, Peale's composite portrait did ultimately achieve a respectable reputation.[214] Moreover, many of the barriers that prevented Peale's

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[211] Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale,* vol. 3, 352.

[212] Peale had been so excited by the prospects for the equestrian portrait that he began painting it that very summer. Unfortunately, Peale overestimated Congress's enthusiasm for such monumental works following wide-spread public disappointment in Trumbull's recently completed history paintings that had been commissioned for the capitol's rotunda. Congress ultimately declined to purchase either Peale's original portrait or the equestrian version. It wasn't until nearly a decade later in 1832 that Congress reluctantly purchased the original portrait from him for a reduced sum. However, even this belated victory was diminished by another action of Congress that same year when the House upheld their 1826 resolution to authorize Stuart's *Athenaeum Portrait* as "the standard likeness of Washington;" an honor for which Peale's newly acquired portrait was once again consciously rejected. At this time Congress had commissioned both a new full-length portrait and new "pedestrian statue" of Washington. The artists were allowed to improvise regarding the particular manners and effects of each work, but the heads were to be based on a prescribed source. The painting would copy Gilbert Stuart's *Athenaeum Portrait* while the statue would follow after Houdon's bust. When one of the representatives contended that Rembrandt Peale's portrait was rumored to be a more accurate source, he was quickly silenced. The equestrian portrait never found a buyer and remained the possession of his estate until it was donated to the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in 1873. See, Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame,* 145. Verheyen, "The Most Exact Representation of the Original," 128.

[213] This assessment was further encouraged by the skepticism that some of Peale's contemporaries held for him. William Dunlap described Peale as having "little [respect] for the truth" (Dunlap, *A history of the rise and progress of the arts of design in the United States*, 56.) He was denounced as a "charlatan" by members of the Philadelphia school board for the claims he made regarding his proposed curriculum for high school that unified drawing and writing (see Clarke Art and Industry, 15. Even Charles Coleman Sellers, an early historian of the Peale family and grandnephew to the artist himself, gave a sympathetic yet damning assessment of Peale's trustworthiness, stating that, "As an authority for the historian, he is as unreliable as it is possible for a completely well-meaning man to be." (see, Sellers, "Instigator," 333).

[214] So much so, in fact, that by the time the antiquarian Charles Henry Hart took up the issue of "spurious" portraits in an article written in 1913, he found the widespread acceptance of Peale's composite portrait as an authentic likeness

composite portrait from being adopted as the "most authentic" were rooted in the same issues that had likewise prevented Delaplaine's print of Washington from fully satisfying his audience, namely, the public's deeply rooted preference for competing prototypes, the contradictions manifest among them, the impressive number of copies in circulation, and the absence of any compelling means of establishing the superior authority of a single likeness. In fact, the moderate success Peale was able to garner for this posthumous portrait is a testament to how well his composite portrait actually addressed these issues, even if it did not ultimately surmount them.

One of the most potent elements of Peale's challenge to his rivals' portraits resulted from his recognition and exploitation of the diffuse nature of authority in early American portraiture. No extant officiating arena or established criteria existed by which the comparative authority of competing portraits could be effectively reconciled. If Peale hoped to supplant the existing portraits of Washington, he would have to create a forum for this comparison to take place, define the criteria by which each candidate should be evaluated, and certify the persons vested to make the determination. Peale would have to overcome these daunting challenges in order to resolve the issues of authenticity surrounding Washington's portraits even if he had not endeavored to resolve them through a composite portrait.

As a new posthumous work, Peale's portrait demanded public attention in a way his earlier version could not. Its unveiling provided a new occasion for the public to reconsider their long-established allegiances and review the case for each of the familiar candidates. Peale also forced

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the most alarming example of fraudulent portraiture in the 19th century. It is interesting to note that in the article Hart accused Peale of trying to pass his composite portrait off as a legitimate life portrait despite the fact that Peale never tried to hide the composite portrait's origins. On the contrary, Peale supposed that these origins improved the case for the authenticity of his portrait. But for Hart, authenticity and life portraiture were so inextricably linked that he mistook Peale's claim to the former to be a claim to the later. See, Hart, "Frauds in Historic Portraiture."

the issue of authenticity to the forefront of these debates by claiming his own to be the most authentic. This was not simply promotional bluster aimed at selling admittance to his gallery, it was also a clear challenge to the public to refute his claim. Peale was fully aware that making such a claim against such a beloved body of patriotic images would draw the proponents of his competitors out into the open. In order to deflect his attacks, they would have to articulate a counter-claim in favor of their preferred alternative, and Peale's history with Washington's portraits gave him an authoritative advantage. It is not surprising that many took the bait. Peale was prepared with reasoned criticisms of each of Washington's most popular portraits against which he supported his own claims by pointing to the favorable testimonials and congressional actions. Therefore, by diminishing Washington's other portraits in favor of his own, Peale elevated to the national stage debates that had long been brewing among various interested parties. If Peale could repel the protests of his contenders publicly, the extent of his victory would be more decisive. It is important to consider that all of these steps could have been undertaken with any kind of posthumous portrait that Peale chose to produce. The experimental composite process may have contributed to the public's curiosity, but it is easy to imagine that the same steps outlined above could have been undertaken, though perhaps to less effect, to promote a portrait based on a memory, a dream, or a vision.

Moreover, each of these steps also came with their own liabilities even without entertaining questions about his composite process. A posthumous likeness would be less familiar than its more established competition, and the length of time between its execution and the death of its subject would complicate its claimed authenticity. Knowledgeable experts might refute Peale's judgments against the existing portraits, or key associates of Washington might counter the testimonials that he had collected. Congress might ultimately refuse him, or worse, endorse one of his competitors.

His fellow citizens might simply not be excited enough by the project to elevate the debate into public notice. In the end, some combination of these liabilities undoubtedly played a role in Peale's failure to securely establish his portrait as the most authentic prototype. Therefore, no matter how Peale approached the issue, it was going to be difficult to overcome the iconic nature of Washington's portraits.

As noted in chapter one, the summer before Peale unveiled his composite portrait the novelist John Neal had remarked that Washington himself would seem like an impostor when compared with Gilbert Stuart's likeness.[215] Indeed, Washington's portraits had become so embedded in the national consciousness that any attempt to deliberate between them was so inevitably bound for failure that Neal joked Washington's reanimated body would have had little hope of resolving the issue. Therefore, the only option open to Peale was a "scorched earth" campaign designed to clear away these earlier attempts to open a path for his portrait to move forward. In a lengthy pamphlet circulated in 1824 to promote his portrait, Peale walked through a brief history of Washington's portraits while laying out his unapologetic criticisms of each. He declared Houdon's Washington to be "defective in expression" and lacking "the charm of living colour."[216] Trumbull's portrait was a "feeble likeness," Pine's was "too small, and not well drawn," and Wertmuller's was tainted by its "German aspect."[217]

But for Stuart, Peale made his strongest case. First, he revealed that Stuart had painted Washington twice, and had himself considered his first attempt to be a complete failure. This fact

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[215] Neal, *Randolph*, 63-64.

[216] Peale, "Pamphlet," 4.

[217] Peale, "Pamphlet," 5.

preempted his audience's assumption that the venerated artist was too skilled a painter to have struggled with the task. If he had failed once, it was possible that his second version also contained flaws. Next, he explained that the original canvas that was the source for all of Stuart's copies remained unfinished, meaning that every person who had seen a finished version of Stuart's portrait, had in fact seen a copy after a very different-looking original. If the original canvas had flaws, Peale claimed, in the copies, "the faults are frequently exaggerated."[218] The sum of this argument established that in accepting copies after Stuart's likeness, much of the public had already accepted a series of portraits that were themselves adaptations or elaborations of a secondary prototype. While these copies were not "composites" in the same way Peale's new portrait was, they did rely on a similar application of artistic discernment to transform Stuart's unfinished original into something more substantive.

3.4 Agitated Waters

Peale's claims were more than just slanderous; they also threatened to cast doubt on some of the most venerated life portraits of his generation. The danger posed by Peale's actions was recognized almost immediately. One critic eloquently summed up the situation in a letter published in *The New York American* shortly after Peale first unveiled his new portrait:

> The question lately agitated by Mr. Rembrandt Peale, with regard to the merits of every other likeness of Washington but that taken by

[218] Peale, "Pamphlet."

> himself; and the preference which he is attempting to establish over them all, is a matter of no little interest, both as it relates to the fine arts, and more especially as a matter sentiment. We naturally wish that a picture of Washington should not only be a true representation, but that it should be a specimen of grace and art, worthy of the great original, and honorable to the state of the Fine Arts in our country. […] But Mr. Rembrandt Peale has come forward to disturb our long established reliance upon these standard works, and to set us afloat on the ocean of doubts, by means of certain pretensions of his own, sustained by certificates of aged persons of the highest reputation in the country, known intimates of Washington."[219]

The letter, signed "Lanzi," was fully in support of Stuart's portrait based on the artist's reputation and the popularity that the image had attracted from the public. However, Lanzi was hardly a neutral observer. By his own admission, he was currently selling his own prints after a copy of Stuart's portrait, and therefore, he was a direct competitor of Peale with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Yet, despite his personal affinity towards Stuart's portrait, Lanzi shied away from declaring it to be objectively superior to any other. He concluded by appealing to the conventional wisdom of the time, that it was best "to leave the question to the public to determine which is probably the best likeness."[220]

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[219] "Stuart vs. Rembrandt Peale," *The New-York American*, Sept. 11th, 1824.

[220] "Stuart vs. Rembrandt Peale," *The New-York American*, Sept. 11th, 1824.

Lanzi's neutral response failed to appreciate the stakes that Peale had outlined. Peale recognized that leaving such a decision to the whims of the market would not be a compelling solution in the long run. He argued that his generation would be the last to have known Washington in the flesh and, therefore, the last that could legitimately weigh in on the debate:

> When we consider the age of those persons to whom the countenance of Washington is familiar—who are capable of judging of the correctness of the portrait; when we consider the number of artists who have seen Washington, and who retain a correct impression of his features on their memories; when we consider how soon time would have deprived us of those persons, and left us without even one to testify to the identity of the original and the picture, we may without enthusiasm hail this portrait as an acquisition of inestimable value to the nation at large.[221]

While Washington had already been dead for nearly 25 years, his portraits were only now entering a moment in which Washington's living memory was threatening to fade completely. The public, whom Lanzi judged to be best equipped to determine for themselves which likeness was best, would shortly lack any among them who had actually ever seen Washington.

Moreover, as discussed in the last chapter, the issue of authenticity in portraiture was steadily growing to become a major concern in a market easily susceptible to counterfeits. Even following Lanzi's proposed laissez-faire approach, the public would still benefit from some form of guidance to remedy situations of erroneous attributions, unreliable copies, and outright frauds.

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[221] *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser*, March 30th, 1824

Up until this point, there had been little anticipation of any further need to establish more granular hierarchies among life portraits beyond personal preference. Each printseller, like Lanzi, and even purveyors of more canonical works, like Delaplaine, only had jurisdiction over the contents of their own work. Therefore, selecting one valid prototype over another did not refute the validity of unchosen works for other contexts. After all, these types of selections were much more likely to be driven by the market forces of supply and demand than they were to be based on a careful consideration of their comparative authority. Even Delaplaine, who had set out explicitly to address the issue of authenticity in portraiture, failed to establish any clear standards by which to compare two verifiable life portraits.

One of the most prominent of these responses to Peale's disruption of the natural order was presented by John Trumbull. Trumbull had all of the credentials necessary to weigh in on the issue: as president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts, as a painter who had been granted several sittings with Washington, and as a solder in the Continental Army where he served directly under the General. Shortly after Peale began promoting his composite portrait, Trumbull took out a column in *The Atlantic Magazine* in an effort to assert his own authority over the issue.[222] He began by identifying fourteen potential life portraits of Washington, specifying the name of its artist, the year it was created, and its current location. Below this he elaborated on the source of their visual differences:

> The above tally with each other, with very trifling differences; no more, however, than might have been expected from the various points of view in which he was taken, the various styles in which

[222] Trumbull, "Original Busts and Portraits of Washington" *The Atlantic Magazine*, Oct. 1, 1824; 1:6, 433

> they were executed, the difference of light and shade, and, more particularly, the various periods of his life in which he sat to the above artists; for Washington in his youth did not look as he did in his latter days, any more than any other man does. When he sat for his last portrait to Stewart [sic], he no more looked the man of former years; and having lost his teeth, he was totally disfigured by a most formidable set of artificial ones, which made him ever appear like another person; hence the occasion of all the dissatisfaction about his resemblance.[223]

Trumbull concluded the list by stating that he considered all of Washington's original portraits to look "more or less alike" the man. Not only was he not troubled by their differences, but he saw them as advantageous for future generations because they revealed Washington at different ages and engaged in different parts of his public career. He admitted that even among Washington's life portraits, some were "greatly superior to others," but he was much more concerned about the "shocking counterfeits" increasingly offered by "every pitiful bungler that lifts a tool or a brush, working solely from imagination, without any authority for their misrepresentations and deceptions, and bolstered up by every kind of imposture."[224] The context of these remarks strongly implied that Trumbull felt that Peale's latest portrait belonged in this category.

Unlike Lanzi, Trumbull was entirely confident in his own expertise. Writing in third person with the authority of his institutional position behind him, Trumbull was happy to weigh in further

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[223] Trumbull, "Original Busts and Portraits of Washington" *The Atlantic Magazine,* Oct. 1, 1824; 1:6, 433

[224] Trumbull, "Original Busts and Portraits of Washington" *The Atlantic Magazine,* Oct. 1, 1824; 1:6, 433

on the relative value of Washington's portrait after Peale had "so warmly agitated" the issue. Therefore, following his list of fourteen, Trumbull offered a second, more condensed, list of portraits that he considered to be indispensable, explaining:

> We have drawn up this list of artists, who painted and sculptured him from life, as far as is ascertained; and give the Various circumstances under which they executed their likenesses, that the public may know where to find the true standard, of what were genuine likenesses of Washington, at the respective periods of his life in which they were done; with a comparative view of those originals most worthy of confidence, which we necessarily limit to six of the best artists, who took his likeness at those periods of his life most interesting to us; and which at the time they were done, met the decided approbation of the most competent judges.[225]

This narrowed field of six absolutely essential examples included Houdon's bust, Stuart's unfinished portrait, and four others less well known today. Each entry on this shorter list was followed with a description of the unique features conveyed by the portrayal. Trumbull described Robert Edge Pine's (1730 – 1788) portrait (Fig. 3.7) as capturing Washington's complexion and military attire, Giuseppe Ceracchi's (1751 – 1801) bust (Fig. 3.8) presented the General nearly in the act of speaking, Archibald Robertson's (1765 – 1835) portrait captured his "vivacity and vigour of eye," and Trumbull's own portrait revealed the "air of majesty" embodied in Washington's full

[225] Trumbull, "Original Busts and Portraits of Washington" *The Atlantic Magazine*, Oct. 1, 1824; 1:6

figure. According to Trumbull, each of these portraits held equal claim as the most authentic portraits of Washington at the various times he was represented.

Trumbull argued that to think of whittling the list down any further would be impossible, arguing: "It is a self-evident absurdity to speak of one picture, as being a standard likeness of Washington; for it must take three originals at least to give a tolerable idea of his looks at three differing periods of his life."[226] For Trumbull, Washington's lengthy public career could not be adequately conveyed by an single image because his appearance had changed so dramatically over that time. Those who served under him in the war might prefer the familiarity of an earlier, younger, Washington, while those that had encountered him as a public figure in later years would better recognize his matured countenance. While Trumbull grounded this argument in the issue of Washington's tooth loss and his changing appearance, he also leans on the way each of the portraits illustrate key moments in his biography, and his public transformation from a virile military commander to a wizened statesman. These two roles had very different conventional representational types and it was unlikely that they could both be satisfied simultaneously with a single portrait. However, even whittled down to six finalists, Trumbull's list offered no real solutions for those who could only choose one prototype, such as illustrated biographies or congressional commissions.

[226] Trumbull, "Original Busts and Portraits of Washington" *The Atlantic Magazine*, Oct. 1, 1824; 1:6

3.5 Copies and Composites

Trumbull tried to discredit Peale's claims by arguing that Washington's larger-than-life legacy was irreducible to a single portrait, but this was the very point that Peale's composite method was meant to address. As Delaplaine had justified his illustrated biography by invoking the social imperative to preserve authentic portraits of America's national heroes, a decade later Peale justified his composite portrait by demonstrating a new social imperative to establish an authoritative hierarchy among those portraits. *Repository* had been primarily concerned with preservation. This was a laudable goal in cases where scarcity and misattributions threatened the survivability of a verifiable life portrait, such as in the case of Columbus. But there was no such danger that future generations would lack for want of life portraits of Washington. In fact, the danger was exactly the opposite. With so many portraits available, executed in many a range of media, by artists with diverse levels competence, working in different styles, and representing Washington at a variety of ages, Washington's features threatened to be effaced by the discrepancies among his many likeness. Therefore, the pressing problem for the authenticity of Washington's portraits in the early 19th century was not one of preservation, but of consolidation. Even Trumbull, who defended the validity of all of Washington's life portraits, felt compelled to isolate a select group of exemplars. Given the many competing priorities guiding *Repository*, this was something that it was ill-equipped to resolve.

