

GEORGE WASHINGTON, PUBLIC SPACE, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Create a contemporary Washington as a symbol or artwork to fit with a museum exhibition in your community.

LEVEL:

Upper Elementary, Middle School

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately one class session

STANDARDS:

- Civics Agency
- Writing
- Primary Source Analysis
- Early American History
- Public History

EAD THEME:

We the People

QUESTIONS:

- Who created these works of art?
- In what ways might the depiction of George Washington reflect the particular beliefs or identities of the artists?
- More than two centuries after his death, can George Washington continue to serve as a relatable symbol for the nation's shared history?

OBJECTIVES:

Students will analyze some of the various ways that George Washington has been depicted in different media from the 1780s to the 21st century;

Students will reflect on and discuss the significance of national symbols and our engagement with them as part of their civic life;

Students will identify and evaluate important themes, trends, and absences in these depictions by creating a museum exhibit catalog about them;

Students will practice civic engagement by designing and proposing a depiction of George Washington that is suited to their community

PLAN:**Engage:**

- A special exhibition at a museum typically curates a number of objects—paintings, artifacts, books, etc.—in order to present visitors with an overview as well as an argument about the topic.
 - Museums often publish exhibition catalogues so that the exhibition is accessible and preserved for a wider audience. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for instance, [has an archive of hundreds of these, dating back to the late 19th century.](#)
 - Students can peruse these to get a sense of what the genre of exhibition catalogues typically looks like.

Explore:

Tell the students: based on your analysis and discussion of the depictions of Washington from the 1780s to the 21st century, choose 5-7 examples from the Primary Source Document (included in PDF) that you believe reflect important aspects of his status as a national symbol. These will be the foundation of your museum exhibition, and you will include all of them in your museum catalogue. These examples should reflect some of the following:

- important stylistic conventions used to depict Washington;
- important qualities or characteristics attributed to him;
- important historical events or roles that he participated in;
- important absences or biases that you detect in these depictions,
- important dynamics that the work of art creates with the viewer.

Tell the students that their analysis of these works can be based on both first-hand observation and background reading.

Explain/Evaluate:

To these choices, students should create one final depiction of Washington to include in the exhibition catalogue. This should be a piece of artwork—a statue or other monument, painting, performance, poem, etc.—that could exist in a specific public space somewhere in your state. The depiction does not only need to be of Washington, but may include Mount Vernon, and other spaces, contexts, and people who are connected with Washington. Students should design it in a way that reflects their beliefs and perspective about the themes of civic participation, we the people, and a people in the world.

Extend:

Students can have the opportunity to actually publish their communication in a school newspaper, Twitter or Facebook page, or address it to the school, local parks department, or whatever agency or office that might have authority over the preservation or creation of the historical site in question.

OTHER RESOURCES

There are innumerable visual depictions of Washington. The Washington Library at Mount Vernon has numerous digital versions of portraits, photographs, artifacts, and other primary sources related to Washington available on its website. These include:

- [Ephemera](#)
 - [Carte-de-visite and portraits](#)
 - [Mount Vernon estate images](#)
 - [Mount Vernon postcards](#)
 - [People at Mount Vernon](#)
 - [Images of George Washington](#)
 - [Paintings and Sculpture](#)
 - [Secondary Story: Life Portraits](#)
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By 1785, George Washington worried that he had already sat for too many portraits.

"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 whilst they are delineating the lines of my face.... At first I was as impatient at the request, and as restive under the operation, as a Colt is of the Saddle—The next time, I submitted very reluctantly, but with less flouncing. Now, no dray moves more readily to the Thill, than I do to the Painters Chair." ([Washington to Francis Hopkinson, 1785](#))

If initially resistant to sitting still for a painter, Washington sure got used to it. From the Revolution to his death in 1799, the portraits of him accumulated. Copies proliferated, meaning that he was a national symbol that was recognizable to people who would never meet him in person. Americans' fascination with depicting Washington would only accelerate after his death. From the early 1800s, he appeared in innumerable paintings, engravings, household consumer products such as water jugs, statues and monuments, and performances like plays, television, and film. This continues today.

