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In God We (Dis)Trust:
George Washington in
the Capitol Rotunda



A six-year-old child asked his mother: “Mama, why is George Washington not wearing a shirt?” When his mother did not respond he asked again, and again, with increasing volume and intensity in his voice each time he asked, until it reached a frantic, “MAMA, WHY IS GEORGE WASHINGTON NOT WEARING A SHIRT?” Last summer in the Smithsonian Museum of American History, I witnessed this child’s intuitive response to Horatio Greenough’s statue (Fig. 1) which was similar to the responses of many Americans who viewed it in 1841, when it was first placed in the Capitol Rotunda. The visual traditions and the iconography of Washington that were established in the time of his presidency stuck with American artists for decades. While many dignified and heroic images of Washington had been made, none were like Greenough’s statue where Washington was likened to the imagery of a Roman Emperor or God. Greenough’s use of classical imagery was not well-received or understood by the American public and the statue drew much controversy. It was removed from the rotunda in 1843, after it cracked the floor. Greenough’s work offered a radical and unpalatable departure from the traditional way that Washington had been shown in American art. Perhaps surprisingly, two decades later another image of Washington was created in the capitol rotunda that was directly influenced by Greenough’s work, Constantino Brumidi’s *Apotheosis of Washington* (Fig. 2). Brumidi drew on similar iconography as Greenough, but handled it in a different way, learning from the earlier controversy to create a work that would be celebrated. Greenough fundamentally misunderstood how Americans would respond to the classical imagery in his work, while Brumidi better understood the American mindset and created a work that moderated classical allegory with current American sensibilities.

Before Greenough, the visual tradition of Washington was heroic, but not godly. Rhode Island-born portraitist Gilbert Stuart was one of the first men to paint Washington and would create hundreds of images of Washington during his career.¹ The copies that Stuart made helped to cement Washington’s image into the American consciousness, as these images were widely distributed throughout the young nation. Washington’s visage was one of a dignified statesman, a man of status but also humility. In larger works such as the 1796 *Lansdowne Portrait*, Stuart worked in some references to classical civilizations, incorporating details such as the column in the background, which was a traditional symbol of fortitude. Stuart used these details to draw parallels between the ancient Roman Republic and the American Republic. Stuart’s representations of Washington would shape the way that subsequent artists depicted Washington.

Even before Stuart painted the severe image of a president in office, John Trumbull reconstructed Washington’s days as the leader of the Continental Army and painted many grandiose scenes of him both on and off the battlefield. Trumbull’s 1792-1794 painting, *Washington before Trenton*, displays the artist’s romantic memory of the Revolution. Washington stands with a stoic determination even as there is a sense of anxiety in the background. The Battle of Trenton was one of Washington’s great triumphs and many artists would follow Trumbull back to this battle, most notably Emanuel Leutze, who painted his *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in 1851.

Following Washington’s death in 1799, several images of Apotheoses of Washington circulated as memorial material. The engraver David Edwin made a print of Washington ascending into heaven (Fig. 3) in 1800. While Washington is shown here in Roman dress and a cherub goes to place a crown of laurels on his head, the artist has imbued Washington with a sense of humility. In 1802, John James Barralet produced a

second, widely distributed image of the apotheosis of Washington (Fig. 4). This image is more iconographically challenging than Edwin's as Barralet filled his image with allegorical figures. In the center, Washington is lifted from his tomb by an angel and by Father Time to be brought to heaven.² Barralet showed Washington in Roman dress but like in Edwin's work he is shown fully clothed.³ This respect for modesty in classically-influenced images of Washington would not always be the case.

Greenough's *Washington* presented a dramatic departure from the iconographic tradition of Washington in American art. In 1832, the United States Congress commissioned Greenough to make a statue for the centennial of Washington's birth. Nine years later, after much anticipation, the marble statue arrived in America from Greenough's Florence studio, and was placed in the rotunda of the Capitol building. The statue was larger than life size, showing the former president bare chested and seated on a throne with one hand pointed up to the heavens and the other holding a sword. This statue is imbued with messages about the American republic, and its initial location of inside of the Capitol rotunda amplified these messages, but perhaps not in a way that the sculptor had intended or anticipated.

Greenough's statue incorporated ideas from past artworks in its presentation of Washington. There are striking similarities to Phidias' Zeus that once stood in the temple at Olympia (Fig. 5). While this statue was lost in antiquity, it was still known by artists in the 1800s through ancient accounts and later drawings. French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres modeled his 1811 painting, *Jupiter and Thetis* (Fig. 6), after Phidias' statue. A letter from Representative Edward Everett "urged Greenough to study it," likening the United States Capitol to a Greek Temple.⁴ Everett also told Greenough "Your Washington may be to the people of America...what the great national statue was to the Greeks."⁵ Greenough would certainly

achieve a statue in a Phidian style but would miss his mark on how his work would be received in America.