Peale's composite portrait came at the question of authenticity from the other side by focusing entirely on the task of consolidation. In his studio, he recreated the scenario that he had helped arrange for Delaplaine ten years prior. In this earlier encounter, Delaplaine's expert consultants had debated the relative strengths and weaknesses of the assembled portraits. In the 1820s, Peale proceeded in a similar fashion, but toward a new goal. Here, Peale once again charted

out the relative strengths and weaknesses of these portraits, but he was no longer attempting to select one to honor as the most authentic likeness. Instead, he attempted to filter the best elements of each prototype into a new composite likeness. While Delaplaine had not published the details of his consultants' deliberations, Peale embedded his own into the very fabric of his composite portrait.

Wendy Bellion has pointed out that the way Peale channeled the idea of artistic discernment to justify his composite method was consistent with Reynolds' aesthetic theories.[227] Reynolds had argued that artists could refine their powers of discernment and overcome the deficiencies of nature by studying a sufficiently large number of imperfect examples:

> All the objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon close examination will be found to have their blemishes and defects. […] But it is not every eye that perceives these blemishes. It must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which, by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, that alone can acquire the power of discerning what each wants in particular. […]. By this means, […] he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect. His eye being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original; and what may seem a paradox, he

[227] Bellion, Citizen Spectator, 301.

> learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object.[228]

Using a similar logic, Reynolds likewise argued that students should study the work of a great number of artists because it was only by combining the "excellencies" of many masters that one could learn to exceed them.[229] The validity of Peale's composite relied on both of these ideas. Just as when Peale had placed Houdon's bust under a "selected light" to impress Bushrod Washington, Peale now proposed to leverage his familiarity with Washington and his portraits to highlight their successes and obscure their failures. At the same time, by drawing from the works of so many accomplished artists, Peale's composite attempted to co-opt the authority of his prototypes.

However, there is an important distinction between the way Reynolds conceived of this process and the way Peale applied it in his composite portrait. While Peale clearly adopted Reynold's rhetoric, his goals were very different. As discussed in the introduction, Reynolds was primarily concerned with the pursuit of perfection and beauty and he actively disdained the portraitist's efforts for likeness. While Reynolds had tried to balance the demands of portraiture and the higher attainments of fine art through the idea of "grand manner" portraiture, Peale refashioned Reynold's theory to justify the creation of something new, which he called a "standard likeness."

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[228] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 44.

[229] Reynolds, *Discourses on Art,* 102-103.

A clue to the differences between Peale's and Reynolds' approaches is demonstrated by a quote from Reynolds that Peale annotated for his unpublished artist training manual *Notes of the Painting Room,* which reads:

> The practice of Copying is not entirely to be excluded (he should have said recommended) since the mechanical practice of painting is learned in some degree (he should have omitted the words in "some degree",) by it—let those choice parts only be selected which have recommended the work to notice."[230]

Peale's edits to Reynold's statement here indicate a fundamental disagreement between the two artists on the importance of copying in artistic practice. For Reynolds, copying was a mechanical process of little value, apt to teach bad habits as much as good. For Peale, copying was of paramount importance to both studio practice and artistic development, claiming that, "No artist […] can be sure that he can make a good original picture if he is unable to make a good copy, at least from his own work."[231]

The best way to explain the importance of this difference is to look at how Peale utilized his conception of copying in his composite. Despite the novelty of his approach, Peale neglected to give any comprehensive account of how he actually went about the process. A representative description is found in a letter written by Peale to Thomas Jefferson only weeks after he had first unveiled the portrait to the public. Peale explained:

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[230] The parentheticals were added by Peale, Quoted in Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 168.

[231] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 104.

> Although [Washington] sat for me for an original Portrait in 1795, and both my father & Stuart painted him in the same year, yet neither of these portraits ever satisfied me, nor have they satisfied the friends of Washington—Each possesses something good which the others do not, and each has its own particular faults. In addition to those materials, we have Houdons [sic] bust, which being made by a mask which was taken from the face of Washington himself, furnishes the exact proportions & the forms of the solid parts, tho it be defective in the expression of the soft parts. My portrait is a composition from all of these, taking my father's as a base upon which to build—because it is the only one that represents him with his particular & Characteristic cast of the head.[232]

While Reynolds viewed nature as a series of imperfect accidents that needed to be corrected and idealized by artistic genius, Peale identified correct information contained in each prototype that could be copied, improved, and assembled into a single composite. In this context, the bust seemed to offer a different kind of information due to the artist's reliance on a mask cast directly from Washington's face. Peale argued that the sculpture provided a better model of the immobile features, while the paintings offered more "characteristic" or "expressive" details. In the composite, the accurate proportions of the sculpture could be infused with the liveliness conveyed in the paintings. From the minor triumphs and failures existing alongside each other in

[232] Letter to Jefferson Jan 8, quoted in, Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale*, vol. 3, 355.

Washington's earlier portraits, Peale extracted useful data and used his judgment to combine the data into an improved whole.

While Peale would later claim to have incorporated an unspecified additional number of portraits into the portrait, it seems likely that the three cited here were the primary sources. We can partially gauge how accurately this description matches Peale's actual studio practices by briefly comparing the proportions of his composite portrait against the works that he mentioned.[233] First, by comparing Peale's composite to both his father's and his own 1795 portraits, it is clear that the proportions of the later image have been modified (Fig. 3.9). The nose has been lengthened and the lips lowered, and the hairline now rests somewhere between the two earlier portraits. If Peale proceeded in the manner described in the letter above, one would expect that these changes would have been done in consultation with Houdon's bust, which he argued contained Washington's "exact proportions." And indeed, when Houdon's bust is lined up in similar fashion, the proportions of the composite line up surprisingly well (Fig. 3.10).[234]

There are also a few features in the composite portrait that can be attributed to known sources with some confidence. For example, the angle of the head is more similar to his own 1795

[233] For these comparisons I have overlaid Peale's composite portrait with horizontal lines the correspond to the top of the head, hairline, brow line, pupils, base of the nose, lips, limbus, and lower chin. Alongside this, I have resized different comparative images based on two points, the pupils and the chin. Admittedly, these comparisons are not rigorously systematic. If the comparative images had strong variations in the two specific proportions that I selected, it could have a pronounced effect the validity of the other comparisons. It is in consideration of this possibility that I have selected the pupils and the chin as the control features for this comparison. In various other attempts, I have used the top and bottom of the head, however, this rarely resulted in a productive comparison because the key features of the face rarely lined up well. Either due to the possible variation of the volume of the hair, or a tendency be some artists to neglect carefully rendering the proportions of the forehead, the results were rarely informative. By using the pupils and the lower chin, I have the advantage of sizing based on a near midline of the horizontal elevation of the face and a solid boned extreme edge.

[234] Here I have used two different renditions of Houdon's bust in profile to try and account for any distortions that might have presented themselves when the three-dimensional objects were photographed. The other comparison is a painting of the Mount Vernon in profile by Peale which was included to further test the accuracy of the photographs.

portrait than his father's. Moreover, the composite portrait is generally consistent with Peale's claim that he preferred the top portion of his father's portrait and the bottom portion of his own. The composite transcribes his father's thick eyelid, widow-peaked hairline, and rounded forehead. The shapes around the mouth are more complex and volumetric like his own portrait, but Washington's lower jowls are more shadowed like his father's. The complexion and texture of the face marries the naturalism of one with the idealism of the other. The one detail that doesn't seem to agree with either of the earlier paintings is the way the near eyebrow rounds over the eye socket. Here again the composite seems to take its cues from the Houdon, where Washington's brow rides over the outer ridge.

I suggest that Robert Edge Pine's portrait (Fig. 3.11) may have also served as a source for the composite as it shares many visual similarities with Peale's 1823 portrait. Presented from a comparable angle to Peale's 1795 portrait, but slightly from below, Pine's portrait may offer an even better match for the pose of the composite. The expression and age of Washington are also strikingly similar. Moreover, the distribution of features of Pine's to the composite compare favorably with Peale's, with the nose in particular matching closely. If Peale did look to Pine's portrait in preparing the composite, then there may indeed be other references to portraits outside of the three that Peale mentioned directly by name. Though the exact number of portraits that might be reflected in the composite is unknown, given how prominently the few that have been identified are reflected in the final portrait, it is unlikely that Peale used more than a small handful of prototypes.

As I discussed earlier, C. W. and Rembrandt Peale's 1795 portraits were, in a way, a precursor to the later 1823 composite. The idea of making an attempt to combine the two portraits had occurred to Peale well before 1823. This is not an entirely surprising solution given the limited

sitting time available to them. In *Notes* he gave similar advice to young portrait painters, advising them, "In one or two sittings a good study may be taken from the life; if not satisfactory, another may be taken in a different position; and between these a deliberate choice may be made to transfer & dead color it."[235] Peale argued that works of art were rarely entirely original but often resulted from "many deliberate original, & borrowed studies; copied & combined by the Master spirit into final excellence."[236] Working from initial sketches toward a finished portrait, the angle of the view, the expression of the sitter, the accuracy of the drawing, and the liveliness of the coloring, were all at constant play and open to modification, revision, and combination. Using the same intellectual faculties by which portraitists were expected to "decide how much to adopt, to reject, or to modify in the habitudes of expression" fleetingly observed in their living sitters, these various components were to be skillfully combined into a symbolically resonant and recognizable likeness.[237]

When Peale visited Europe, he found another precedent for combining multiple sources into a single portrait. He explained:

> It is not sufficiently known to American artists how much those of Europe, even the most celebrated, make use of plaster casts in composing & finishing their original paintings […]. I have seen […] Lefevre, in painting the portrait of Denon, [verify] the accuracy of his drawing, by having before him a fine bust by Houdon, which was the more to be relied on, because it was Houdon's practice to

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[235] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 103

[236] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 74.

[237] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 72.

> take a mould [sic] from the living face, as the basis for his modelling."[238]

As the life mask had been capable of standing in for the sitter during certain stages of the bust's modeling, the bust could later be called upon by Lefevre to similarly sit as a supplementary resource for his painting. Following this same line of reasoning, Peale argued, "A portrait to be copied, placed at a suitable distance & elevation, stands in the situation of the original represented, & is to be viewed & copied as a natural object would be."[239] Therefore, when Lanzi accused Peale of putting forward a portrait based on memory against those painted directly from the original himself, Peale retorted that his portrait was indeed painted "from originals at the side of his easel—originals painted by himself and his father in 1795, aided by the study of Houdon's bust."[240]

Trumbull had argued against the need for Peale's composite portrait by stating that all of Washington's life portraits "more or less" resembled him. But as much as Peale highlighted the problems that existed in these portrayals, his composite practice actually placed them in a superior position than most earlier copyists. For example, when Delaplaine sought out a prototype for *Repository,* he was only interested in the single most authentic version to stand in for the absent hero. In contrast, Peale acknowledged the distributed value of all of Washington's portraits, not simply as flawed approximations, but as original sources analogous to Washington's own presence. He argued that each of them contained some aspects directly linked to Washington's

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[238] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 177.

[239] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 76.

[240] *New York American*, Sept., 4, 1824.

person, and like a biographer who compiled their account from disparate sources, he claimed to have judiciously selected the key features necessary to provide an iconic summation.

This way of thinking bridged the gap between Reynolds' aesthetic theory of artistic discernment and the growing 19th-century focus on authenticity in portraiture. Portraits were already standing in for their sitters in more substantive ways, as legible manifestations of their inner character and enduring tokens of their living presence. Peale simply took this one step further, arguing that they could also stand in directly for the portraitist and offer the occasion for a new portrait. Instead of following Reynolds' idea of overcoming imperfect prototypes and creating ideal forms, Peale advanced a practice of combining the partial truths of a number of painted prototypes into one "standard likeness." Peale thus used his artistic prototypes as a second kind of nature. In *Notes,* Peale explained:

> It is only by carefully copying the productions of any artist that a correct conception can be obtained of that Artist's mode of seeing nature, & his manner of execution. When copies of good pictures are thus made, the principles developed should be applied to the Artist's own studies of Nature, either to adopt them, or to modify or deviate from them. […] In copying an excellent piece […] it becomes the duty of the copier, not only to catch their spirit but, as in all other works of Art, to endeavor to improve it in the process of reproduction.[241]

[241] Peale, *Notes of the Painting Room*, 74.

Reynolds had claimed that by developing their faculties of discernment, artists would be able to compose perfected forms from imperfect prototypes, but Peale argued that this cut both ways. As much as artists could learn to idealize through the study of nature, they could also learn to decode the mechanics of a particular artist's interventions by studying their work. Or put another way, an artist sufficiently familiar with the modes and manners of an artistic work could approach it with a corresponding level of transparency and reconstruct the missing details with some measure of confidence.

3.6 Reading Bones

While Peale's notions of artistic copying certainly underlay his composite portrait, it is worth considering another context for his practice. As I mentioned earlier, Peale first encountered portraiture in the context of his father's museum which displayed portraits alongside natural history specimens. For Peale's father, the two branches of knowledge served by each of these sets of objects extended from the same roots. In fact, Peale's peculiar interpretation of Reynolds may have been influenced by the cross-pollination of portraiture and natural history in the Peale Museum. Peale's father is credited with implementing several radical curatorial innovations in his museum that were quickly adopted by other naturalists. Most notably, C. W. Peale did not follow the conventional modes of presenting his animal skins flat or stuffing them with straw. Instead, he developed new taxidermic techniques to more naturalistically stretch his skins over anatomically accurate wooden forms. He then placed these specimens in simulated habitats that reflected the

environmental conditions, diet, and behaviors of each particular species.[242] These practices placed the Peale Museum at the very forefront of natural science displays and granted his specimens an unprecedented level of lifelikeness. C. W. Peale explicitly credited his background as an artist for the way he approached natural history and taxidermy as a, "new kind of painting."[243]

At the turn of the 19th century, naturalists adopted a similar approach to preparing their specimens as Reynolds had employed in his aesthetic theory. Taxidermy was a necessary step for naturalists who wanted to preserve their specimens against the ravages of time, but C. W. Peale took greater care to present them naturalistically and contextualize them in didactic displays. Much like painting, this was a laborious process that relied heavily on both a skilled hand and discriminating eyes. When C. W. Peale successfully exhumed a large cache of Mastodon bones in 1801, Rembrandt and his father undertook the task of reassembling the mixed fragmentary remains of at least three different skeletons. Because the animal was extinct, it was impossible for them to check their work against a living model. This was one of the first such large scale reconstruction of fossil remains ever undertaken, for which the Peales had to draw inferences from the anatomical composition of similar animals.[244] For three months, the Peales worked with sculptor William Rush (1756 – 1833) to sort through the remains and carve wooden replacement parts for any bones that were missing or found to contain "deficiencies."[245] Through this process, the Peales were able to compose two complete skeletons for exhibit.

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[242] Gaudio, "Surface and Depth," 55-71.

[243] Stein, "Charles Willson Peale's Expressive Design," 184.

[244] Barrow, *Nature's Ghost,* 18.

[245] Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame,* 52.

Just as Peale later argued that he could work from Washington's life portraits at the side of his easel in place of the living original, here the bones of multiple mastodons were sorted, supplemented, and arranged in such a way to reveal lost information about the nature and appearance of an absent subject. French naturalist Charles Cuvier's (1769 - 1832) had argued in 1798 that utilizing such educated guesses to make sense of fossil remains constituted a valid scientific approach because all life exhibited a "correlation of parts."[246] Working from the assumption that each component of an animal was uniformly coordinated to best ensure their continued survival, Cuvier was able to reconstruct entire skeletons of unidentified animals from just a few bones, with impressive prescience (Fig. 3.12).

The bones contained clues for knowledgeable naturalists that helped them to decide how they should be properly reassembled, but by the same token, the conclusions that they drew from them became reflected in the structure that they settled on. Therefore, the resultant organization produced a new network of significance for each component. The clearest example of this in the case of the Mastodon was revealed through debates about whether the creature was an herbivore or a carnivore. In 1802, Rembrandt Peale published a treatise on the Mastodon in which he argued that the shape of the teeth and the orientation of the jaw strongly implied that it was the latter.[247] When this interpretation was not accepted by many of his contemporary naturalists, Peale revised his earlier orientation of the skeleton's tusk pointing out defensively (Fig. 3.13), to show them more aggressively pointed down (Fig. 3.14) to root up shellfish.[248] Like his father, Peale saw the

[246] Barrow, *Nature's Ghost*, 40.

[247] Peale, Incognitum,

[248] Thomson, *The Legacy of the Mastodon*, 47 – 54.

pursuits of the artist and the naturalist as being directly related. He argued that creating meaningful visualizations of the natural world required skills of natural discernment, which could, if need be, even produce images of things never directly seen by the artist. He explained:

> In the exploring expedition of Lewis and Clark, no individual of his party had the least knowledge of drawing; and all the illustrations which embellish the history of that expedition, were engraved from designs made by my father from the skins of animals which he first had to put into their natural forms; and an interesting cataract was drawn entirely from a verbal description.[249]

A resourceful artist sufficiently knowledgeable about natural forms, like his father, could approach animal skins and verbal descriptions with a certain sense of transparency. They could confidently "guess" as Cuvier had and supplement the fragmentary evidence that they did have with additional information gleaned from other sources to compose absent anatomies.

Peale approached the task of copying in a very similar way. He argued that artists should treat a painting to be copied as if it was the subject that it depicted and subsequently strive to improve on it through skills of artistic discernment. This mirrors Cuvier's theory of "correlation of parts," by which a more detailed and informative illustration of the original could be formed by supplementing inconclusive fragmentary remains with evidence from similar cases. The analysis of his composite above hints at how this process worked in practice, but Peale continued to evolve on it in his approach to Washington's portraits afterward.

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[249] Peale, "Portraiture," *The Crayon*, vol. 4, no. 2 (February, 1857): 44-45.