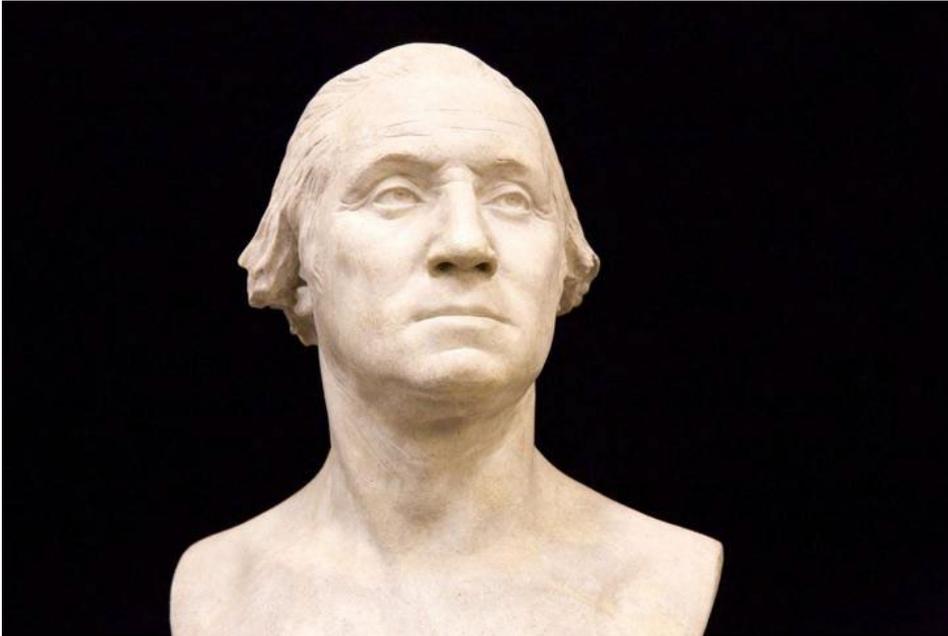
But which Washington appears in these depictions? What characteristics and qualities do authors, artists, and others attribute to Washington? What historical event or narrative do they place him in? How is the viewer supposed to relate to Washington? In other words, what do these depictions show us about Washington as a national symbol, and about national symbols in general?

Although there are aspects of Washington that recur in these depictions over the decades and centuries, artists also make important changes and use Washington's image to make different arguments about him and about America. How we depict national symbols and relate to them is an important civic question, because the way we tell history reflects our beliefs, ideals, and aspirations as a people. This is a process that all students can engage in, giving themselves the opportunity to practice reflective patriotism and civic disagreement as they work through tough questions about our history.

This learning resource presents students with a number of notable depictions of Washington from 1785 to 2016. Based on student observations about what Washington has represented as a national symbol to Americans throughout history, students will express their own perspective on what a meaningful depiction of Washington would look like in their community today.

PRIMARY SOURCE
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Jean-Antoine Houdon [bust of George Washington](#) (1785)



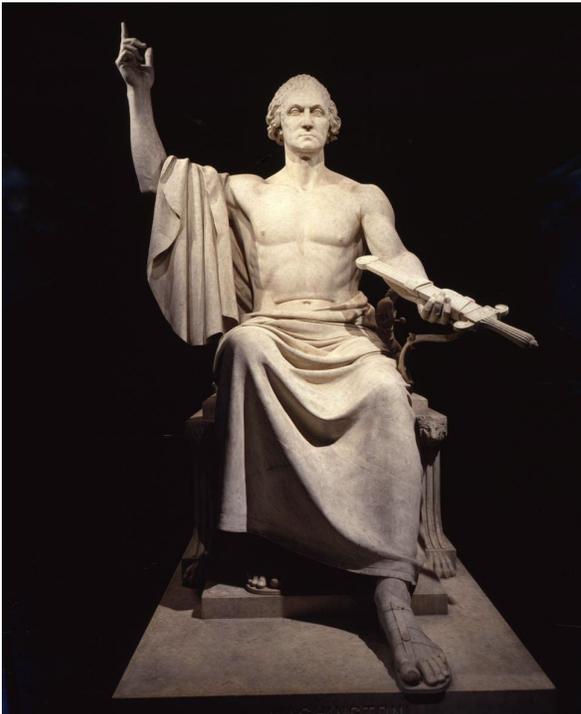
Edward Savage, [The Washington Family](#) (1789-1796)



[John Trumbull, *General George Washington Resigning his Commission* \(1826\)](#)



[Horatio Greenough, *George Washington* \(1841\)](#)



Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851)



Junius Brutus Stearns, *The Life of George Washington: The Farmer* (1853)



[Constantino Brumidi, *The Apotheosis of Washington* \(1865\)](#)



[1869 one-dollar note \(first on which Washington appeared\)](#)



