

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART RECEIVES FIRST FIVE PRESIDENTIAL PORTRAITS BY STUART

WASHINGTON, D. C. April 10, 1979. The National Gallery of Art will receive the only surviving set of portraits of the first five presidents by the renowned American portraitist Gilbert Stuart (1775-1828) through gifts by Thomas Jefferson Coolidge IV and purchases with the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. The set will go on view April 27 in the Gallery's West Building as the core of a new installation of American paintings.

All five portraits were painted by Stuart between 1810 and 1825. Known as the Gibbs-Coolidge set, the paintings were commissioned by Colonel George Gibbs of Rhode Island and subsequently acquired by Thomas Jefferson Coolidge of Boston, a great-grandson of the nation's third president.

The portrait of George Washington will be presented to the Gallery by 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. Mr. Coolidge has designated the portrait of Thomas Jefferson as a promised gift. The portraits of James Monroe, John Adams, and James Madison have been purchased through the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

These acquisitions bring to the National Gallery a Stuart group of outstanding aesthetic quality. Among the Gallery's other Stuart paintings

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are such well-known and exceptionally fine examples as The Skater (Portrait of William Grant), Mrs. Richard Yates and the original Vaughan portrait of Washington.

A similar set was made by Stuart for a Boston picture dealer and framemaker, John Doggett. The Doggett set was destroyed when three portraits burned in the 1851 fire at the Capitol's Congressional Library. Engraved reproductions based on this set were enormously popular during the Federal period, earning the nickname "The American Kings."

The Gibbs-Coolidge set represents some of Stuart's finest male portraits. Concentrating on facial characterizations, eliminating unnecessary accessories and employing neutral backgrounds and simple bust or half-length compositions, he rendered each president with unusual individuality, warmth and humanity. His skillful use of translucent glazes on hard-wood panels has resulted in luminous surfaces, generating a natural glow to flesh tones.

Unlike many of his British and American contemporaries, who often assigned studio assistants to paint copies of their original portraits of distinguished sitters, Stuart usually executed his works by himself. This practice is all the more remarkable considering the many commissions he accepted for replicas of his life portraits of the Founding Fathers. He painted three portraits of Washington from life -- the Vaughan (1795), in the Gallery's collection, a bust-length painting in which Washington faces to his left; the Athenaeum (1796), also a bust-length work in which he faces right; and the Lansdowne (1796), which is a full-length example. The Athenaeum version in the Gibbs-Coolidge set is the fourth Stuart portrait of Washington to enter the Gallery's collection.

Stuart portraits of the other presidents represented in this set

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are rarer. Of the five existing portraits of John Adams by Stuart, those depicting Adams toward the end of his life -- among them the Gibbs-Coolidge version -- are considered among his finest works. Six of Stuart's portraits of Jefferson are extant, as are four of James Madison and three of James Monroe.

The installation of the Gibbs-Coolidge portraits in gallery 60B will be complemented by rehanging of other works by Stuart, as well as those by his contemporaries John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) and Benjamin West (1738-1820). Among the works on view will be Stuart's well-known paintings of The Skater (Portrait of William Grant), Mrs. Richard Yates and the original Vaughan version of Washington in gallery 60A. The Copley Family and The Red Cross Knight by Copley will be installed in gallery 64 with his Watson and the Shark; and West's Battle of La Hogue and Colonel Guy Johnson, as well as examples by his followers Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) and John Trumbull (1756-1843), will be on view in gallery 62.

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