Throughout the 1850s, Peale conducted a series of traveling lectures in cities across the northeastern United States. In the two-hour lecture, Peale recounted in detail the circumstances surrounding Washington's most famous portraits. These performances were popularly attended, due in part to rising interest in Washington as a hero of American unification during the tumultuous years leading up to the Civil War, but also due to Peale's penchant for dramatic showmanship.[250] Rather than illustrating his presentation with readily available small-scale prints after these works, Peale carefully executed his own highly finished copies of the originals. In these copies Peale standardized their scale and cropped their compositions within uniform ovoid frames and trimmed away any compositional distractions.[251] As he discussed both the history and relative merits of each portrait, Peale delighted audiences by illuminating the corresponding portrait-copy with a special gas lamp designed to focus light directly on each face.[252] These lectures culminated with the exhibition of a copy of Peale's own composite portrait of Washington along with a detailed account of its mysterious origins.

The portrait copies that he used in these lectures were not presented as composites but they still demonstrate the same types of interventions that were seen in his 1823 portrait. In the copy that he made of Robert Edge Pine's portrait (Fig. 3.15) Peale replaced Pine's painterly brushstrokes with a tight and smooth finish. The cheeks have been filled out and modeling of the skin is much more descriptive, indicating a range of volumes not present in the original source, particularly around the mouth. Peale even added a prominent philtrum under the nose. Similar additions and

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[250] Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame,* 232.

[251] For example, he removed Washington's hand and cane from his copy after the portrait by Robert Pine.

[252] Miller, *In Pursuit of Fame,* 232.

modifications are present in the copy that he made from his father's first portrait of Washington (Fig. 3.16). Here the changes are even more severe with Peale taking his father's relatively flat rendition and imagining it under a "selective light" that dramatically emphasizes every subtle shift in the original's surface as shadows and reflections interplay in an intricate display of naturalism. In each case, Peale took the original portrait, as his father had taken the skins brought back by Lewis and Clark, and stretched them into new shapes. When he encountered anything that he felt to be a failing in his prototype, he confidently stepped in to correct it, just as he had re-carved the missing and imperfect bones of the Mastodon skeleton. As an expert of Washington's portraits, long accustomed to the many prototypes available to him, Peale felt empowered to apply his own discerning vision to elevate the forms that he composed in his copy.

To modern audiences, the changes that Peale implemented in his copies will likely cause them to be seen as disingenuous to their prototypes, untrustworthy, and subjective. But this response is also informed by modern notions of more seemingly objective image-making techniques like photography. These changes were also reflected in a new range of practices that began to dominate scientific approaches during the second half of the century. In Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's comprehensive study of these developments, they argued:

> Objectively the thing was as new as objectivity the word in the mid-nineteenth century. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, men of science began to fret openly about a new kind of obstacle to knowledge: themselves. Their fear was that the subjective self was prone to prettify, idealize, and, in the worst case, regularize observations to fit theoretical expectations: to see what it hoped to see. Their predecessors a generation or two before had also been

> beset by epistemological worries, but theirs were about the variability of nature, rather than the projections of the naturalist. As atlas makers, the earlier naturalists had sworn by selection and perfection: select the most typical or even archetypical skeleton, plant, or other object under study, then perfect that exemplar so that the image can truly stand for the class, can truly represent it. By circa 1860, however, many atlas makers were branding these practices as scandalous, as "subjective." They insisted, instead, on the importance of effacing their own personalities and developed techniques that left as little as possible to the discretion of either artist or scientist, in order to obtain an "objective view."[253]

While Peale and his father saw art and science as utilizing similar methods and pursuing similar purposes, a divide developed later in the century and portraiture was on the fault line. As naturalists, they relied on their personal knowledge to prepare their specimens to stand as exemplars of their class. As portraitists, they telescoped the variability of their sitter's over the length of a sitting into a single immobile image. For those like C. W. Peale, who saw the natural world as the work of a divine creator, natural history offered a chance to see the trace of the mind of God.[254] At the same time, the precepts of physiognomy encouraged people to look at portraits

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[253] Daston and Galison, *Objectivity,* 34-5.

[254] One of the central debates at this time was whether creatures like the Mastodon could be extinct. Cuvier argued persuasively in favor of the theory, but for earlier naturalists like C. W. Peale, the idea was often seen as incompatible with their world view. Thomas Jefferson had argued that, "Such is the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken." Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* 1787, See Barrow, *Nature's Ghost.*

with analogous expectations, promising that valuable information about a subject's characteristic nature could be revealed through clues recorded in their likeness. Later in the century, the more objective metric of phrenological measurement would replace the more intuitive practice of physiognomic perception, and photography would transpose a likeness without reliance on artistic discernment.[255]

Discussing these developments later in life Peale defended his somewhat antiquated views on the role of portrait painters in a post-photographic world. Responding to a recent claim that photography offered potential patrons "likenesses that are truer, cheaper, and quicker done,'"[256] Peale contended:

> Profiles cut with the Physignotrace, sillouettes, and pencil sketches, as well as dagerreotypes and photographs, all have their merit […]. The task of the portrait painter is quite another thing—an effort of skill, taste, mind, judgment—demanding the opportunity of *study*, during many sittings […] to render permanent the transient expression of character with which may be the most agreeable. This requires all of the resources of his Art, all his experience in the manipulation of his materials, and in the study of character and expression. […]. It is comparatively an easy task to paint a striking likeness of a person sitting silent and thoughtful, without emotion; but to catch the expression of the sitter engaged in animated

[255] See Lukasik, *Discerning Characters.*

[256] Rembrandt Peale, "Portraiture," *The Crayon,* vol. 4, no. 2 (February, 1857): 44-45.

> conversation […] and to mark every part of the countenance with a harmony and *unity* of sentiment, is only to be expected from the hand and mind of an experienced artist.[257]

For Peale, it was the same for both natural history and portraiture; reading the bones of a subject was an interpretive endeavor, and his composite portrait was the very consummation of this belief.

3.7 Conclusion

In the end, despite Peale's best efforts, he was unable to establish his composite portrait as a "standard likeness." Many of his contemporaries took issue with how he tried to undercut the authority of Washington's life portraits, relied on testimonials to promote his own project, and claimed that anything other than a life portrait could possess Washington's most authentic likeness. Peale still achieved many smaller scale victories for his portrait during his life. He successfully sold around 80 copies of it and established himself as an authority on Washington's portraits. But his 1823 composite portrait fell quickly out of favor at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1913, Charles Henry Hart lambasted it as the single most "spurious," "fictitious," and "pertinacious," portrait of Washington ever executed, arguing that "unless implicit reliance can be placed on the authenticity of the likeness, a portrait is worthless."[258] For Hart, much as it had been for Alois Rigel a decade earlier, authenticity in portraiture was closely associated with the concept

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[257] Rembrandt Peale, "Portraiture," *The Crayon,* vol. 4, no. 2 (February, 1857): 44-45.

[258] Hart, "Frauds in Historic Portraiture," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1913.*

of an objective view. Therefore, when he read Peale's claims regarding the authenticity of his composite, they appeared so improbable that they struck Hart as deceitful and malicious. However, Hart's criticism was misdirected. Peale had never tried to pass his portrait off as a life portrait or to hide the composite process that he used to create it. In fact, his entire claim was based on the premise that his composite process would add value to the likeness that he depicted.

Moreover, the idea of the composite was not really the problem anyway. The root of Hart's criticism was that Peale's painting was especially susceptible to subjective influences, but some measure of that same criticism threatened nearly any other pre-photographic portraits as well. The validity of Peale's composite method was reinforced in 1885 when photographer W. Curtis Taylor demonstrated various experiments with composite photography for the American Philosophical Society and inadvertently translated the thesis of Peale's composite project into a new medium. Inspired by Francis Galton's "generic images," Taylor combined 17 portraits of Washington into three different composite photographs (Fig. 3.17) in an effort to overcome the potential subjective influences contained in each of the sources. Taylor explained, "These are the efforts of a number of cotemporaneous artists to present each his own conception of one particular subject, and the historical value of this method of averaging results is beyond computation. It is to portraiture what the sifting of the testimonies of a multitude of eye-witnesses is to the discovery of one set of facts."[259] Like Peale, Taylor identified the lack of agreement between the various examples, attributed those differences to inaccuracies in each source, and proposed to solve the issue by combining their features into a single image. However, unlike Peale, Taylor did not try to compose

[259] Taylor, "On Composite Photography," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 22, no. 120, 360-362.

this image through long attenuated skills of discerning vision, but rather utilized a mechanical process in an attempt to remove any possibility that his subjectivity would influence the results.

In the end, the most lasting influence of Peale's 1823 composite portrait was the instability that it caused in the public's passive acceptance of Washington's portraits. While the solution that he proposed was rejected later in the century, the way that Peale pointed to the failings of Washington's other portraits anticipated the anxieties that a future, more objectively-minded audience would hold against such manually-produced portraits. Peale claimed that there were no authentic portraits of Washington before he created his own, and while many like Lanzi and Trumbull rejected the argument, later audiences would become more sympathetic to the idea. Peale's project was simply the first of many such efforts to create something more concrete and authentic from the representations that Washington left behind.[260]

[260] The most prominent recent example of this was Mount Vernon's 2010 forensic reconstruction series, which used state-of-the-art technologies to compile data from a number of Washington's portraits. This data was then manipulated a sophisticated series of algorithms and computer models by a physical anthropologist to produce three different lifelike models of Washington corresponding to key moments in his biography. The project was prompted by a desire to provide visitors a chance to see, through the power of modern science, what Washington "really" looked like. See, Schwartz, "Putting a Face on the First President," *Scientific American,* February (2006), 84-91.

4.0 Unmasking Jean-Antione Houdon's Washington

4.1 Remembering Forgotten Histories

In the last chapter, I discussed the problems confronting Rembrandt Peale's 1823 posthumous composite of George Washington, concluding that the representational paradigm through which he composed it relied on a range of aesthetic and scientific approaches to image-making that did not translate well for later audiences. In this chapter, I will examine a reverse case in which a class of portraits of Washington became recognized as having an exclusive quality of authenticity for reasons quite different from those recognized by their initial audience. Across the same timeline that Peale's portrait became less comprehensible, another set of portraits became comprehensible in a new way.

On March 31, 1873, the Senate of Virginia resolved to commission a history of their prized pedestrian statue of George Washington sculpted by Houdon (Fig. 4.1). This action was part of a larger project to reinforce the floor of the Virginian General Assembly Building in order to allow the statue to return to its original location in the rotunda. The resulting 23-page book, written by the State Librarian Col. Sherwin McRae (1805 – 1889), was titled, *The Houdon Statue, Its History and Value*.[261] Published nearly a century after Washington first sat for Houdon, McRae's brief history details the happenings surrounding the statue from its commission to its reinstallation.

[261] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*.

Benefiting greatly from the readily available materials on the subject, McRae's account is richly supported by official documents, testimonials, and personal correspondence.

As the title suggests, McRae was not simply interested in recounting the historical narrative surrounding the statue, but also in articulating its value. The promotional tone of the book is hardly surprising given the nature of its commission and the official position of its author. But even the primary sources that McRae consulted rarely offered anything short of unequivocal praise for Houdon's statue. This near universal approbation had been a hallmark of both critics and scholars throughout the intervening period during which Houdon's statue had become increasingly renowned as an especially noteworthy likeness of Washington.[262] Yet, by the time McRae assembled his history, the particular qualities for which the statue was praised had changed substantially from those identified by its initial audience. While the statue had long been hailed as an insightful characterization by a leading artist in the eighteenth century, later scholars like McRae instead emphasized its material relation to Washington, casting it as, "the most perfect similitude of Washington that has ever been made."[263]

This change is partially explained by the mounting social pressures on early American national portraiture. By the mid-nineteenth century Houdon's statue of Washington began to play an increasingly prominent and exclusive role in safeguarding the national memory of Washington. It was no longer enough for the statue to simply offer *an* authentic likeness of Washington among a class of comparable portraits. As the hierarchical ordering of Washington's portraits began to settle throughout the 19th century, Houdon's Washington was increasingly seen as *the* authentic

[262] See, Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs*.

[263] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*, 13.

likeness. Key to this new attribution was the changing way its history was understood. Surprisingly, much of this history was not well known before the second half of the 19th century when a number of first, second, and third hand accounts of the statue's creation were first published. Wielding the fruits of these recent revelations and adopting rhetoric that had become popular for promoting copies after Houdon's likeness, McRae articulated a history of the sculpture that left little doubt as to its absolute authenticity. McRae's book represents the culmination of this transitional period and provided a template for a new approach to Houdon's likeness of Washington—an approach that still often dominates discussions of the work today.[264]

The premise of McRae's argument was that there was a direct connection between the history of the statue and the value of its likeness. In order to demonstrate this, McRae quoted a rare example of dissenting criticism of Houdon's Washington published in 1859. The author, Henry Tuckerman (1813 – 1871), bemoaned that the "implicit fidelity now evident in the busts of our leading sculptors, was not then in vogue, and the artists of the day were rather adept in idealizing than in precise imitation of nature. Therefore, the result of Houdon's labors, though in general satisfactory, cannot be used with the mathematical exactitude as a guide which greater attention to minutiae would have secured."[265] Tuckerman's assessment of Houdon's tendency toward idealization was not uncommon, but applying it to the Washington statue ran counter to the subsequently well-practiced narrative of its conception. In fact, McRae found Tuckerman's

[264] Several will be covered in due course, such as the recent forensic reconstructions of Washington commissioned by Mount Vernon.

[265] Irving, *Life of Washington*, 313.

comment "so remarkable" that it could "only be accountable […] that the writer was but partially acquainted with the history."[266]

While Tuckerman found the idealism that he identified in the sculpture to be "generally satisfactory," McRae took a harder position against idealization in portraiture, claiming that "no portrait of Washington can be satisfactory about which there is a reasonable doubt as to its similitude. The more beautiful and artistic the less satisfactory, if it professes a resemblance which it does not possess."[267] By placing "satisfaction" with the statue as directly contingent on its "resemblance," McRae circumvented Tuckerman's stylistic assessment as ancillary to the fundamental question at stake for the value of the statue: the surety of its connection to the body of Washington. Therefore, McRae's history is, at its heart, a history of the proximity of the statue to Washington's person, a history that he felt proved without a doubt that the likeness was executed with "absolute exactness."

To this end, McRae emphasized Houdon's commitment to working closely from his model, recounting how he rejected the initial proposal for him to work from a full-length painting of Washington which could have been easily transported to the artist's studio in France. Instead, Houdon demanded that he be allowed to work directly from Washington—a stipulation that almost dismantled the entire commission due to the added expenses of a life insurance fund to protect the artist's family should he perish on the transatlantic voyage.[268] Moreover, McRae argued that Houdon's willingness to execute the statue in contemporary dress rather than the more traditional

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[266] McRae, *The Houdon Statue,* 12.

[267] McRae, *The Houdon Statue,* 12.

[268] Letter, Jefferson to Patrick Henry, July 15, 1785, Quoted in Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs,* 197.

classical garb signaled his commitment to unvarnished truth for this particular commission.[269] But most of all, the key detail of this history that Tuckerman's account failed to mention was Houdon's reliance on a life mask of Washington in the creation of his statue (Fig. 4.2). For McRae, and many future scholars, Houdon's use of a life mask was the defining attribute of the statue because it created an immutable link between the form of the stone and the actual volumes of Washington's face. [270]

However, despite the centrality of the life mask in contemporary interpretations of the Houdon's likeness of Washington, there has been very little critical evaluation of how the history of its creation was written. In this chapter I will trace the history of the association of the life mask with Houdon's likeness of Washington. I argue that this history demonstrates that the narrative that has been adopted by many scholars and institutions tells us more about the priorities and market forces of the 19th century than it does about Houdon's 18th century productions. Therefore, I will consider the applicability of the claims made later in the development of this association between mask and likeness, such as those levied by McRae, to Tuckerman's earlier interpretations, as well as how they relate to the artistic conventions of portraiture in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Tracing these developments will provide insight into the changing role of American national portraiture and standards of authenticity along the same timeline.

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[269] In reality, it was Washington who suggested that Houdon utilize contemporary dress for the statue, citing the recent work of Benjamin West. While Houdon complied in the case of the pedestrian statue, he used classical dress for the bust version of the work that he sent to the Salon. Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs,* 206.

[270] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*, 12.

4.2 The Mystery of the Life Mask

The most obvious issue with the history of the life mask as it is presented today is that it was virtually unknown to Houdon's initial audience. At the time Houdon's statue was first installed in the Virginian General Assembly Building in 1796, the existence of the life mask was entirely undocumented. Even a well-informed review of Houdon's Washington published in London two years later did not mention the life mask, despite its author having toured Houdon's studio where the mask was kept.[271] The first known mention of the life mask, in either manuscript or publication, did not appear until 1824, in a pamphlet written by none other than Rembrandt Peale.[272] There is no definitive evidence that Washington himself ever mentioned Houdon taking his life mask and the event is conspicuously absent from his diary entries for Houdon's visit in October 1785.[273] Even then, popular knowledge of the life mask does not appear to have taken hold until much later and the few accounts that do acknowledge its existence are contradictory. As we have seen, even Tuckerman's otherwise competent history of Washington's portraits failed to identify the life mask in 1859. This could partly be explained by the surprisingly late arrival of corroborating accounts of the existence of the life mask. There is evidence that by 1841 there was a family tradition in Washington's household that held that Houdon had indeed taken a life mask, but only one first-hand account by someone claiming to have witnessed the event ever

[271] The Monthly Magazine and British Register, Vol. 6, Part 2, Sept. 1798, Pa. 202-205.