PRIMARY SOURCE

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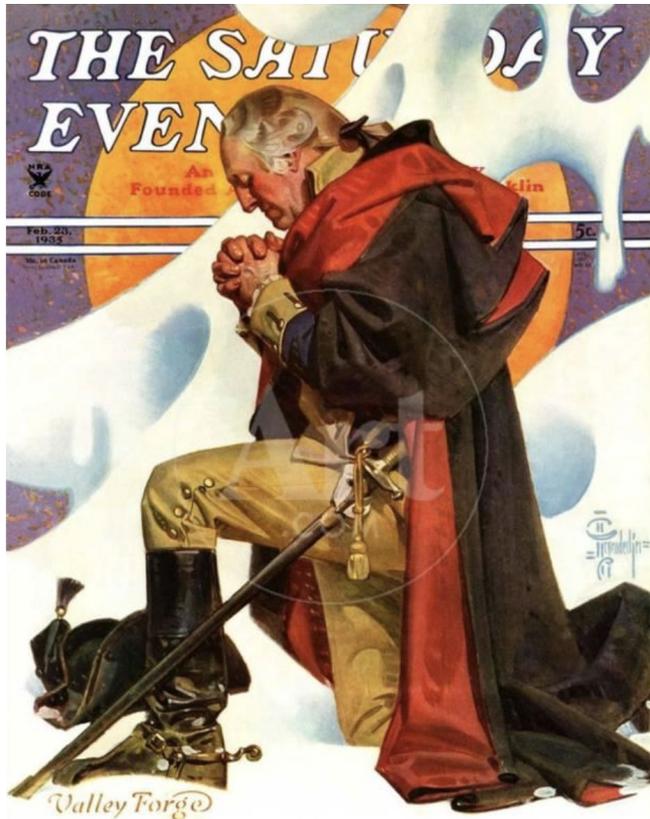
[Washington and Lincoln \(Apotheosis\) \(1865\)](#)



[Richard Henry Park, Washington Monument \(Milwaukee, 1885\)](#)



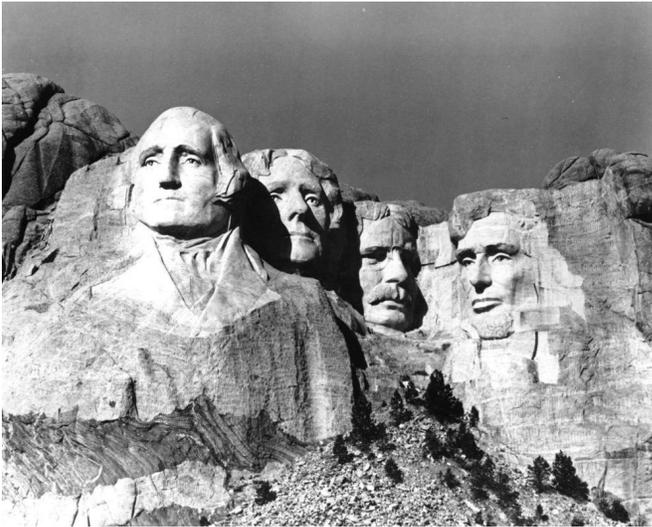
Saturday Evening Post (Feb. 23, 1935)



[Victor Arnautoff, *The Life of Washington* \(1936\)](#)



[National Parks Service, Mount Rushmore after completion \(1941\)](#)



Jacob Lawrence, [“We crossed the River...”](#) in *Struggle: From the History of the American People* (1954-6)



James West, *Point of View* (2006)



Christopher Jackson as George Washington in Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2016) (Photograph by Joan Marcus/Richard Rodgers Theatre)



WASHINGTON AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

During his lifetime and afterlife, George Washington has been one of the—if not *the*—most important national symbolic figures in the United States. In the decades after his death, his plantation and mansion, Mount Vernon, became the most popular national tourist site. Meanwhile, George Washington seemed like the one symbol that could unite the national community, helping it overcome the internal divisions that threatened to tear it apart between national Independence (1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865).

Visitors and others who consumed the many books, articles, lectures, or art about Washington often believed that he exemplified the special qualities of dignity, fair-mindedness, fortitude, and sense of duty that had made the Revolution and Founding successful and aspirational. Military officer Henry Lee named Washington, “First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” At the same time, others questioned or challenged Washington’s status as a national symbol. For instance, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, recognized that Washington did free the enslaved people he owned at Mount Vernon, but also that Washington’s “monument is built up by the price of human blood.” The stakes of Washington as a national symbol have changed since the late nineteenth century. But interest in Washington as a national symbol and debates about what he symbolizes have continued to matter to Americans into the 21st century.

These learning resources explore Washington’s meaning and influence as a national symbol. Some of these sources are in Washington’s own words, but most are in the words or art of others. These sources show how and why Washington was a national symbol during his life and after his death. More important, they help students analyze the civics question of how Americans have related to Washington as a national symbol. This will support students as they think critically about how our relationship with the nation’s history and its symbols both reflects and influences our identity and civic life as a people.

The sources in this lesson have the potential to engage students with four major civics themes:

- The importance of understanding and commemorating our history as a type of **civic participation**
- The complexity and stakes of recognizing the shared history of **we the people**
- The dynamic between national identity and the roles played by the **U.S. in the world**
- The connection between understanding history and civic engagement with **contemporary debates and possibilities.**

With this Learning Resource, the History Questions aim to stir classroom analysis of the primary sources, and the Civics Questions to help students apply those insights about history to our contemporary context. The Civics Activity asks students to think creatively about what Washington can symbolize today.