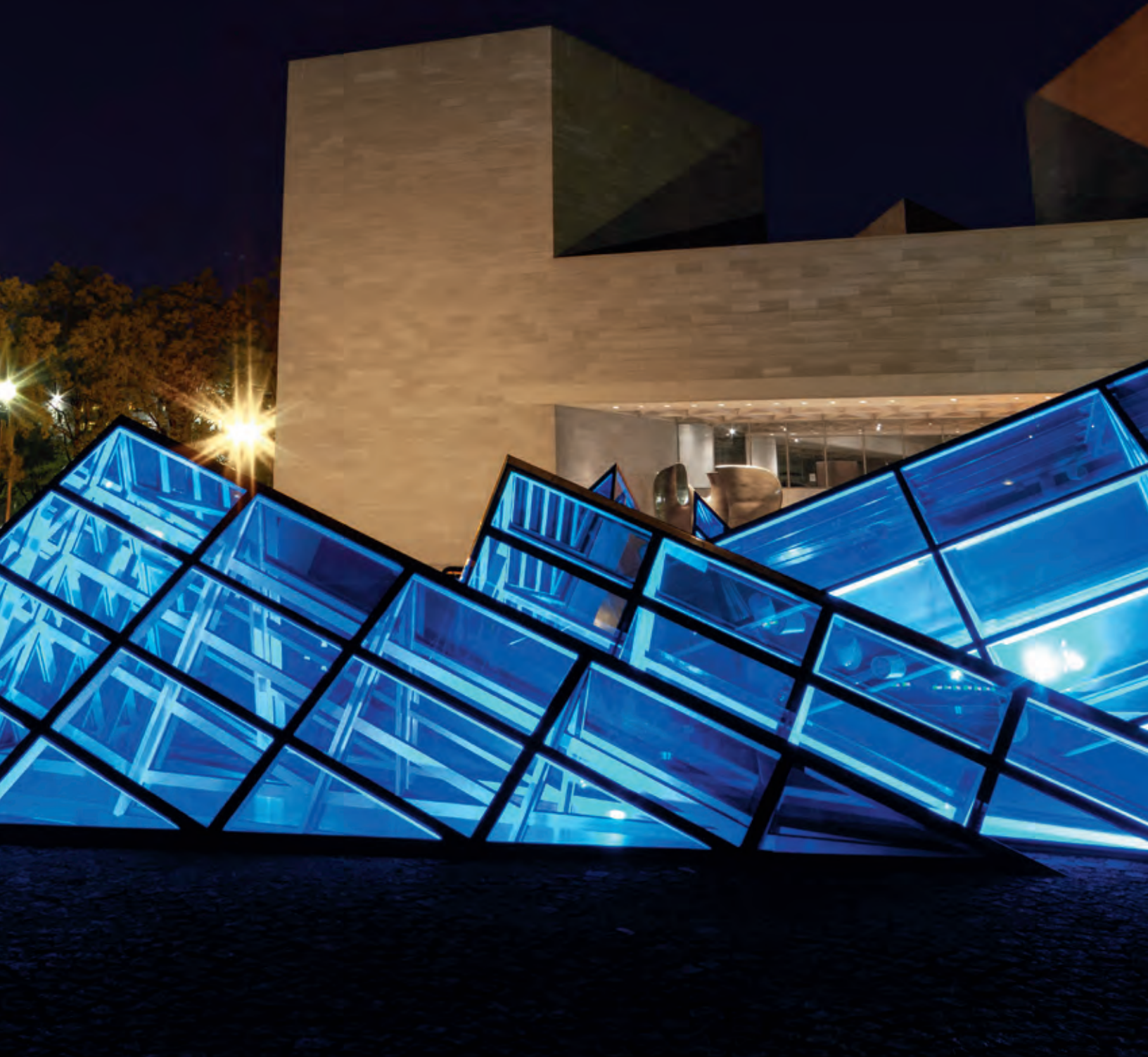


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Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

Gilbert Stuart and the Representation of the Nation

Gilbert Stuart's portraits of the first five American presidents, known collectively as the Gibbs-Coolidge paintings and produced between 1817 and 1821, occupy pride of place in the Gallery's West Building. More than incisive representations of the leaders of a burgeoning nation, these portraits express the ideological goals and aspirations of the moment while conveying ideals of early nineteenth-century taste. With this in mind, it is fair to say that the images of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe render the Early Republic in human form. At the beginning of their third century, they remain at the intersection of the representation of storied individuals and the nation writ large. As the Gallery strives to better represent the nation through looking at its collections in new ways, the Gibbs-Coolidge paintings constitute a provocative case study to think about how to formulate narratives that make a group of nineteenth-century paintings of "America" relevant to a twenty-first-century viewing public that rightly desires the Gallery to make its works and its spaces accessible to a broader audience.