[272] Peale, "Pamphlet"

[273] See, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-04-02-0002-0010-0010. The Mount Vernon website erroneously concludes that Washington's diary entry from Oct. 10th describes the preparatory steps of the mask's creation because it details Houdon's process for mixing plaster of paris, However, there are many other reasons why Houdon may have mixed plaster on this occasion besides the production of a life mask, including the creation of a mold of the terracotta bust or the casting of a plaster copy.

published.[274] This account wasn't published until 1856, when Washington's adopted grandson George Washington Parke Custis (1781 – 1857) recounted observing the procedure, an event that had occurred nearly 70 earlier when he was four years old.[275] As I will discuss shortly, not only was Custis's account intentionally exaggerated to capitalize on a rumor that had recently become a source of public interest, but it wasn't even his own story in the first place. He had stolen it from his elder sister. There is a notable disconnect here between the way that the existence of the life mask has now become the single most important fact used to understand Houdon's sculpture and the fact that it was completely overlooked by nearly all early commentators on the statue. McRae himself puzzled over this fact, admitting, "It seems almost incredible, that nearly thirty years should have elapsed after the completion of the Houdon statue before its true character was understood."[276]

This gap in historical knowledge of the life mask is a mystery with real stakes for our understanding of changing notions of authenticity in early American portraiture. The effect of this singular fixation on the mask is clearly discernable in the changing assessment of Houdon's work. Without identifying the life mask, early commentators like Tuckerman freely evaluated the formal characteristics of the Houdon's Washington as they would any other available portrait, with many voicing preference for a competing bust.[277] For McRae and later historians, the existence of the

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[274] Longacre inquired around this time to verify a claim made by Stuart in 1825. Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 26.

[275] Versions of this narrative are found in Barry, "Report," and a letter by J Grant Wilson in Spirit of 76, March 1895. An firsthand statement by Custis that somewhat corroborates the other two can be found in "Washington Globe," Sept. 14, 1854.

[276] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*, 14.

[277] Irving, *Life of Washington.*

life mask overturned the conclusions of such approaches by imbuing the statue with a special category of connection to Washington not found in any other likeness of him. With his knowledge of the life mask, McRae retroactively reinterpreted the earlier reception history of the bust to support his forgone conclusions. Therefore, details such as Houdon's travel to America, his use of contemporary dress, and most importantly, the creation of a life mask proved to McRae the artist's uncompromising commitment to a type of raw naturalism not typical in portraiture of that time, an anomaly of the 18th century that was fortunately uniquely serviceable to the standards of authenticity of the 19th century.

However, while the narrative of the life mask provides a convenient mechanism for later scholars to filter through the nebulous category of then-authentic 18th-century portraits of Washington to satisfy the 19th-century notion of a "head par excellence," it leaves many questions unanswered.[278] First of all, the mere existence of the life mask does not establish a compelling relationship between it and the resultant statue. The mask shows no signs of subsequent casting or pointing that would have been necessary to transfer the form to another medium, so how exactly did Houdon utilize the mask in his sculptures?[279] Why was the mask forgotten for so long, and why did the possibility of its existence gain so much traction when it reemerged in the second half of the nineteenth century? Moreover, how does the mask justify the centrality of the question it was most called upon to answer, namely, why did it become so important to identify a singular "head par excellence" in the first place?

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[278] Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 25.

[279] Meighan, "In Pursuit of Physical Evidence," 52-54.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the imperative to identify the most authentic portraits of significant American figures extended well beyond Houdon's statue of Washington. Beginning in the first decade of the 19th century, American periodicals and biographers frequently debated the merits of noteworthy portraits in service of establishing a clear foundation for future generations to know the appearances of those responsible for the establishment of their new nation.[280] As the founding generation grew older in the following decades, the nation became acutely aware that the living memory of the revolutionary period was soon to fade away, especially in the wake of the coincidentally simultaneous deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in 1826 on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Portraits of such early Americans no longer served to simply commemorate their sitters' achievements, but also became seen as irreplaceable historical records of their presence. This function became even more important as popular acceptance of the foundational tenets of physiognomy and phrenology began to shape the discourse of appearance in America, establishing the head as an essential source for gaining knowledge of a person.[281] These pressures were manifest in stakes that McRae placed on his validation of Houdon's statue: "Art will now have its recognized standard, and history its authenticated and unquestioned record; and science may approach this statue as it did the living man, to enquire the form and measurement of the person which manifest such intellectual and moral phenomena, and the relations of material shape to a character which has no parallel in history."[282] As portraiture became an increasingly central

[280] See Gordon, "Golden Age of Illustrated Biography."

[281] *See* Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*.

[282] McRea, *The Houdon Statue*, 14.

component of national identity and memory, verifying the quality of the records worthy of preservation and promotion became a crucial critical endeavor.

There were other forces at work as well. The first lithograph was published in the United States in 1821, replacing the more rudimentary engraving techniques and opening the door to a greatly expanded market for portrait prints.[283] The increasing availability of high quality portrait reproductions of American worthies finally allowed Americans to emulate the fashionable explosion of portrait print collecting that had swept England at the end of the 18th century. But this also led to stiff competition between established artists, burgeoning portrait galleries, and increased domestic print production. And this competition, in turn, encouraged a style of promotional rhetoric that sought to legitimize a marketable likeness at the expense of its potential competitors.

In fact, the root of McRae's claims about the legitimacy of the life mask were first articulated within this market-driven rhetoric. Unlike Houdon's public sculpture, which received continual attention after it was installed in the Virginia Assembly Hall, the mask was hidden away in the artist's studio. Upon Houdon's death in 1828 it was purchased by the Philadelphian lawyer and author Robert Walsh (1785 – 1859).[284] The mask is not listed separately in the executor's catalog and was probably bought as part of a large set of objects under the title "Un grand nombre de masques de personnages célèbres, la plupart moulés de leur vivant"[285] Sometime before Walsh left for Europe in 1836, the mask transferred briefly into the possession of a Philadelphian stone-

[283] Jackson, "Bass Otis, America' First Lithographer."

[284] Pettrich, "Memorandum," Also see, Lochemes, *Robert Walsh*, and Woodall, "The Relationship of Robert Walsh, Jr."

[285] Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon*, 266.

cutter named John Struthers (1786 – 1851).[286] In 1837, Ferdinand Pettrich (1798 – 1872), a struggling sculptor and recent German immigrant, began working for Struthers to help carve sepulchral works, including a new sarcophagus to hold Washington's remains. By 1839 Pettrich was working toward securing a lucrative commission for a monument depicting Washington, for which he acquired the mask from his employer.[287] Pettrich's financial struggles were dire and it is unlikely that he could have offered much in exchange for the mask.[288] Despite the historic value often attributed to it, this early history does not demonstrate that much value was placed on the mask before it came into Pettrich's possession, and being only a partial cast of Washington's face it was clearly a meager model for a full length statue.

But what the mask lacked as a prototype, it made up for as a popular curiosity. Pettrich clearly made his source known in pursuit of the commission. The first published mention of the mask after it left Houdon's studio appears in a description of the model that Pettrich presented for the commission (Fig. 4.3) in the *Saturday Courier,* stating that the features "are copied from an original cast of the face of the great and good man."[289] His model drew "large crowds" when it was put on display in Independence Hall.[290] Was this interest in Pettrich's sculpture partly the result of the mystique provided by the life mask? It is difficult to gauge the effect of Pettrich's use

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[286] Woodall, "The Relationship of Robert Walsh, Jr.," 219.

[287] Stehle, "Fredinand Pettrich in America." and Pettrich, "Memorandum."

[288] After failing to be awarded an earlier commission he had to petition Congress for a partial payment for the work he had invested in the competition on account of his misunderstanding of the judicial process, see Stehle, "Fredinand Pettrich in America."

[289] Quoted in "Emanuel Leutze's Three Masks of Washington," in *Pennsylvania History,* July 1971, no 3, pp 298.

[290] It is unclear exactly which model was being referred to here, but a plaster model by Pettrich made in preparation for the unfinished monument is currently housed at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art.

of the life mask on the reception of his work other than to say that it was mentioned by the author of the *Saturday Courier* article. However, the possibility of Pettrich's use of a life mask in this case did not lead the author to make any of the grandiose claims that would be taken up later by McRae.

While Pettrich ultimately abandoned the commission in favor of other pursuits, it is clear that he valued the mask highly and, unlike Robert Walsh and John Struthers before him, he retained it until his death in 1882. Pettrich refused to sell it despite continued financial difficulties later in life and reportedly received several "offers of considerable sums" in exchange for it. The back of the mask still bears the mark he placed on it "Property of F Pettrich" (Fig. 4.4).[291] He even took the precaution of recording a signed memorandum in 1839 relating the provenance of the mask which was sold along with the mask by Pettrich's widow to the American Sculptor W. W. Story (1819 – 1895) in 1882. According to Story, Pettrich would bring out the mask whenever visitors would come to his house and even favored his most cherished guests by gifting them one of Washington's hairs plucked from the surface of the mask.[292] While Houdon did not need to lean on the existence of Washington's life mask to grant authority to his productions, it served as a useful tool of legitimization for Pettrich. But Pettrich also began to value it beyond its studio function with added reverence for its historical connection to Washington's body.[293]

Artists later in the century were able to unify these ideas to even more effectively leverage their own copies after Houdon. The American market for authentic portraits of national figures

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[291] Story, "The Mask of Washington."

[292] Story, "The Mask of Washington."

[293] Story, "The Mask of Washington."

was very competitive in the first half of the 19th century and even though Washington sat for a large number of original portraits during his lifetime, demand for his likeness far outstripped the number of authentic "life portraits" available for purchase. But while Washington's painted portraits were commonly multiplied through copied paintings and prints, three-dimensional works were a lot harder to come by.

Sculpture was generally adopted more slowly than painting in America for a myriad of reasons, including barriers of cost, training, materials, and reluctant governmental patronage of the arts. This meant that there were substantially fewer sculptural representations of Washington than painted ones. By the time demand for such works could sustain local artists, those hoping to tap into the growing market for either monumental and mantel-sized Washingtons had to make do without having their subject available for a sitting. Therefore, they had to rely on whatever other prototypes were available to them. Pettrich luckily had the life mask on hand with which to work. Other less fortunate artists actively sought out especially worthy likenesses to emulate, for which one of Houdon's many renditions of Washington was a popular choice. Copies based on such works were produced by "most American sculptors of note" and had become so ubiquitous by the mid-nineteenth century that "commercial 'Houdons' in bronze, marble and plaster [could] be bought in most cities of the world."[294] In this market, the narrative of the life mask became a convenient way for artists working from these sources to articulate the value of their prototype and distinguish their work from their competition's.

However, this version of the narrative was not always the most beneficial course. For example, when Clark Mills (1810 – 1883) received permission in 1848 to take a cast of the revered

[294] Morgan, *Life Portraits of George Washington*, 111.

Mount Vernon bust of Washington made by Houdon from life (Fig. 4.5), he made no mention of the life mask. Instead, he inscribed each copy with a note explaining that the original bust was taken "from the living face of Washington."[295] While Mills probably knew of the existence of the life mask from his time at Mount Vernon, he preferred instead to emphasize that the bust on which his work was based had been made in Washington's presence. More important for Mills than the relationship shared by all of Houdon's Washingtons to a life mask was the more exclusive privilege he had obtained to take a cast of a rare and fragile bust created by Houdon from life. In other words, the value of his copy did not stem from the mechanical accuracy of a life mask, but from the Mount Vernon bust's status as a life portrait, being made at the hands of a preeminent eighteenth-century master.

When it came to official governmental commissions, the standards of determining authenticity were often more stringent. After the statue of Washington executed by Antonio Canova was destroyed in a fire that broke out in the North Carolina State Capitol Building in 1831, the Virginia General Assembly began considering ways to safeguard Houdon's statue of Washington. In 1853 they hired the local artist William James Hubard (1807 – 1862) to create a cast of it (Fig. 4.6). In exchange for this service Hubard was guaranteed the exclusive right to sell casts of the Houdon statue for seven years. When Hubard had bronze copies ready for sale three years later, the Governor of Virginia proposed that the state should purchase one to place in the Military Institute at Lexington, Virginia.[296]

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[295] Morgan, *Life Portraits of George Washington*, 111.

[296] McRea, *The Houdon Statue*, 11, and Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs*, 222.

The state government at the time took the task of endorsing a particular likeness of Washington very seriously. The Committee on Arts and Science released a 24-page report recommending the purchase before it was authorized.[297] The report explained that Hubard had been required to "produce the proofs in his possession necessary to convince [the] Committee of its authenticity," including "copies of original letters, written by Washington himself, Franklin, Jefferson and the artist Houdon" relating to "the original cast made from the person of Washington."[298] In the words of the committee, this was necessary "in order to prevent the possibility of a doubt existing in the public mind, and to allay any cavil that might arise among artists, or those claiming already to be in possession of authentic copies of Washington, differing in almost every essential particular, from the statue of Houdon."[299]

It is interesting to note that while the original documents reproduced in the report indeed shed light on many of the details surrounding the original commission of Houdon's statue, they were less compelling in regard to the history of the life mask. Not only was the life mask not documented in any of the original letters, or in Washington's diary, but the only account cited in the report that discussed the mask at all was nothing more than a popular unfounded anecdote that had recently gained traction. According to the report, Washington had obliged Houdon with much more than simply sitting for a mask; rather, "Washington did permit himself to be laid nude upon a table, and buried in plaster from head to foot; the sculptor remarking, after the operation, that he

[297] Barry, "Report."

[298] Barry, "Report," 2.

[299] Barry, "Report," 2.

would transmit him just as he was, for he was too grand an object, and too glorious a character to trust to the dictation of art, or embellishment of fancy."[300]

The apocryphal tale that Houdon took a full body nude cast of Washington began spreading in the 1840s, and proved all the more potent through its sheer absurdity in the absence of any other known accounts of the creation of the life mask to refute them. Eleanor Parke Lewis (1779 – 1854), Washington's step-granddaughter found the myth particularly upsetting.[301] Such misremembered anecdotes were common regarding the mask at this time. A similarly erroneous account claiming that James Madison had been called to act as an official witness of the life mask being made began in the 1860s as a mischaracterization of Benson Lossing's (1813 – 1891) 1859 description of Madison's visit to Mount Vernon while Houdon was in residence.[302] Not only were such anecdotes frequently propagated by artists like Hubard to promote their own productions, but without any other evidence of the event, they became the primary medium through which the public was to be persuaded about the mask's creation.

In promoting his cast of Houdon's Washington, Hubard leaned much more heavily on the central importance of the connection between the life mask and his model than either Pettrich or Mills had before. But at the same time, much of the resulting report focused on other qualifications as well. The report emphasized Houdon's achievements as an artist, discussing the success and approbation awarded to several of his other works at length. Despite claiming that Houdon tried to minimize "art or embellishment" through the taking of a life mask, the committee apparently

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[300] Barry, "Report," 4.

[301] Letter from Eleanor Parke Lewis, Dec. 3rd 1849, transcript in the Morgan Library archives.

[302] Seymour, "Houdon's Washington at Mount Vernon Re-Examined." 152, note 25. Also Lossing, *Mount Vernon and its Associations*, 221-229.

did not find the sculptor's artistic talents and his mechanical processes to be mutually exclusive. The report further qualified the work by demonstrating the unimpeachable character of Houdon, even going so far as to express the artist's fervent support for the principles of the American Revolution. The meandering range of support offered in the report attempted to unify the earlier assessments of Houdon's work with the newly popularized details of the life mask, but this ultimately made the precise role of the life mask somewhat ambiguous. Why should these details matter if the value of the bust was dependent on a lack of artistic intervention?

In contrast, when Maurice J Power (1836 – 1902), proprietor of the National Fine Arts Foundry, collaborated with New York sculptor William R. O'Donovan (1844 – 1920) to mass produce bronze copies of the Mount Vernon bust (Fig. 4.7) a few decades later in 1877, the designers were now completely unconcerned with Houdon's artistic qualifications. In a short two-page pamphlet published to promote their busts, they dispensed with the idea of a mediating life mask entirely, claiming instead that the original bust was itself "cast from the head and shoulders of Washington."[303] O'Donovan argued that

> A cast made from nature, while its qualities are far from artistic ones, has an integrity that a true artist would no more think of disturbing than he would think of painting over a photograph. A capable artist may evolve from either a photograph or a cast a portrait bearing all of the essential truth that either of them have, and knowing their defects, add much that they are capable of giving."[304]

[303] HSP, "National Fine Arts Foundry," 1.

[304] HSP, "National Fine Arts Foundry," 1.

It is important to emphasize that in the above quotation, they were referring to themselves as the "capable artists" who could correct the cast, not Houdon, whose role had been essentially reduced to mere cast maker. This was emphasized in the second page of the pamphlet which contained reproductions of letters solicited by Power testifying to the surety of a portrait based on a "life cast," in which Houdon's name was not once mentioned.

As we have seen, a number of 19th century sculptors sought to overcome the absence of Washington's body and justify their selection of Houdon's likeness as an adequately authoritative prototype for their own copies through its relation to the life mask. But here, Power and O'Donovan took this claim even further. They argued that a cast taken from life was analogous to a photograph in a way that constituted a category of record with so much integrity that it completely dispensed with the need for Washington's body. Therefore, any work based on it, given it was the product of competent artists such as themselves, could thus exceed the authority of a life portrait.

