

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

Washington, D. C. June 25, 1967. Gilbert Stuart, painter-laureate of young America, will be honored by an exhibition opening at the National Gallery of Art two days before the start of the July 4th week end.

It is the first major showing of Stuart's work in almost 40 years.

Among the 54 pictures to be seen in Washington, D. C., from June 28 through August 20, are Stuart's memorable portraits of the first five presidents of the United States. These likenesses, which have done more than anything else to characterize the leaders of the early Republic, include two of Stuart's portraits of George Washington, the National Gallery's "Vaughan," and the full-length "Lansdowne" from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Other presidential portraits are John Adams, from the National Collection of Fine Arts; James Monroe, from The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, from the Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

Stuart, who is identified generally with paintings of men,

also did a thriving business in portraits of such eminent ladies as Mrs. John Adams and Mrs. Richard Yates, paintings which are in the collection of the National Gallery, and Mrs. Perez Morton, a painting lent to the exhibition by the Worcester Museum. The exhibition also has portraits of two granddaughters of Martha Washington--Mrs. Lawrence Lewis (Nelly Parke Custis), lent by Mrs. Edwin A. S. Lewis, and Elizabeth Parke Custis, lent anonymously.

Stuart spent the Revolutionary War years working for Benjamin West in London. He did not begin the great American historical pictures until 1793 when, bankrupt in Dublin, he decided to return home to America to recoup his fortune by painting one of the most famous men in the world, George Washington. Of course, as Washington's fame increased so did the demands of the portrait painters. As early as 1785, when he was sitting for the English artist Robert Edge Pine, General Washington wrote: "I am so hackneyed to the touches of the painter's pencil that I am now altogether at their beck, and sit like Patience on a monument." At a single time Washington found himself surrounded by the easels of four members of the Peale family of artists.

Soon after arriving in New York, Stuart painted the full-length of Chief Justice John Jay--lent to the exhibition by the Chief Justice's descendant Peter Jay. President Washington, however, was to be an elusive subject for two years. In 1795, when Stuart got his chance to paint the Chief Executive, the sittings did not go smoothly. The brilliant raconteur Stuart, with his showy erudition and continental manner, found himself unable to converse with the solid soldier of the Revolution, who maintained an

apathetic and frozen expression. The result was a popular success even though the critic John Neal observed in 1823: "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."

Stuart's reputation as the most incisive of all American portraitists does not rest on the Washington pictures alone, however. The brilliant full-length of The Skater, which is from the collection of the National Gallery and which established Stuart's European reputation, conveys the artist's mastery far more than any of the portraits of the first president.

From 1794 to 1805, Stuart followed the government from its temporary quarters in New York, to Philadelphia, and then to the new city of Washington. He situated his painting room between the White House and the Capitol, near what is now the corner of 7th and F Streets, N. W. Only a few hundred yards away was the swampy area destined to be the site of the National Gallery of Art a century and a half later. It was in this muddy new city in 1805 that Stuart began the portrait of Thomas Jefferson.

The strangely devious and profligate ways of Gilbert Stuart have been traced by biographers to a series of unsettling incidents in his early life. The self-willed son of a poor Rhode Islander, he amazed his family with his sketching skill and was apprenticed to a visiting Scottish painter, Cosmo Alexander. So apt a pupil was the boy that Alexander took him to Edinburgh. There, unexpectedly, the older man died, and it is probable that

Stuart came close to starvation before he was able to work his way back to America as a crew member of a merchant ship.

On his second trip overseas, in 1775, Stuart was saved from a similar misadventure when he appealed for help from a fatherly American artist who immediately took the young painter into his London home. Benjamin West was History Painter to George III, and, with the backing of West, young Stuart achieved prominence in the England of Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Romney. It was during this period that Stuart painted the portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the American expatriate, John Singleton Copley. The Reynolds and Copley pictures have been lent to the exhibition by the National Portrait Gallery of London.

"Gilbert Stuart, Portraitist of the Young Republic" presents a view of the artist's entire productive life, a life which had its genesis as an unschooled primitive who painted the picture of Mrs. John Bannister and Her Son, which has been lent by the Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island. Most of the paintings in the exhibition will be shown later at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An illustrated catalogue with introductory text by Edgar P. Richardson sells for \$2.00.

Catalogues, black-and-white photographs and color transparencies on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 225.