The Gibbs-Coolidge paintings were commissioned by George Gibbs, a mineralogist and mineral collector from a prominent Newport, Rhode Island, family. In 1810 he married Laura Wolcott. Her father, Oliver Wolcott Jr., had been, among other things, a soldier in the Continental army, a graduate of Yale University, the second United States Secretary of the Treasury, a governor of Connecticut, and a federal judge. Wolcott knew Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Given these relationships, the five portraits

could have visualized the Gibbs family's close links to the Early Republic ruling class. Art historian Ellen Miles in 1995 suggested that they might well have reflected Gibbs and Wolcott's political affiliations and ambitions.

The Gibbs commission gives insight into early nineteenth-century patronage, and Miles points to the ideological lifting the paintings might have done at the time they were delivered. Contemporary commentators spoke at length about the accuracy of the likenesses portrayed and the ability of Stuart to capture the true character of his sitters. Indeed, in 1823 James Neal wrote, "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." Years later, in 1876, Jane Stuart, the artist's daughter, on a more humorous note mused that some people interpreted the shadows on the first president's nose as an indication of his predilection for snuff. By the 1830s, Stuart was lauded as the nation's greatest portraitist. This was due in no small part to his ability to make portraits that depicted both individuals and abstract concepts. In the case of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, Stuart represented flesh-and-blood men as well as the burgeoning nation in its heroism and glory.

While the Gibbs-Coolidge paintings would not enter the Gallery's collection until 1979 and 1986, Stuart's portraits have always been part of its holdings though the first exhibition devoted exclusively to his work, *Gilbert Stuart, Portraitist of the Young Republic*, would not take place until 1967. Edgar Richardson, the exhibition's curator,

understood not only the portrait's ability to be concrete and abstract but also its capacity to be a mirror. In his mind, Stuart's images of Washington concretize the impossibility of separating the man from the nation. Washington attained mythic status, and the popularity of Stuart's portraits of him, in Richardson's words, "is a phenomenon that tells us even more about Americans and how they wished to see Washington than it does about the man itself." This is to say, the mirror is also a blank canvas onto which viewers transfer their own experiences and concerns.

Richardson insists that a cult of heroism formed around George Washington as he participated in the formation of the United States. "Stuart," Richardson writes, "painted the great cult images of Washington." We still live with this cult, one amplified by the placement of the Gibbs-Coolidge paintings in the West Building.

These portraits still call to mind the formation of the United States and, for many, ideas of heroism associated with our nation's founding. But how do we regard the images of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe in a present that seeks to show the complex nature of American independence and the development of the Early Republic? These portraits easily accommodate a unified notion of America, one that is united and came together free of conflicts. They easily represent the image of a nation that is white and Anglo-Saxon.

However, in 2020, such questions of Americanness, notions of who counts as a full American, and whose Americas are shown on the Gallery's walls are up for scrutiny and revision. Visitors have noted that Adams was the only one

of these five presidents who was not a slave owner, and they have rightly asked about histories of slavery with respect to these pictures. From this standpoint, the Gibbs-Coolidge paintings have been transformed into objects of intense debate, and they have become indicative of the absence of stories in the Gallery of the United States that grapple with histories of slavery and inequality.

In this changed terrain, the portrait still sits at the nexus of representing concrete individuals and abstract ideals. The difference is our understanding of the five presidents as being complex individuals and acknowledging that the formation of the nation was dependent on the institution of slavery. As such, we regard the portrait as we always have. They have now been deployed to partake in different narratives of the nation. These new directions form the basis of how colleagues across the Gallery will chart new pathways in exhibition, education, and research. Paramount in all of these arenas is understanding that knowledge and new ways of animating the Gallery's collections can come from many different forms of expertise and conversations that foreground multiple perspectives. In that way, the Gallery can move toward greater diversity, equity, access, and inclusion.

• Steven Nelson, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*



**Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755–1828),
George Washington, c. 1821, oil on wood,
Gift of Thomas Jefferson Coolidge IV in
memory of his great-grandfather, Thomas
Jefferson Coolidge, his grandfather,
Thomas Jefferson Coolidge II, and his
father, Thomas Jefferson Coolidge III,
1979.5.1**