This claim is structured very similarly to Peale's earlier argument that Washington's life portraits could be treated as reliable "originals" for the basis of a new and more authentic portrait, but the terms of what qualifies as worthy original have shifted greatly. The analogy of the life mask to photography is patently anachronistic, but the ease with which many of these latter commentators frequently slipped into it indicates its utility in describing the way they desired the mask to have functioned. And yet the comparative difficulty of finding an appropriate analogy that does not resort to such anachronisms suggests that the sentiments behind it are anachronistic as well. Moreover, despite how similarly Peale conceived of the sources for his composite, today his project appears to be both antithetical to the narrative of the life mask and unreconcilable with the post-photographic analogy through which it is so frequently explained.

What quickly stands out when examining the arguments surrounding Houdon's life mask in the mid-19th century is how little consensus there is between them. Did Houdon produce a mask, a bust cast from life, or a full body cast? Was this simply one step in Houdon's larger process of refinement or did the mechanical processes fundamentally determine the form of his final likeness? Was the nature of the life mask historically significant during its moment of creation, or was it merely commercially convenient in the years that followed? Many of these questions were ultimately put to rest following the publication of the most frequently cited source for the history of the life mask, an 1887 article in *Harper's Weekly* written by the American sculptor, and current owner of the mask, W. W. Story.[305]

Having acquired the mask from Pettrich's widow in 1882, Story recounted a richly detailed history of the mask punctuated by provocative anecdotes and impassioned arguments regarding its veracity. Story detailed the provenance of the mask which was beautifully illustrated alongside the article. Here Story put forward the most unequivocal claims about the value of the mask yet expressed, calling it "the most absolute and authentic representation of the actual forms and features of his face that exists. In all respects any portrait which materially differs from it must be wrong."[306]

However, what is often overlooked about Story's account is that it was also written in an attempt to advance Story's own bust of Washington based on the mask. Story made every effort to use his ownership of the life mask to prevent any chance of competing with another sculpture with a connection to the mask. He even went out of his way to diminish the accomplishments of

[305] Story, "The Mask of Washington," 144 & 146.

[306] Story, "The Mask of Washington," 144.

his friend, and former owner of the mask, Pettrich, explaining that he was "not an artist of great ability." But Story also claimed that Houdon's own finished sculptures compared unfavorably to the life mask and called into question the idea that any bust portrait was ever made from life at Mount Vernon.[307] In this way, Story effectively undercut the status of Houdon's work while placing his own on similar footing. While Houdon may have seen Washington in person, Story claimed that his only model after returning to his studio in Paris was the life mask. Therefore, by working from the same model as Houdon, and avoiding the French artist's mistakes, Story cleverly outlined a set of conditions that would allow him to claim to offer an even more authentic likeness of Washington than Houdon, despite having never seen the man himself.

Moreover, even without admitting the personal biases that may have influenced Story's description of events, his account still holds poor historical value. Story's article was published a full 100 years after the life mask was taken by Houdon and nearly all of his sources are second hand. He never met Houdon, Robert Walsh, or John Struthers, the first three owners of the mask. His only point of contact with these earlier events was through an elderly Pettrich, who likewise had had little direct connection to the history of the mask. As confidently as Story stated this history, pointing more powerfully than ever at the resulting value of the mask, the verifiable details of his narrative provide a very flimsy foundation. Story was not a historian, and his commercial interest in the narrative he was presenting did not encourage him to dig below the surface of the claims he was propagating.

[307] Though some have argued that he was unlikely to have been able to examine all of the versions of the Houdon's works that he offered commentary on. See: Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs*.

4.3 Firsthand Accounts

Story was not alone in accepting the history of the mask at face value. Here it would be useful to work backwards through the various original accounts that claimed to offer details about Houdon taking the life mask. From the branch of those who shepherded the life mask, we have Story's 1887 article and Petrrich's 1839 memorandum, but neither claimed to have any information about the circumstances of the mask's creation. In his article, Story even complained that despite his best efforts, he could not locate a single book purporting to offer details of the event.[308]

As mentioned above, the only credible published firsthand account of the event was given by George Washington Parke Custis near the end of his life. For reasons that will become clear in a moment, there is no record of Custis discussing this event prior to the death of his older sister in 1854. But it seems that after this date, Custis freely regaled his house guests with the drama of the encounter.[309] One such visitor summarized Custis's experience as follows:

> Houdon was so impressed with the importance of the work to posterity, that he earnestly entreated his illustrious subject to permit casts of his entire person to be taken. Mr. Custis, then a lad, stated that he was terrified at seeing his beloved father, as he called him, lying at full length on a table, with no covering save a sheet, which was removed as the casting of the different parts were completed.

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[308] Story, "The Life Mask of Washington, 145.

[309] Examples of this can be found in Hubard, "Report" and *Spirit of 76*, March 1895.

> He was the only witness of this operation, which was so repugnant to the feelings of Washington, that he permitted some expression to escape not exactly in accordance with his usually calm and collected conversation and manner.[310]

However, it would seem that Custis had actually stolen this anecdote from his elder sister Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis who had described a somewhat similar experience in reply to her brother's request for more information about the life mask five years earlier:

> I was only six years old at that time, and perhaps should not have retained any recollection of Houdon's & his visit, had I not seen the General as I supposed, dead, & laid out on a large table coverd [sic] with a sheet. I was passing the white servants Hall & saw as I thought the corpse of one I considered my Father, I went in, & found the General extended on his back on a large table, a sheet over him, except his face, on which Houdon was engaged in putting on plaster to form the cast. Quills where in the nostrils. I was very much alarmed until I was told that it was a bust, a likeness of the General, & would not injure him.[311]

Ironically, Lewis followed this description with an heartfelt admonition to her brother to utilize her account in his soon to be published memoirs to, "put a stop to the abominable falsehoods published so frequently" that Washington's full body had been cast in the nude by Houdon,

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[310] Quoted in *Spirit of 76*, March 1895.

[311] Letter from Eleanor Parke Lewis, Dec. 3rd 1849, transcript in the Morgan Library archives.

marveling that “anyone could believe such incredible anecdotes.” But not only did Custis not include his sister’s account in his memoirs, but he seems to have propagated this “intolerable & impossible” rumor though his own adaptation of the events.

But even Lewis’s account of these events is complicated by the family’s misattributions of a bust by Joseph Wright as one by Houdon.[312] Wright was also purported to have taken a life mask of Washington one year earlier in 1784. It is therefore entirely possible that Lewis mistook the life mask session of Wright for that of Houdon. This possibility is supported by a very similar anecdote relating to Wright’s life mask that was recorded in Elkanah Watson’s memoirs published around the same time. Watson explained that while visiting Mount Vernon in 1785, notably before the arrival of Houdon, he was attended by George, Martha, and young Eleanor. According to Watson, Washington himself described the circumstances under which Wright took his life mask on this occasion. The exchange, written in first person, was presented by Watson as “nearly the words of Washington.”

> Write [sic] came to Mount Vernon with the singular request, that I should permit him to take a model of my face in plaster of Paris, to which I consented with some reluctance. He oiled my features over, and placing me flat on my back, upon a cot, proceeded to daub my face with Plaster. Whilst in this ludicrous attitude, Mrs. Washington entered the room, and seeing my face thus overspread with the plaster, involuntarily exclaimed. Her cry excited in me a disposition

[312] Seymour, "Houdon's *Washington* at Mount Vernon Re-Examined.”

> to smile, which gave my mouth a slight twist, or compression of lips, that is now observable in the bust write afterward made."[313]

As Martha's grandchildren both lived at Mount Vernon following the death of her son in 1781, it is at least possible that Eleanor had accompanied her on this occasion and that the memory later became conflated with the much more widely discussed narrative of Houdon's life mask.

McRae was notably concerned by this particular anecdote, despite his own enthusiasm for the evidence surrounding Houdon's life mask, cautioning that, "No subject is more fruitful of errors and misrepresentations than the effigies of the great and memorable." After describing Watson's account, he compared it to Lessing's account of the same event, who claimed that the mask had been broken when it was removed from Washington's face. He contended that:

> The inconsistency between these narratives and their omission in the prominent biographies and works which have recorded the portraits and effigies of Washington may well justify the opinion that no such scene ever occurred, and it is narrated in detail to show how easily fable becomes history."[314]

Indeed, it is important to remember that this account was not published until 1856, more than 70 years after the events described took place. And despite the caution shown here by McRae, none of this has stopped the text "quoted" by Watson from being blindly attributed as a firsthand account from Washington himself.[315] But at the same time, the situation that McRae described here was

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[313] Watson, *Memoirs,* 119.

[314] McRae, *The Houdon Statue,* 23.

[315] Elizabeth Bryant Johnston, "Original Portraits of Washington Including Statues, Monuments, and Medals" *Boston Osgood and Company*, 1882, 149; *Scribner's Monthly*, August 1876, 608; *American Heritage*, February 1969 vol 20,

likewise strikingly similar to the conflicting accounts surrounding Houdon's life mask. And as we have already seen, there was an impressive tendency for such "fables" to infiltrate this history, perhaps more so than most examples given its prominence.

Aside from the scattered testimonies of the artists who came into possession of the mask and the conflicting recollections offered by Washington's family, there is only one other verifiable branch of sources for information regarding Houdon's life mask. The most prominently quoted publication of this branch was an 1860 address given by the Engraver of the Mint, James B Longacre (1794 – 1869), commemorating the inauguration of the Washington Cabinet of Medals at the Philadelphia Mint. As an engraver, he was keenly aware of the need to secure a good prototype. He explained:

> Viewing the close connection that necessarily exists between the medal portrait and the sculpted bust, belonging as it were to the same department of art, the bust very frequently furnishes the only reliable and material authority from which the medalist can proceed with his work—the fidelity of the sculpted head or bust becomes a question of the first importance in determining the value of a likeness on a medal.[316]

While these sentiments are comparable to the those offered by the copyists discussed above, it demonstrates a marked shift from earlier numismatists' attitudes toward the authenticity of

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Iss 2. Even Mount Vernon's website uses this quote: http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/artwork/life-portraits-of-george-washington/ Accessed June 2017.

[316] Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 24.

likenesses recorded on medals.[317] Following this remark, Longacre went on to explain why he felt that Houdon's work was "the most valuable criterion of the accuracy of the likeness" of Washington.[318] Longacre's certainty stemmed from an interview he had with Gilbert Stuart in 1825. During the course of their meeting, Stuart's own painting of Washington, which Stuart had on hand in his studio, became the subject of conversation. As discussed in the last chapter, just the year previous the competing portraitist Rembrandt Peale had exhibited a new portrait of Washington which he had declared superior to any other ever produced and had singled out Stuart's popular likeness as particularly "inaccurately drawn" and "heavily exaggerated."[319] This led to a very public debate about the relative value of the two artists' portraits of Washington that was still broiling when Longacre visited Stuart's studio. Naturally, Stuart was keen to defend the reputation of his single most important work. On this occasion, he challenged Longacre to compare his portrait with his memory of Houdon's bust, explaining that since Houdon utilized a life mask, it would provide a fitting "test of the correctness of the head then before [him]."[320] Longacre admitted that the existence of the life mask was "not previously known to [him]," but he considered Stuart's statement "unquestionable."[321]

Part of the reason that Stuart's claim has been treated so favorably is because it seems to be, as McRae describes it, a "magnanimous and just declaration" born of humility instead of self-

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[317] See, Perkinson "From an 'Art De Memoire'"

[318] Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 27.

[319] Peale, "Pamphlet," 6.

[320] Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 25.

[321] Snowden, *Medals of Washington*, 25.

interest.[322] While even Longacre had a vested interest to conclusively identify an unimpeachable prototype from which to validate his own work as Engraver to the Mint, Stuart, on the other hand, appeared to be promoting Houdon's likeness over his own. However it is important to note that in Longacre's account Stuart actively used the narrative of the life mask to act as an independent test to legitimatize his painting against slanderous claims against it recently levied by Peale. While Stuart did imply that Houdon's life mask made for an authoritative test case, his painting and the bust were very different mediums and therefore were not truly in competition with one another.

Moreover, even if Longacre was convinced by Stuart's account of the mask, he still failed to account for where Stuart himself had come by this knowledge. The genesis and spread of ideas is difficult to determine without a clearly documented trail. My research is only capable of accommodating written accounts, and those few surviving examples could simply be the tip of the iceberg representing a pervasive oral tradition about the life mask in the early 19th century. But if such a tradition existed, it failed to greatly expand the number of sources that would later be cited. In the case of Stuart where he never explicitly cited a source for his knowledge, there is a clear and likely candidate: Rembrandt Peale. Longacre and Stuart's conversation was in response to the offending remarks of Peale, and these criticisms, which were often made in the context of a short history of Washington's portraits, included details about Houdon's life mask.[323] Unlike Stuart and Longacre, Peale claimed to have firsthand knowledge of the life mask, having discussed it with Houdon in the sculptor's studio in Paris in 1808.[324]

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[322] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*,14.

[323] Peale, "Pamphlet," 4.

[324] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 11-12.

Peale's description of his 1808 visit to Houdon's studio, published in his 1824 promotional pamphlet on his own composite portrait, is the first written account that I have been able to locate that claims Houdon utilized a life mask in creating the bust.[325] It is also to my mind the most persuasive. Unlike Walsh and later owners of the life mask, Peale claims to have gotten the information from the original source, and unlike the conflicting Washington family accounts, Peale demonstrated a mastery of the historical details surrounding Houdon's work. The fact that Peale claimed to have only learned about Houdon's use of a life mask in 1808, despite his family's singular and intimate knowledge of early American portraiture, strongly points to this being the origin point for American knowledge of the life mask's production.

While Peale's account identifies Houdon's procedure of taking a life cast directly from Washington's face, there is no evidence that he saw the mask when he visited the artist's studio in 1808. The wording of his 1824 pamphlet is somewhat ambiguous, but he clarified his claim in a later version of the script that he used for his Washington portrait tour, describing Houdon's process in detail:

> [At] Mount Vernon, [Houdon] made, on the living face of Washington, a plaster mould, preparatory for the clay impression, which was then modelled into the form of a Bust, & immediately before it could shrink by drying, moulded and cast in Plaster, to be afterwards, in Paris, copied in Marble.[326]

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[325] This assessment was confirmed by Helen Clay Frick in an article examining the origins of the narrative of the life mask. See Frick, "Houdon and Rembrandt Peale,"*The Magazine Antiques*, vol 26, no 1, (July, 1934), 8-9.

[326] Peale, "1859 Winterthur Washington Lecture," 12.

In this description, the positive cast of the life mask was only an intermediate step in the creation of the bust. It was not an object of display on its own, and would it would therefore be unlikely that Houdon would have brought out the mask for Peale to examine. The idea that Peale did not see the life mask directly is also reinforced by the way he described the differences between the bust and the life cast in 1824 as being the result of Houdon's desire to animate the bust with details modeled from life. This almost certainly would have included operations like carving opening the eyes, but we now know that these steps were done at an earlier stage to the positive cast of the life mask itself.[327] If Peale had seen the mask, he would have identified this as an earlier intervention. In this way, the mask would have been a preparatory step to be modified before any surviving casts had been made. This is quite different from the narratives that became popular later in the century proposing that not only the face, but the whole body of Washington was the result of an indexical process.

Many conclusions can be drawn from this lengthy review of the sources for information about the life mask. First, no evidence indicates that knowledge of the life mask extended beyond the scope of those few who came into contact with it until Peale published his pamphlet in 1824. Second, despite the prominence of Peale's platform, this knowledge spread remarkably slowly throughout the 30s and 40s, mostly through artist circles such as Stuart, Longacre, Pettrich, Mills, and Hubard. This increased in the 1850s with the publication of the problematic firsthand accounts dictated through Custis and Watson, and eventually culminated in the historical certainty in such testimonials in the 1870s and beyond by the likes of McRea, Story, Biddle, Hart, and Arnoson. We also learn that along this timeline, ideas about the life mask's authority became inexorably tied

[327] Many later commentators were appalled that Houdon had opened the eyes, which they saw as cutting against the objectivity of the medium and therefore at odds with the function of a life mask.

to nearly every likeness of Washington copied from a Houdon. This happened despite the demonstrably tenuous nature of the historical accounts on which they were based.

Therefore, if we were forced to judge the validity of the life mask solely from the written accounts presented here, we might be tempted to question the narrative entirely, just as McRae did with the accounts of Wright's life mask. Yet this wasn't the case in the 19th century. As we have seen, it wasn't just artists seeking to promote their copies that failed to critically question the validity of the narratives surrounding the life mask, but historians too. The hunger for evidence of this relationship was so strong that even such "intolerable & impossible" accounts like those describing an elaborate full body casting were frequently taken as fact.

However, despite the chaotic manner in which the history of the life mask unfolded, the mask itself does indeed appear to be genuine. In the end, the strongest evidence of this is not found in the accounts frequently cited in the 19th century, but in the physical properties of the object itself. The execution is consistent with being made as open mold cast meant to be removed in one piece. On the back of the mask, there are marks along the top and bottom edge that indicate excess plaster had been cut away before it had fully dried, perhaps in an effort to eliminate the partially cast neck and hairline (Fig. 4.4). If it had been cast from the finished sculpture, it would have had less difficulty preserving those areas, like the mask-style cast that appeared later (Fig. 4.8). While the surface quality of the mask is not as clear as some of Houdon's other surviving life and death masks (Fig. 4.9), there are some areas that seem to preserve the texture of skin (Fig. 4.10). Likewise, the hairline and eyebrows preserve the trace of stray hairs that cut into the wet plaster (Fig. 4.11 and 4.12). The eyes are particularly interesting as the color and texture is noticeably different from the other areas with a distinctly carved appearance. The inner part of the left eye socket and base of the nose appear to show a seam where additional plaster was applied on top of

the initial casting (Fig. 4.13 and 4.14). It seems reasonable to suppose from this that the open eyes were carved directly on this mask, something that would not have been necessary on anything but the original life mask.

