Lansdowne Portrait

Ilya Golden 12/1/12

Mr. O’Shea – US History Period 1

After the United States of America was formed, the Americans wanted to show nationalism. Nationalism is the devotion, loyalty, and patriotism to one’s own nation. This was expressed in many ways, which included dances, songs, and art. Gilbert Stuart was one artist who expressed nationalism in his paintings, which were mostly portraits. There would often be hidden meanings and expressions in the portraits, signifying military rule, peace, and the thirteen states.

Gilbert Stuart was born in Rhode Island during the period of Colonial America. In 1761, at the age of six, Stuart began to show talent in painting. He was tutored by Cosmo Alexander, another famous artist at the time. After moving to Scotland, Alexander passed away, and Stuart could not pursue his career there. He moved back to Newport, Rhode Island in 1773.

Once the American Revolution was brewing, Stuart left for England in 1775. He became a protégé under Benjamin West, another famous painter. Even though he had many commissions, Stuart did not have a lot of money. Sometime around 1787, he was in danger of being sent to the debtor’s prison, and fled to Dublin, Ireland. Once there, Stuart painted many incomplete paintings and accumulated just as much debt as he had in England. He moved back to the United States and settled in New York City for a brief time (1793), eventually moving to Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1795.

After opening a studio, many wealthy American commissioners took interest in Stuart. He painted many pictures of famous Americans of the day, including the first six Presidents of the United States of America, Abigail Adams, Henry Rice, Martha Washington, John Jay, Horace Binney, Commodore John Barry, and others. Work in his studio eventually led to his most famous work of art, the painting of George Washington, also known as *The Athenaeum*. He painted many paintings of Washington, and they were in high demand for copies, but none as much as *The Athenaeum*.

*The Athenaeum* was painted in 1796, and is an unfinished painting of George Washington. As of today, it is his most celebrated and famous work. There were a total of 130 replicas of *The Athenaeum* painted by Stuart and his daughters. The original version was never completed, but rather used to create the copies. Around 70 were sold for 100$ each. The incomplete painting currently hangs in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, and is used on the US 1$ bill.

It can be said that Stuart made another painting that was almost as famous at *The Athenaeum*. This painting is called the *Lansdowne* *portrait*, and features George Washington, symbolically standing with a sword in his hand. It was commissioned in April 1796 by Senator William Bingham of Pennsylvania, who was one of the wealthiest men in the United States of America at the time. It measures 8 by 5 feet, and was given to the British Prime Minister, William Petty FitzMaurice. Stuart depicts Washington standing and renouncing a third term as U.S. President. Several replicas were made of the *Lansdowne portrait*. The original is currently on permanent display at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. It was bought for 30$ million by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation in 2001, and stayed in the National Portrait Gallery, where it was previously on anonymous loan. Replicas are on display in the East Room of the White House, the Old State house in Hartford, Connecticut, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

The *Lansdowne* *portrait* contains a lot of symbolism relating to American and ancient Roman symbols of the Roman Republic. George Washington is shown standing, dressed in a black suit with an extended hand, as if in the middle of orating a speech. Behind him is a row of two Doric columns, with an additional row on the left. He also has a sword in his hand, which signifies a democratic form of government – It is a dress sword, rather than a battle sword, which would symbolize a monarchy or militaristic dictatorship. There is a transition of storm clouds into a rainbow, which signifies the American Revolutionary War giving way to a time of peace for the Americans post the Treaty of Paris (1783). There is a medallion on the chair showing the colors of the American flag. There are also numerous books around the table, two on it, and five under. The books on the table are *Federalist* and *Journal of Congress*, referencing the Federalist Papers and the Congressional Record. The books under the table symbolize Washington’s position as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. There is a pen and paper on the table as well, depicting the rule of law. This concept states that every citizen is subject to the law, standing in contrast to the belief of divine right to rule. The term ‘every citizen’ shows that even the ruler can be brought under the law. The leg of the table is shaped like fasces, which is the ancient Roman symbol for power. There is an inkwell on the table, engraved with Washington’s coat of arms. The quill expresses loyalty to the United States and the power he wielded. His clenched facial expression comes from the false teeth that he wore, showing the constrained expression that is easily viewed in many portraits of George Washington.

The *Lansdowne portrait* reflects many American values and the current standing of the country, as well as many things about Washington. It stands an impressive 8 feet tall (painted in *grand manner* style), and has a certain grandeur about it, which attracted me when I stepped into the room. It is extremely significant to be in a museum – This is a copy of the painting that was saved by Dolley Madison, during War of 1812, when the British went to burn Washington D.C. If it was not saved, copies could not have been made, and there are chances the world would not be able to see this masterpiece by Gilbert Stuart.

Bibliography

About to be made bitches