But the earlier historians who attempted to sort through the evidence did not have access to the mask. In the 100 years after Houdon took it back to his studio, the mask spent less than 15 years in America.[328] But even lacking any concrete evidence, they accepted the narrative of the life mask anyway, because it was a useful tool that allowed portraits made to preserve the most important Americans of the 18th century to resonate across time with audiences in the 19th, while simultaneously lending themselves to reproduction along the same principles.

4.4 The Agency of the Medium

In order to understand the stakes of the problem here we must examine the disconnect between the significance attributed to the life mask in the late-19th-century, and the way it would have been utilized and understood in the sculptural traditions in which it was made. Again, and again, throughout the second half of the 19th century, Washington's thickly opaque plaster mask was consistently treated as if it was a transparent record of the man himself. But those who did so rarely focused on the logistics of how the mask bridged the link between Washington's body and Houdon's resulting likenesses.

[328] Houdon took it back with him to France in 1785. It briefly returned to America when it was purchased by Walsh in 1828 before Pettrich left America with it in 1843. Stehle, "Fredinand Pettrich in America," 409.

Looking through the mask as if through a photograph, the mask seems to present a uniquely scarce view of Washington's face unobscured by the shadow of doubt cast by the intervening hand of an artist. Unlike his other portrayals, the volumes traced on his mask's surface are not skillful approximations of his appearance, but rather correspond to a field of minutely distributed data points recorded through a mechanical process based on direct physical contact with Washington's body. The mask replaces the inconsistent, subjective, and socially responsive performances of his manual portraitists with a stable and repeatable mechanical process founded on physical laws, offering viewers more direct access to the "data" that informed it. Through the apparent passivity of its medium, the mask allows its material components to fade from consideration while promising an unmediated account of Washington's features. Like a sheet of paper covered in text, the physical support recedes as an inconsequential detail to the meaning of the data recorded on its surface.

The properties of the medium, as well as the procedures of its handling, lend themselves well to this illusion. When wet, the diluted viscosity of the plaster offers minimal resistance to reshaping. Yielding effortlessly to the contours and features of its subject's face, it readily pours over subtle hills and valleys while seeping into wrinkles and pores. Moments after application, the plaster begins to dry and solidify into a rigid mold and is soon capable of maintaining its new form after being removed from the face that had impressed it. By thus transforming the invisible negative space surrounding Washington's face into a solid physical object, this initial mold charts the space that he once inhabited, replacing his body with its absence. The final life mask, made by pouring fresh plaster into this negative shell, in turn produced a positive cast of Washington's face once the original mold was broken away. Through the mechanical transposition from positive to negative and back again, the resulting mask seemingly transmuted Washington's flesh into plaster.

However, it is easy to call this romanticized notion of total passivity into question. The influential archeologist and art historian Annie Nicolette Zadoks Josephus Jitta (1904 – 2000) warned about this misconception about casts taken from fleshy bodies:

> The bony structure becomes more apparent. The form of the forepart of the skull grows more pronounced. Temples and cheeks fall in, cheek and jawbones strongly protrude […] The bridge of the nose grows very pronounced; its tip falls in. The naso-labial furrows become deeper, the folds grow limp. […] Every detail, every little line is smoothed away; death-masks hardly ever show anything of the so-called "verism" generally attributed to them.[329]

The most obvious problem is that wet plaster must contend with the forces of gravity. Therefore, Washington was required to lie on his back while the initial mold was taken to ensure that the plaster remained in place. Between the effects of gravity pulling on Washington's reclining form and the added weight of the plaster itself, the mold was surely marked by the subtle shifts in the softer tissues of the face often observed in such masks—an effect that is clearly visible in Houdon's death mask of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) (Fig. 4.9). For softer forms, casting was not a viable an option at all, such as the exquisitely fleshy jowls that hang from Houdon's bust of Benjamin Franklin (1706 – 1790) (Fig. 4.15), where either the weight of the plaster or the reclining of the model would have completely destroyed the effect.

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[329] Jitta, *Ancestral Portraiture in Rome and the Art of the Last Century of the Republic*, 47. Quoted in Brekenridge, *Likeness*.

Moreover, the nature of the process also limited the complexity of forms that could be transferred into the final mask. Since the plaster applied to Washington's face ultimately formed an open mold for casting the mask and was removed from the face in one piece, it was restricted to changes in elevation along one axis, disallowing undercut features—the most notably absent of which being Washington's ears. Likewise, in order to prevent cracking or distortion, the process demanded that the subject remain absolutely still until the plaster dried, leaving their eyes and mouth closed while breathing slowly and carefully through quills inserted into their nostrils. Through such limits and demands, the process of creating Washington's life mask was a dynamic exchange in which Washington had to first yield to the properties of the plaster before it would yield properly to forms of his face. Each of these concessions demonstrate how the agency of the materials determined key aspects of the mask's final appearance and significantly distance it from the "transparent" object we may have first imagined it to be.

Even so, simply acknowledging the practical challenges that the process was designed to overcome hardly discredits the mask's acclaimed fidelity. It could still be argued, for example, that the mask provides a completely accurate account of Washington's appearance while under such conditions—presenting the spitting image of a select portion the man's face as he lay under the weight of a plaster mold while remaining perfectly still with his eyes and mouth closed as he breathed through the shafts of a few feathers. Hardly a typical condition for Washington, and certainly not one ever directly associated with Houdon's resultant heroic statue.

Admittedly, this definition pushes the point to the edge of absurdity, but it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to reconcile these conditions with how the significance of mask is often read. Even if we intend to ignore the above concerns, the mask itself has clearly been altered to reconstruct the nose and eyes that could not be captured through this method. Therefore, I

contend that it is disingenuous to argue, as McRae and others have, that the life mask "has stamped [Houdon's statue] with indelible and authoritative marks as the only exact similitude of the great original," without acknowledging the highly unnatural conditions through which it was produced.[330]

4.5 Accuracy and Duplication in Houdon's Studio

The importance that McRae placed on the life mask also overlooks an even more fundamental question: what allowed the mask to provide a more superior model for a work sculpted in clay or stone than the body of the sitter? Stone is carved, not stamped, though it is a credit to Houdon's skills that the accuracy of his work lends itself to being interpreted through such analogies. Reproduction was at the very core of his studio's practice and, as I will demonstrate here, he was capable of ensuring the accuracy of his work regardless of whether it was cast, carved, or modeled. Each process had its place in his studio, and each had its own benefits and drawbacks. While some were more convenient in certain situations, none of them offered a categorical advantage in achieving greater fidelity, nor were any less susceptible to artistic modification. In the case of the life mask, the agency of the material discussed above demonstrates the former, while the seamless addition of the open eyes is evidence of the latter. Therefore, despite the existence of the mask, I argue that the manner in which it has dominated discussions of Houdon's

[330] McRae, *The Houdon Statue*, 13.

Washington portraits is not founded in the material reality of the way casting was integrated into the other processes utilized in Houdon's studio.

Houdon was an entrepreneurial sculptor and implemented several cutting-edge innovations that were tailored to the changing markets of the late-18th century. Instead of putting all of his efforts toward the limited set of fiercely competitive large-scale state-sponsored commissions, Houdon turned his attention to the growing number of merchants, bankers, and professionals that were entering the market looking for more modest sized works. This audience was especially interested in portraits of luminary figures, and to court them, Houdon aggressively pursued sitters that he knew would appeal to a broader public and for which there would be great demand for reproductions. He remained actively engaged in the traditional institutions of high art, making sure to send as many of these works as he could to be officially exhibited in the Salon, where they were legitimized with critical praise and attracted public interest.[331] But at the same time he also encouraged visitors to observe him in his studio, where he demonstrated his modeling abilities and his technical processes against the backdrop of a growing catalog of noteworthy subjects available for sale. A majority of Houdon's oeuvre is therefore comprised of economically-sized portrait busts that could easily be scaled to fit any budget, executed in plaster, terracotta, marble, bronze, or even adapted into a full-length figure should such a commission present itself. Being able to accurately and expeditiously reproduce these models was a central focus of his studio. His business model was so reliant on the production of copies that he began placing a wax seal on each of his

[331] Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon,* 18-19.

copies to authenticate them as works from his hand to provide some measure of protection against piracy.[332]

An excellent example of Houdon's business savvy can be seen in the way he outmaneuvered the competing sculptor Jean-Jacques Caffieri (1725 – 1792) to gain a suitable portrait of Franklin. Caffieri had executed a bust of Franklin (Fig. 4.16) one year prior in 1777, and he had jealously guarded his monopoly over Franklin's likeness, stipulating to his sitter that no artist should be allowed to copy the work.[333] When he learned that Houdon had executed a competing bust the following year, Caffieri was incensed and wrote an angry letter to Franklin demanding to know why Houdon had been commissioned for a bust so soon after him. He complained that allowing Houdon to do so "was almost like saying to the public that [his] had not given satisfaction."[334] In response, Caffieri was briskly informed by Franklin's grandson that Houdon had not been commissioned or even paid for the busts. In fact, there isn't even a record of Houdon ever being granted a sitting with Franklin. The scholarly consensus is that the bust was executed from memory, a feat that Houdon had been rumored to have previously accomplished.[335]

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[332] Hinton, "An American Icon in Context," 29. Piracy of portraits was a growing concern throughout the 19th century as well, nearly every artist discussed in this dissertation struggled with it. As portraiture became increasingly consumed through reproductive media like prints and casts, it was easy for unauthorized reproductions to proliferate. Stuart had to compete against European prints of his work, Peale had petitioned Congress to try and get protections for his composite portrait of Washington, and Houdon claimed his death mask of Rousseau was his "copyright" when he was denied a commission for a statue that would necessarily have to be based on it, since it was the only sculptural prototype available.

[333] Hinton, "An American Icon in Context," 25.

[334] Hinton, "An American Icon in Context," 25.

[335] An often-told anecdote recounts how Houdon saw a beggar in the street who he wanted to sit as the model for his statue of John the Baptist. When he refused to sit for Houdon, the artist worked the model in his studio while observing his subject through frequent excursions to the square in which he resided. Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon,* 74.

Because Houdon's aim for the Franklin bust was to produce a workable mold, he could afford to be generous with the initial fruits of the enterprise. Therefore, Houdon gifted Franklin no less than four plaster copies of this likeness to dispose of as he wished. This was a win-win for Houdon because Franklin's acceptance and distribution of his work legitimized his approval of it while placing examples of his work in highly visible locations to be seen by others who might be interested in purchasing one.[336] Houdon would more than recuperate the expense through the future requests that they inspired, and as an added bonus, he ingratiated himself with one of the people overseeing the commission for the pedestrian statue of Washington that Houdon hoped to secure. Though inadvertently, he also managed to simultaneously sour relations between Franklin and Caffieri, who also had designs on the same commission.[337]

The case of Franklin's busts is worth considering further because they provide insight into Houdon's studio practices that are less concrete in the case of Houdon's Washington. A recent study of several of these Franklin busts has found new evidence about how Houdon went about producing and duplicating them.[338] Images taken with a borescope of the interior of a terracotta version at the Louvre has identified it as the original prototype (Fig. 4.15). The surface inside this bust has been scraped away with an aggressive toothed tool to remove the solid core and thin out the material to prevent it from cracking when drying, indicating that is was likely modeled entirely by hand.

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[336] One of the places that Franklin gifted one of these casts was the Masionic Lodge des Neufs Soeurs, of which both Franklin and Houdon were full members. See Lins, "Houdon's Studio Practice," 70.

[337] Biddle and Hart, *Memoirs,* 87-90.

[338] Meighan, "In Pursuit of Physical Evidence," *Encountering Genius,* 45-63.

The exterior of Franklin's bust also shows evidence of being subject to subsequent casting. The incised lines that are visible along multiple ridges of the bust are consistent with indentations that would be left in wet clay by the metal dividers used to keep the separate parts of a piece mold from fusing together.[339] From here, Houdon could proceed in a number of ways. Plaster copies cast from the resultant mold could be sold as they were or used as a model for a marble version like the one housed in Philadelphia (Fig. 4.17). But he could also press clay into the mold to produce a new workable version in which he could freely alter the features and expression, adjust the angle of the head, or remodel the clothing. Through a similar process, he could seamlessly marry portions of clay cast from different molds with newly modeled components into a completely new work as seen in the many different versions that he executed of Voltaire (Fig. 4.18 & 4.19). This was one of the ways that he was able to integrate the features of life and death masks into his portraits, as he did with his bust of Rousseau (Fig. 4.20).[340]

Houdon's studio was uncommonly efficient and productive. He was able to model a bust in as few as two sittings and his studio assistants were able to proceed through all of the steps of creating a piece mold and begin casting a plaster copy in about two weeks.[341] Houdon utilized a number of tools besides casting to speed up the process of reproduction. He often relied on calipers and other measuring instruments while modeling directly from a sitter, which was significantly faster than going through the laborious process of producing a life mask and using the resulting

[339] While still wet, the bust would be coated in oil and plaster would be applied with a brush. In order to break up the mold into sections that could be removed without destroying the original, metal dividers called shims would be placed in between sections of plaster, which would leave noticeable marks on the its still-impressionable surface. These sections would then be held in place with a secondary casing called a "mother mold."

[340] Poulet, Jean-Antoine Houdon, 168.

[341] Lins, "Houdon's Studio Practice," 74.

mold as a starting point for the face.[342] He seems to have reserved the life mask process for his most important sitters.

Houdon's skills as a modeler were frequently remarked upon by those who observed him, and indeed the accuracy of his measurements were famously verified in 1906 when the recently exhumed skull of John Paul Jones (1747 – 1792) was found to perfectly match the dimensions preserved in his bust.[343] Similar tools were also necessary for transferring modeled or cast prototypes into marble. One of the reasons that Houdon was so productive was that his studio was on the very forefront of emerging late 18th century measurement technologies, being among the first to adopt the English sculptor John Bacon's (1740 – 1799) innovative pointing machine.

Beginning with the development of various "pointing" devices in the mid-18th century, sculptors quickly developed a series of increasingly sophisticated systems for transferring forms into stone.[344] In the most rudimentary application, a pointing machine combined a grid and a caliper so that the orientation of the caliper could be transferred accurately from the original to the copy. Small metal pins were inserted into the artist's clay or plaster original at key points to serve as registration points while protecting the fragile material from damage. The elevations of these points were then systematically transferred to the copy. In a variation illustrated by Francesco

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[342] Making use of a life mask required the labor of creating the temporary initial negative mask, from which a more durable positive cast could be produced, which in turn would be used to create a permanent mold, with each step requiring substantial preparation and drying time. Only then could clay or terracotta be pressed into this final mold to be integrated into the rest of the bust.

[343] While Houdon was known to have taken casts of some of his sitter's faces, it is unlikely that such a cast could be taken of an entire head, meaning that the back part of the skull preserved in the sculpture was modeled with measurement and skill. Poulet, *Jean-Antoine Houdon,* 20.

[344] See "Chapter 16: The Pointing Machine" in James Ayres, *Art, Artisans & Apprentices: Apprentice Painters & Sculptors in the Early Modern British Tradition,* 335-342. And "Chapter III: The Assistant—At Home and Abroad" in Frederick Lawton, *The Life and Work of Auguste Rodin,* 1906, 27-43. And *The Making of Sculpture: The Materials and Techniques of European Sculpture.* Ed. Marjorie Trusted. London: V & A Publications, 2007.

Carradori (1747 – 1824) in 1802 (Fig. 4.21 & 4.22), the grid was projected down along three sides of a sculpture by a series of plumbs, which measured the coordinates of key landmarks and enabled the artist to orient their calipers consistently.[345] This hanging grid was later replaced by a mobile frame that could be quickly moved and aligned precisely against both the model and the copy by registering against the same three points of contact. Armatures set with sliding pointers were attached to this frame and calibrated to the exact depth and location of each of the pins placed in the original. This system was greatly preferable to earlier designs because it didn't demand the same level training and skill. Therefore, studio assistants could rough cut a fresh stone block, drill down each point to the depth indicated by the armature, and clear out the area between each hole until all but the last few layers of material were left to be finished by a more skilled journeymen or the artist of record.[346] This greatly increased the amount of the process that could be passed on to lower-skilled stone workers while safeguarding expensive materials against costly mistakes.

But even this design was clumsy because the frame could only register points from one plane, and therefore required that both the model and the copy to be turned multiple times to access all of the necessary points, and each time it was necessary to establish a new set of registration points. John Bacon is credited with popularizing the "pointing machine," by changing the joints of the armature to allow for a greater range of articulation (Fig. 4.23). Bacon greatly streamlined production by removing the need for the works to be rotated and re-registered. By 1790, Bacon's modified pointing machine allowed him to keep an impressive twenty assistants busy in his

[345] *The Making of Sculpture: The Materials and Techniques of European Sculpture.* Ed. Marjorie Trusted. London: V & A Publications, 2007.

[346] Rudolph Wittkower, "Pointing Machine." *Sculpture: Processes and Principles.* New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

studio.[347] When Houdon visited Bacon's studio, he was apparently so impressed with the system that Bacon obliged him to take one for himself.[348]

Prior to the development of the pointing machine, it was entirely possible that a skilled artist could use other systems of measurement to accurately duplicate forms. While the pointing machine certainly made this process more convenient, it was not a sufficient solution to the task of executing an accurate copy. It allowed for speedy approximations, but the final layers of stone had to be carefully removed to replicate the final nuanced surface of the original. The pressure to systematize this process that was demonstrated in each of the progressive stages of these systems' development had less to do with any dissatisfaction with the results of earlier techniques, and more to do with solving bottlenecks in production that began to appear as demand for copies increased.

4.6 Casting as an Exceptional Method

As the above review of Houdon's studio practices makes clear, the extent to which the various sculptures Houdon made of Washington were "stamped" with the man's face was not merely the result of Houdon's casting a life mask, but also relied on the precise application of new systems of measurement with the skillful modulation of the final surface performed by hand. In the case of the Houdon's Franklin busts, researchers have verified an extraordinary consistency between modeled, cast, and carved versions. Using advanced 3D-imaging tools to scan and

[347] Ingrid Roscoe et al. eds 2009, *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain*, 1660-1851.

[348] Cunningham, *The lives of the most eminent British painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1830, Vol. III, pp. 209–210.

compare four different versions of the bust, they found distances between equivalent points to be typically within .3% of each other, concluding: "the remarkable outcome of this study has been the unanticipated demonstration of the precision and accuracy in reproducing details and forms that Houdon and his studio were able to achieve, including the quite astounding freehand reproductions in marble of plaster and terracotta forms—to within parts of a millimeter in many places."[349]

While this aspect of Houdon's work has been gaining widespread attention in recent years, it has done little to redress the claimed importance of the life mask in the case of his Washington portraits. When an analogous study was done to investigate the similarities of the Mount Vernon bust to the life mask, researchers were confronted with nearly identical results as the Franklin study, but in this case, they reached an entirely different conclusion. Before discussing this study, it is important to clarify that the Mount Vernon bust offers fewer concrete clues about its execution than the original Franklin terracotta does. The exterior of the bust has been heavily restored and is obscured by "multiple layers of white paint, shellac, plaster, or putty," and the interior has not yet been explored with a borescope.[350] Washington's diary does mention sitting for the bust, but gives no detail about how or even whether a life mask was used by Houdon to help make the bust.

Many scholars over the past 100 years have attempted to reconstruct the timeline of Houdon's visit to Mount Vernon from the fragmentary evidence that survives.[351] Without

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[349] Lins, "Houdon's Studio Practice," 86.

[350] Meg Loew Craft, Shelly Sturman, and Nicole Miller, "Treatment Report: C 1998, M-79: Bust of George Washington by Jean-Antione Houdon" (Art Conservation and Technical Services, Baltimore, MD, 1998).

[351] See Eisen, "The Leutze-Stellwagen Mask of Washington" and Seymour, "Houdon's *Washington* at Mount Vernon Re-Examined."

distracting the present study with an abundance of details that don't bear directly on my central argument, it will suffice to say that Houdon's short stay at Mount Vernon offered less than ideal working conditions for the creation of the bust. From the loss of his cargo during the voyage to a rash of wet weather, there were a number of difficulties against which Houdon had to contend. Based on the available evidence, consensus among these experts has been that there was simply not enough time for a life mask to have been produced and a mold of it created before the bust was modeled. This assessment has been a problem for any argument that the bust was directly reliant on the mask, because it means that the work on the bust preceded the creation of the mask. Some authors have proposed that the bust was subsequently altered in consultation with the mask or even that the mask was itself actually cast from the bust, but the timeline has always been interpreted as being incompatible with the claim that the face of the bust was directly cast from a mold of the life mask.[352]

The difficulties presented by the documentary evidence are often set aside when commentators consider the relationship of the bust to the mask. When forensic anthropologist Jeffery Schwartz compared high resolution 3D scans of both objects in 2006, he was astonished to find that "the two differ at most by a statistically insignificant 0.3 millimeter."[353] This result was consistent with those found in the Franklin study, and yet here the author concluded that the only plausible explanation was that the historical record was flawed, explaining:

> Documents at Mount Vernon indicate that Houdon had made the bust days before the life mask, which suggests the two would have

[352] Hart and Biddle, *Memoirs*, Seymore, "Houdon's *Washington* at Mount Vernon Re-Examined," Poulet, *Jean-Antione Houdon*.

[353] Schwartz, "Putting a Face on the First President."

> differed more, because the bust would have been done freehand. Yet the eyes, nose, asymmetrical skewed chin, positions of the exposed earlobes, and creases in the forehead were identical in the life mask and bust. Finally, after months of puzzling, I concluded that Houdon had not created the face in the bust freehand. After he added the eyes to the life mask (they had to be covered when the mold of the face was taken), he then made a mold of the mask and pressed terra cotta into it to achieve the bust's face. I had to take it on faith that the rest of the head was based on Houdon's caliper measurements.[354]

As we have seen, no documents actually specify when the life mask was taken. But even though Schwartz assumed the documentation was there, in the end he couldn't accept it, because he believed that life casting was the only method capable of ensuring the accuracy of the facial features recorded on the bust. The accuracy of the rest of the head he had to take "on faith" as the result of measurement.

It is not my intention to discount the possibility that Schwartz's conclusion is correct. The historical record is inadequate and the potential for errors or misunderstandings is high. And as discussed above, there is evidence that Houdon occasionally pressed terracotta into life-cast molds during the process of modeling a bust, just as Schwartz claims he did here. However, I do contend that the findings of his scans are likewise insufficient to make this determination on their own.[355] The fact that the Franklin study identified comparable precision in cases where casting was not

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[354] Schwartz, "Putting a Face on the First President," 86.

[355] Indeed, when various experts were asked to investigate Schwartz's claims, including Ellen Miles and Anne Poulet, they remained confident that the life mask had not been used in the way he suspected. Records of email exchanges between these experts can be found in Smithsonian Museum of American Art's archive.

feasible indicates the Mount Vernon bust's fidelity to the mask need not be attributed to one particular method of duplication.

Even if Schwartz's suspicions proved true, the way he has linked Houdon's accuracy exclusively with the technique of casting reinforces the fallacy that the Mount Vernon bust is conceptually interchangeable with the life mask. Regardless of the tools used in its creation, it is essential to approach the bust as a distinct artistic production. This is especially true given that Houdon clearly did not see the life mask as either necessary or sufficient to satisfy the demands of the commission. If a life mask was all that was required, Houdon would not have needed to undertake the lengthy and dangerous journey to America himself. His workmen were more than capable of completing such tasks. The tilt of the head, the appraising eyes, and the heroic bare shoulders all lend the bust an expressiveness that exceeds the mask as a source. The conceptual distinction between the mask and the bust can also be seen in the very different lives that they lived after they became separated. While the bust continued to receive attention in Mount Vernon as an original life portrait of Washington, the mask passed through the hands of several artists as a largely unknown studio tool. And when Peale first tried to lean on a connection between the bust and the mask in 1824, very few people appear to have taken notice. However, as culturally defined notions of accuracy, likeness, and authenticity shifted in the second half of the 19th century, these issues were effaced by new concerns that most prominently manifest in the now central importance granted to the life mask.

4.7 Life Masks in Early-19th-Century America

The apparent lack of interest in the early 19th century in the relationship between Houdon's likeness of Washington and the life mask can be explained by examining how techniques of casting and pointing became more widely known in the first half of the 19th century. By 1830, pointing machines had become ubiquitous in Italy, but despite the consistency they enabled, copies by this method had developed an unfavorable reputation among some American connoisseurs for being unskilled productions. In 1831, the American writer James Fenimore Cooper wrote about his distaste for even the most well-executed marble copies:

> Most of our people who come to Italy employ the artists of the country to make copies, under the impression that they will be both cheaper and better, than those done by Americans studying there. My own observation has led me to adopt a different course. […] The very occupation of the copyist infers some want of that original capacity, without which no man can impart to a work, however exact it may be in its mechanical details, the charm of expression.[356]

In keeping with the importance that Reynolds had placed on artistic discernment, Cooper was unwilling to accept that the "charm of expression" found in an original work could be entirely conveyed by an unskilled copyist.

While Cooper's distain for mechanical copies was directed at sculpture as an artform in general, similar sentiments applied to sculpted portraits in particular. The clearest evidence of a

[356] Quoted in Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, Vol III, 419.

pervasive disregard for value of life masks in portraiture at this time is demonstrated by the indifference with which the works of the American sculptor John Henri Isaac Browere (1790 – 1834) were received. Between 1817 and 1834, Browere set about the ambitious task of assembling a national gallery of busts depicting America's most prominent citizens.[357] Like Delaplaine before him, Browere promoted his collection as containing the most authentic likenesses possible. However, while Delaplaine sought out the best available prototypes, Browere produced an entirely original series of portrait busts from life. By 1828, Browere claimed to have spent $12,087 in pursuit of the project and had succeeded in sculpting nearly every prominent American figure alive at the time, including Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, James Monroe, DeWitt Clinton, John Adams, Martin Van Buren, and Gilbert Stuart.[358] Browere's output was prodigious, with a vast majority of his subjects being executed in a single year, 1825.

The key to Browere's plan depended on a proprietary method that he had developed for creating a life mask. Utilizing this secret formula, Browere produced life casts of his sitters with unparalleled fidelity (Fig. 4.24). His technique enabled him to overcome many of the traditional challenges in creating a life mask that I described above. His plaster was lighter and less viscous, which allowed it to seep more easily into the smallest wrinkle and it set so thinly that it did not weigh down the sitter's features. It also dried more quickly than earlier methods, which meant that

[357] Not much has been published on Browere's work because it was hidden away for several decades following the artist's death. The details presented here are most reliant on Hart's book on Browere and an unpublished manuscript by Browere's grandson, Everett Lee Millard, housed at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY.

[358] Meschutt, *A Bold Experiment*, Millard suspected that the number quoted here may be a mistranscription of the original letter, claiming that $1,287 is a more realistic number. Either way, the project was a substantial investment of time and money for Browere.

his subjects could remain more naturally seated upright and even allowed them to strike a suitable temporary expression. Browere fully believed that his technique was categorically superior to his competitors' and hoped that it would set his work apart. In his advertisements, he questioned his audience, "Who, that has ever worked in this material, knows not that Plaster of Paris is an opake [sic], heavy body? Would not the features of the face, therefore, be sunken, the bones become […] more protuberant, and the tout ensemble have the ghastly appearance of death?"[359] His works, he promised, more forcefully preserved an impression of his subject's vitality. To maximize the benefits of the improved fidelity granted by his casting technique, Browere embedded the original positive mask directly into his busts.

When the Revolutionary War hero, the Marquise de Lafayette (1757 – 1834), toured the United States from 1824-1825, several artists clamored for a chance to capture his likeness. When both Browere and his rival John Frazee (1790 – 1852) were granted the opportunity to take Lafayette's life mask, Browere aggressively argued for the superiority of his method. He invited a panel of witnesses to observe the procedure of taking the mask, and once it was complete, he collected a series of testimonials from those in attendance certifying the accuracy of the results.[360] Even before Frazee had presented a finished bust of Lafayette to the public, Browere began calling him out by name in the newspaper arguing for the technically superiority of his own process, and by extension, the greater authenticity of his portrait bust (Fig. 4.25). He argued that even Houdon's earlier bust of Lafayette likewise suffered deficiencies from his imperfect casting technique (Fig.

[359] Millard, *Portrait of a Young Republic*, 40a.

[360] Fenimore Art Museum Library, Manuscript of Certificates. This tactic was striking similar to the one employed just one year earlier by Rembrandt Peale when promoting his composite portrait, and notably, Peale contributed his own testimonial in favor of Browere's life mask of Lafayette

4.26).[361] Browere assured the public that the "vast superiority" of his bust "over every other bust heretofore executed of General Lafayette" was assured because the General had "never before submitted to a similar or equally correct method of having his likeness executed."[362]

While Houdon's life masks existed alongside a number of analogous representational strategies, Browere positioned his life masks as the single most important evidence of his busts' authenticity. Therefore, when an ear broke off of his mask of Lafayette before he had completed the bust, Browere begged Lafayette for another sitting. Browere was an accomplished sculptor, yet he refused to attempt to repair the defect or to model a new ear by hand. Instead, he traveled from New York to Philadelphia and produced an entirely new mask. By defining the value of his works through the superiority of his casting technique, Browere inadvertently placed a negative value on his own modeling skills wherever they interposed on the cast features of the bust. Each time he applied his knife to the plaster, he made his work one step closer to those produced by other artists like Houdon and Frazee.

Despite the public's initial curiosity in Browere's method and his growing collection of busts, Browere had difficulty cultivating a lasting interest in his works. Unlike Houdon, Browere had much more difficulty attracting the approval of institutional tastemakers. In the newspaper, Browere's critics decried him as "a poor deluded plaster-man" and the authors of his accumulated testimonials were accused of having a "total absence of chaste and prudent discrimination, or of ability to judge […] works of Fine Art."[363] Browere responded poorly to criticism and his fiery

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[361] Millard, *Portrait of a Young Republic*, 50.

[362] Millard, *Portrait of a Young Republic*, 49

[363] Millard, *Portrait of a Young Republic*, 50b.

temper did not win him many allies. When he learned that John Trumbull, the current president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts (NY), had spoken ill of his work for being the result of a "process" and "fit only for a waxworks" Browere was incensed.[364] He wrote an unabashedly hostile letter to Trumbull in which he offered his own scathing assessment of the senior artist's work. Trumbull was so astonished that he endorsed the letter: "Browere. Poor man! Too much vanity hath made him mad."[365] Similar interpersonal conflicts developed between Browere and William Dunlap, which prevented Dunlap joining the National Academy of Design (NY).[366]

The biggest blow to Browere's career came from an ill-fated complication that arose when he attempted to take a life mask of Thomas Jefferson. For unknown reasons, Browere's plaster dried more quickly than he expected which caused it to become stuck on Jefferson's face. The procedure for removing it was both violent and lengthy as Browere slowly chipped away at the plaster with a chisel and hammer. Jefferson and his family were understandably distressed by the experience and soon a few privately shared remarks had spawned into a widely circulating rumor that Jefferson had barely escaped the encounter with his life.[367] The idea of a portraitist inadvertently suffocating their heroic subject in an ill-advised effort to grant them a modest form of immortality was much too rich a tale to be easily countered and Browere's career never recovered.

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[364] Millard, *Portrait of a Young Republic*, 324.

[365] Hart, *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans,* 20.

[366] Hart, *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans,* 20.

[367] The best summery of these events is found in Meschutt, 'A Perfect Likeness' *American Art Journal*, vol 21, no 4 (Winter, 1989), pp. 4-25.

In the end, Browere's central focus on the authority of his refined mechanical process left him unable to establish an artistic value for his work. The way he prioritized verisimilitude and the indexical relationship between his sitter and their bust made his works a novelty, but it failed to please his audience more than conventional approaches. Lost in the liminal space between a work of art and an inert record, Browere's portraits were a somewhat confusing anomaly outside the established categorical boundaries of portraiture at that time.

On his deathbed in 1834, devastated by his own obscurity, Browere instructed his family to cut the heads off of each of his busts and store them away for 40 years, hoping that latter generations would better appreciate the value of his collection. While his family ultimately declined to dismember the busts, they complied with his request to take them out of public view. They were not seen again until 1876, when it was hoped that the centennial of the Declaration of Independence would rekindle an interest in them. But it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that they finally attracted critical attention.

In 1899, the antiquarian Charles Henry Hart took a special interest in Browere's busts. Hart was thoroughly impressed with Browere's technique, which he described as "real, human, lifelike," and "truthful," while other life masks had always struck him as "dead," "heavy," and "almost repulsive in their lifelessness."[368] Browere would have undoubtedly been pleased with this assessment, which strongly echoed his own claims. However, it is interesting to note that the testimonials that Browere collected from his contemporaries were decidedly less exuberant in their praise for his life masks than Hart. Hart compared Browere's busts to the daguerreotype and presented them as exceptional in their capacity to reproduce the very living qualities of their

[368] Hart, *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans,* 26.

subjects, while his contemporary supporters used much more neutral language. Even as they attested to the bust's resultant "accuracy," "faithfulness," and "exactness," they did not attribute any specific authority to his process.

Commenting on Browere's lack of success in his own lifetime, Hart explained:

> What one generation fails to appreciate, and therefore decries and sneers at, a subsequent one comprehends and applauds. […]. Were these remarks not true, the very remarkable collection of busts from life masks, taken […] by John Henri Isaac Browere […] would not have been hidden away until their recent unearthing."[369]

Indeed, in many ways, Browere seemed to be ahead of his time. Even so, Hart's argument is backwards. It is not the domain of historians to project their own contemporary expectations and biases onto the past and bemoan the fact that those living then lacked the values possessed in their own time. Instead, Browere's busts provide a perspective into a hybrid space, one that may appear recognizable to later audiences but which was bound in it its own moment to a set of expectations less familiar to later generations. It is the same for Houdon's life mask of Washington. When McRae was astonished to find that so many people had not known about the mask's existence, or that earlier commentators had faulted the artist for his characterization of Washington, he failed to consider how those apparent contradictions might have been rooted a different cultural approach to notions of authenticity. Browere's failure likewise implies that Houdon's early 19th-century American audience was not overly impressed by the mechanical accuracy of life masks.

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[369] Hart, *Browere's Life Masks of Great Americans,* 12.

4.8 Conclusion

There is every indication that Washington's life mask was inconsequential to the ascribed authenticity of Houdon's many sculptural representations of Washington throughout the first half of the 19th century. I argue that this was not the result of ignorance of the mask's existence, though such ignorance surely existed. Rather, the authenticity of Houdon's various Washingtons was established in a similar fashion to his Franklins, Jeffersons, and Voltaires. Each was proven, not by one particular mode of production, but by Houdon's consistent reputation for pleasing his patrons, the prestige afforded by his many prominent sitters, and most importantly, the impressive number of variations and near-identical copies by his hand that made their way into nearly every notable collection of "heads" on both sides of the Atlantic. While copies after Stuart's portraits of Washington varied wildly, apart from a thinly shared compositional geometry, Houdon's Washingtons preserved a more detailed physiognomy that established itself in the collective memory of the 19th century through the rhythm of its own repetition.

As the structures that defined the authenticity of portraiture became more diffused at the turn of the 19th century, Houdon's studio was among the first to effectively respond. He actively pursued the expanding market for portrait busts by cultivating a catalogue of prominent contemporary figures and adopting a number of innovative reproductive technologies to systematically regulate the consistency of his copies. The Mount Vernon bust and the pedestrian statue in Richmond demonstrate Houdon's continued alliances to traditional paradigms of authenticity in which a select few authoritative institutions housed and legitimized a rare subset of authentic originals. But Houdon's ultimate success also depended on the way the public interacted with multiple versions of his works in multiple contexts. While the Mount Vernon bust remained in the home of the first president, any collector could acquire one for themselves which promised

to be equally authentic. Therefore, it was not the life mask that initially granted authority to Houdon's numerous Washingtons. Rather, they were accepted as authentic because Houdon found a way to effectively distribute the authority of this likeness in a way that was well-suited to the demands of the expanding portrait market—through authentic copies.

5.0 Epilogue

5.1 The Bicentennial Portrait

In 1932, US government officials were busily making preparations for a nationwide celebration commemorating the bicentennial of George Washington's birth. As a part of these festivities, Congress organized a Bicentennial Commission and charged them with the task of authorizing an officially sanctioned portrait of Washington. In order to select an appropriate work, a special delegation was formed comprised of seven art critics, two historians, a painter, a representative from the Library of Congress, and the superintendent of Mount Vernon.[370]

Following Congress's charge, the delegation sorted through "the many more or less authenticated" portraits of George Washington completed "from life," in order to select "the one portrait that will have official sanction and be issued in hundreds and thousands of copies as part of the observance of 1932."[371] The exact method by which the committee was to assess the authenticity of these portraits was left to their discretion.[372] In addition to the well-known portraits of Washington, the committee also issued a public call requesting all other privately owned or lesser-known examples to be brought forward for consideration. The diverse range of objects that the delegation ultimately examined included, "oil paintings, sketches in pen and ink, pastels,

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[370] Marling, "Commentary," 155.

[371] *Special News Release Relating to the Life and Time of George Washington, as Prepared and Issued by the United States George Washington Commission, Vol. 1* (DC: U.S. George Washington Commission, 1932), 67.

[372] *Special News Release Relating to the Life and Time of George Washington, as Prepared and Issued by the United States George Washington Commission, Vol. 1* (DC: U.S. George Washington Commission, 1932), 68.

profiles in cut paper, watercolors, prints, miniatures on whale bone, and bits of needle point."[373] In many ways, this assortment of objects brought before the delegation resembled the collection of prototypes that Delaplaine and Peale claimed to have likewise examined.

What quickly stood out to the delegation was the vast difference in the facial characteristics exhibited by each portrait. While there were many recurring features such as the deep-set eyes and broad cheeks, the overall effect of many of the portraits was quite distinct. Confronted with this dilemma, the delegation had no readymade method to determine which portraits could be trusted as accurate and which could be dismissed. Nearly 150 years after Washington's death, there was no longer any living authority by whom the many discordant likenesses of Washington could be arbitrated. Washington's living memory had long since become distant history and the only means by which the delegation could access his appearance was through the manifestly imprecise visual documents that remained. But if the delegation was to pick the face by which Washington was to, as they put it, "live again and become a vital force in the minds and hearts of the American people,"[374] then they felt a certain responsibility to resurrect the right one.

The inconsistency between these different representations brought into sharp focus a perceived failing of late-18th-century portraiture as a medium for the preservation of accurate physiognomies. As this study has already demonstrated, this was by no means a novel discovery.[375]

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[373] Marling, *George Washington Slept Here*, 339.

[374] This is the phrase that Sol Bloom used to describe the Mission of the Bicentennial. Marling, *George Washington Slept Here*, 327.

[375] Accounts of dissatisfied patrons grumbling about the inaccuracy of a given likeness date back to the Renaissance. Gombrich identified two styles of defense against unimpressed portrait patrons during the Renaissance. The first, following Michelangelo, argued that the portrait was a work of art, which would stand the test of time much better than an ephemeral likeness. The second, claimed that the portrait simply exceeded the face in its ability to reveal a person's appearance. See Gombrich, "The Mask and the Face," 2.

What was different in this instance was that the question of likeness had become an unassuageable obstacle for the delegation. While inaccuracies had long been an inevitable feature of portraiture, with the advent of photography a new model of authenticity had taken root.[376] The real tragedy, as far as the delegation was concerned, was that Washington had not lived long enough to be preserved through photography as Lincoln had.[377] In a time when two photographers could produce nearly identical images under controlled circumstances, the discrepancies between Washington's various portraits had become increasingly problematic. How could the delegation sanction one portrait over another if the entire 18th-century mechanism of portraiture lacked the type of clarity that they had grown to expect?[378]

Without the ability to confidently assess the mimetic accuracy of Washington's portraits through visual parity, the committee turned instead to evaluating the procedures through which each portrait had been produced. Following the assessments of earlier commentators like McRae, the delegation ultimately settled on Houdon's life mask as the most authoritative extant representation of Washington.[379] If the failings of the artists were to blame for the discrepancies

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[376] For a discussion of the development of photography and its effect on the understanding and production of portraits see, Heather McPherson, *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001). An excellent discussion of artists' continuing in efforts to provide "truthful" images is found in Gombrich, *Art and Illusion,* especially "Part One: The Limits of Likeness." Also, Daston and Galison, *Objectivity.*

[377] Marling, *George Washington Slept Here,* 337-341.

[378] It may be important to note that the delegation was having these debates about "authentic portraiture" following a boom in the market of counterfeit colonial portraits, a practice that had made fools of even prominently respected experts. See Saunders, "The Eighteenth-Century Portrait in American Culture of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," 142.

[379] It is unclear which version of the life mask the committee used in this process. The initial life mask taken by Houdon is thought to have traveled with him back to Paris, but several copies were in circulation in America at the time of the Bicentennial. It is important to note that some of these life mask "copies" were actually made from taking a cast of a completed bust, rather than the one that had been taken directly from Washington's face. See Morgan, *Life Portraits of Washington,* 96-101.

between the different portraits, then the life mask offered an ideal alternative. Like the photograph, it was an image made without artistic interpretation, indexically preserving each curve and depression of Washington's face, not through skills of mimesis, but through direct contact with his features. However, the disembodied mask itself was too unrefined to make a suitably heroic impression.[380] So the delegation eventually settled on the portrait they felt was most closely related to the mask, Houdon's Mount Vernon bust. Not only was it a widely revered artistic work produced from life by a renowned artist, but it also appeared to rely on concrete measurements taken from both Washington's body and the life mask. While the committee conceded that the many extant portraits of Washington were each valuable in their own ways, the bust alone had "every guarantee of absolute accuracy in presenting Washington."[381]

Even still, the three-dimensional bust could not adequately serve the purposes of the official portrait for the Bicentennial because it was not easily reproducible for distribution in the manner that Congress had initially proposed. In order to function as intended, the bust needed to be converted into a flat, mass-producible image. And yet, even given this imperative, the committee ultimately rejected all existing two-dimensional prototypes in favor of photographing the bust (Fig. 5.1).[382] It is significant that the committee rejected even those portraits that accurately copied the bust itself—especially given the damaged condition of the bust in 1932.[383] Indeed, the

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[380] The disembodied face of the mask lacked the context of the rest of the head. Also, because of its method of production it lacked detail in the eyes and nose, details that were filled in by Houdon before working on the bust. It is easy to forget that the object that the delegation examined was not the original negative mask itself, but a positive cast from a corrected negative featuring open eyes and a repaired nose.

[381] *Special News Release Relating to the Life and Time of George Washington, as Prepared and Issued by the United States George Washington Commission, Vol. 1* (DC: U.S. George Washington Commission, 1932), 72.

[382] Selecting a view of the bust that would later be transformed into a low relief and imprinted on the quarter.

[383] A missing curl of hair that partly obscures the ear is found in earlier copies of the bust. Moreover, the bust was particularly ill-suited to photographic reproduction due to the dark natural color of the terra cotta which had to be

actions of the delegation represent a complete breakdown of trust in any of Washington's manually-produced portraits. The committee defended their choice, explaining that "by being photographed from several angles, [Houdon's bust] provides a variety of portraits, all artistic and all authentic."[384] In the eyes of the committee, the comparatively autonomous procedure of photography—and by extension the life mask—imbued their new official portrait with a self-evident claim to authenticity.[385]

Like Peale's portrait, this Bicentennial portrait was a new creation built on the principles of visual authenticity of its time. Its indexical lineage was meant to inoculate it against contemporary suspicion by means of the faith granted to its process of translation: from face, to mask, to bust, to photograph. Without direct access to Washington's living body, the delegation faced the same dilemma as Delaplaine. But even while looking at a similar body of source material, these new experts came to a wildly different conclusion. Since Washington could not be photographed directly and thus mechanically transposed directly into an image, the statue would have to—and could—stand in for him.

In an interesting twist of fate, the delegation's new portrait was even less successful than Peale's in re-authoring Washington. When it was revealed, the image was soundly disavowed in

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painted white before it was photographed in order to avoid any potential racial confusion regarding the resulting photograph. Marling, 1988, 341.

[384] *Special News Release Relating to the Life and Time of George Washington, as Prepared and Issued by the United States George Washington Commission, Vol. 1* (DC: U.S. George Washington Commission, 1932), 72.

[385] It is for this reason that the committee did give preference to silhouettes produced by a physiognotrace, because like photography, the mechanical nature of the physiognotrace greatly reduced the margin of error inherent to the freehand sketch. John Cage has likewise linked such early means of producing mechanical portraiture to the early 19th century understanding of photography, see Gage, "Photographic Likeness," 119-130.

the press as, "not our Washington."[386] While it had originally been proposed that the new Washington photograph would be distributed nation-wide in unprecedented quantities to promote the patriotic contemplation of Washington's character, the public response was ultimately so negative that the new "Official" Washington was only used for a limited number of print materials published by the Bicentennial Commission. In the end it was Stuart's portrait that had that honor, appearing in nearly every place that the Bicentennial Commission had envisioned their official portrait occupying. It was as if Neal's prophecy had been realized: the delegation had tried as much as they could to put forward the real body of Washington, and he had indeed been called an imposter.[387] It is interesting for the context of this current study that recent scholarship on the Bicentennial Commission's failed portrait has been much more sympathetic to its failure than they have been with Peale's composite, often blaming misguided public expectations over any possible misconception in the committee's planning.[388] However, simply because modern critics are familiar with the logic behind the delegation's actions, it does not necessarily follow that their planned portrait was inherently more viable than Peale's.

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[386] Greenhalgh, "Not a Man but a God," 277.

[387] While defending their decision, the committee described their image as more objectively related to Washington's body than Stuart's, conceding only that Stuart's image was perhaps a better demonstration of his inner character. Greehalgh, "Not a Man but a God," ?

[388] Greenhalgh uses the failure of the new image as proof of the devotional status granted to Stuart's portrait. This is a convincing stance, given that Stuart's image continued to deflect challengers, but it does not explain the qualities of Stuart's portrait that allowed it to do so.

5.2 Medium and Meaning

One decade after the Bicentennial Commission made their case for the new photographic portrait of Washington, the French film critic André Bazin (1918 – 1958) suggested that such a psychological response to photography was inescapable. He argued that:

> This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*-presented […]. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.[389]

While today critics may not go so far as to claim that the "being of the model" is literally present in a photograph, it is hard to refute that one does indeed experience such a "quality of credibility" when viewing a well-executed photograph. Bazin claimed that this acceptance comes because photography has finally liberated art from its misguided "obsession with likeness," by providing a

[389] André Bazin, "Ontology," In *What is Cinema* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2004), 13-14.

medium that satisfies, "once and for all and in its very essences, our obsession for realism."[390] The problem with Bazin's assessment is that "likeness" and "realism" are not historically stable categories. So long as these concepts are defined in relation to technologies of representation, such as linear perspective, casting, or photography, rather than the broader history of thought in which they rested, historians will be unable to appreciate how these technologies were embedded in the representational paradigms that surrounded them.

In discussions of portraiture this has been especially problematic. It has been common practice for scholars to make sweeping commentaries on the genre as a whole, trying to encapsulate the entire Western production of likenesses into a neat categorical package. The first section of nearly every study on the subject begins by trying to establish a working definition for the genre by describing a nexus of concerns surrounding patrons, artists, markets, styles, philosophical beliefs, and identity politics. These studies have indeed helped to identify some of the variables that have played an important role in portraiture in particular situations. However, by treating these terms as universally applicable, they also artificially homogenize the genre to fit the categories of their own investigations.[391] A unified definition of portraiture cannot explain why Washington's portraits, having been deemed sufficient or even meritorious in the time that they

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[390] Bazin, "Ontology," 12.

[391] I owe much of this line of thought to Stephen Perkins's recent reexamination of the tenuous historical position of a painting of John II which the Louvre currently identifies as "the first surviving example since antiquity of an independent painted portrait." Perkins analysis demonstrates how the Louvre's definition purposefully excludes other "portrait-like" practices that both parallel and predate the portrait in question, such as medieval donor figures, heraldic imagery, and works executed in the round. Moreover, Perkins explains how the historical construction of this definition of "portrait" was tied to 19th and 20th century interests in individualism, nationalism, and realism; modern concepts that Perkins claims would have been very foreign to the painting's original creators. From this position, Perkins argues that applying the term "portrait" to this object invariably implies a set of historically contingent biases and expectations that mischaracterize the actual conditions of the object's creation. For Perkins, the designation "portrait" itself establishes a framework of investigation that is ill-suited for the object in question. See Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King*, 8. Also see Goodman, "Seven Strictures on Similarity," In *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972).

were created, later failed to stand up to the scrutiny of so many subsequent commentators. I argue that the apparent visual cohesion of the genre does not imply a corresponding level of conceptual cohesion. Moreover, tools and techniques are not in and of themselves meaningful. Images of faces, or anything else for that matter, are cultural tools, and therefore best understood through the work that they accomplish.

Appendix: Figures

Images have been redacted for copyright purposes.

Fig 1.1. George Washington Print, Washington Headquarter's Museum, c. 1800.

Fig 1.2. Joseph Wright, George Washington, 1790.

Fig. 1.3. Washington Print and Masonic Letter, Washington Headquarter's Museum, c. 1782 - 1800.

Fig. 1.4. Washington Print and Masonic Letter, Verso, Washington Headquarter's Museum, c. 1782 - 1800.

Fig. 1.5 Washington Print, Verso, Washington Headquarter's Museum, c. 1800.

Fig 1.6 John Smibert, *The Bermuda Group*, 1728, reworked 1739, oil on canvas, Yale University Art Gallery.

Fig. 1.7. James Granger, *Biographical History of England*, 1769.

Fig. 1.8. Washington Print from the 1797 English edition Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy.*

Fig. 1.9. Thomas Gainsborough, Sarah Siddons, 1785.

Fig. 1.10. Gilbert Stuart, Washington, 1795, National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.

Fig. 1.11. Gilbert Stuart, George Washington, 1796, National Portrait Gallery, Washington D. C.

Fig. 1.12. Gilbert Stuart, George Washington, Detail, 1796, National Portrait Gallery, Washington D. C.

Fig. 1.13. Terminus of the moon, photo credit NASA.

Fig. 1.14. C. W. Peale, George Washington, 1776, The Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY.

Fig. 1.15. Gilbert Stuart, Washington, c. 1805-1815, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY.

Fig. 1.16. Anonymous copy after Rembrandt Peale after Gilbert Stuart, ca. 1860.https://www.great-republic.com/products/19th-century-original-painting-portrait-of-george-washington-after-rembrandt-peale

Fig. 4.15. Jean-Antoine Houdon, Bust of Benjamin Franklin, 1778, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

Fig. 4.16. Jean-Jacques Caffieri, Bust of Benjamin Franklin, 1777, Bibliotheque Mazarine, Paris, France.

Fig. 4.17. Jean-Antoine Houdon, Bust of Benjamin Franklin, 1779, Philladeplphia Museum of Art, Philladelphia, PA, Assession number: 1996-162-1

Fig. 4.18. Jean-Antoine Houdon, Voltaire (François Marie Arouet de Voltaire), 1778, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

Fig. 4.19. Jean-Antoine Houdon, Voltaire (François Marie Arouet de Voltaire), 1778, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

Fig. 4.20. Jean-Antoine Houdon, Bust of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1779, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

Fig. 4.21. Francesco Carradori, *Istruzione elementare per gli studiosi della scultura*, 1802. Pictured in The Making of Sculpture: The Materials and Techniques of European Sculpture. Ed. Marjorie Trusted. London: V & A Publications, 2007.

Fig. 4.22. Francesco Carradori, *Istruzione elementare per gli studiosi della scultura*, 1802.

Fig. 4.23. Improvised Pointing Machine demonstrated on Wiki-Stone Carver, http://sculpturewiki.com/html/pointing.html#pointing:inplace

Fig. 4.24. John Henri Isaac Browere, John Adams, 1825, New York Historical Association, New York, NY.

Fig. 4.25. John Henri Isaac Browere, Marquise de Lafayette, 1825, New York Historical Association, New York, NY.

Fig. 4.26. Jean-Antione Houdon, Marquise de Lafayette, c. 1789, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, MA.

Fig. 5.1. After Jean-Antione Houdon, Bicentennial Commission's Official Portrait of George Washington, 1932, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., Object Number: LC-USZ62-97688.

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