Greenough lived and worked in Europe for most of his adult life spending only about three years in America.⁶ In Italy he became attuned to the tenets of Classicism that were prevalent in European art. As seen in Ingres' highly-praised painting, European audiences would not object to the artistic use of nudity. Such a display of the human form appealed to European audiences and was fully expected as part of the artistic skill set. Thinking in these terms is what set Greenough up for his statue's rough reception in America, where the audience was less concerned with the skillful execution of form than they were with emotional and religiously-based response to subject matter.

In January 1841, an artist (whose name was not reported) saw the statue in Greenough's Italian studio and wrote a letter to the *New York Signal* praising it as "...strikingly grand and appropriate—both republican and Christian."⁷ This artist likely referenced the Colossus of Constantine (Fig. 7) in the letter.⁸ This Roman statue, like Ingres' painting, drew on Phidias' Zeus for inspiration of its form, furthering the connection that Everett urged Greenough to make between his work and Phidias's. While the statue did not survive in its entirety, the remaining pieces are the head, hand, part of an arm, and a foot.⁹ From these pieces, it is known that the statue of Constantine would have been seated in a throne and pointing up with his right hand. In the statue of Constantine this was a reference to divine providence, as he was the Roman Emperor who embraced Christianity. According to the author of the letter, Greenough's Washington is meant to mirror the statue of Constantine in both form and in message, but this is not entirely correct. The author applied the term "republican" to the comparison of Washington to Constantine, but Constantine was an Emperor, not a

Senator or Consul. The attribution of “republican” does not fit who Constantine was as a historical figure, but it fit Washington, and drawing this parallel, the artist set the tone that he thought Greenough intended for his statue. History views Constantine as a pillar of civic and religious virtue, and in mirroring Constantine’s pose in his work, Greenough forged a link between Washington and Constantine as important men in both affairs of state and morality. The story of Washington and the Cherry tree, published in Mason Locke Weems’ 1800 book, created an image of Washington as a pillar of morality and this idea is reinforced through the parallels to Constantine in Greenough’s work.¹⁰

The imagery on the back and sides of the throne also communicate a message of morality and wisdom. The armrests of the throne are in the shapes of lions, which is a common symbol associated with King Solomon who was a wise and just Biblical ruler. The theme of wisdom is compounded by the relief sculpture on the right side of the throne, where Apollo is shown in his chariot (Fig. 8). The inclusion of Apollo references the ideas of enlightenment thinking and reason, both things for which Washington and America stood. On the left Greenough included a relief of Hercules as a child, wrestling with a snake to save his brother (Fig. 9). This scene acts as a reference to the American triumph over England in the struggle for independence and exemplifies the bravery and strength of the American people. Sculpted into the back of the throne are the figures of Christopher Columbus and a Native American (Fig. 10). Columbus, like Washington, wears a Roman toga. Columbus acts as a reference to the first European to come to America, linking him to Washington who was the first president of the United States. The decision to clothe Columbus in a toga underscores Greenough’s commitment to allegorical language in a

classical style in his work. The Native American is bare chested, wearing only a vest and skirt; in this way he is also dressed like Washington, as they are both partially nude.

Despite the initial excitement over the statue, public opinion of the statue rapidly changed. Critics were very vocal in their reactions to the statue. Philip Hone, a politician from New York, said that Washington was “undressed with a napkin lying in his lap,” which was a jab at the figure’s Roman dress.¹¹ Congressman Henry Wise, who had been a supporter of Greenough before seeing the statue said that “He would keep the head of Greenough’s figure and throw the body in the Potomac.”¹² The visual tradition was one where important figures wore clothes, which stemmed from America’s Puritan roots. Americans also lacked the long art historical legacy that Europeans had and were far less comfortable with showing the naked body in their art. Until this point, nudity in American art had been reserved for Native Americans and slaves. There was an unconscious association with nudity in art with “the other” and seeing George Washington shown in this way was not well received by the public.

The parallels to imperial iconography were also unsettling, as there was a monumental figure of imperial majesty sitting in the middle of the still young nation’s legislative branch. While the public railed against the statue, Greenough believed that these complaints came from the poor lighting in the rotunda, not from complaints regarding the form of the statue.¹³ The immense weight of the statue eventually cracked the floor of the rotunda leading to its removal to the East Lawn two years after its installation. Greenough’s statue remained on the East Lawn for several years before being placed in the Smithsonian Castle.

The removal of the statue because critics objected to Washington’s partial nudity would make sense if Greenough’s statue were then moved to storage. But the statue was placed on display on the East lawn, arguably a more visible and

certainly more open-access spot than inside the Capitol Building. This move suggests a deeper political problem than Washington not wearing a shirt. The imagery used by Greenough is akin to representations of Greek gods and Roman Emperors and perhaps having this imperial imagery in the heart of the United States legislative branch was not the best idea for the still-young democracy. This conflict between republican and imperial ideals could be the larger reason for the relocation of Greenough's statue. Displaying the statue outside of the Capitol allowed the public to look upon Greenough's Washington and see it as a representation of American ideology infused with Roman imagery, while removing the implication of an imperial image trying to eclipse American democracy.

Given the reception and removal Greenough's statue it may seem strange that a few decades later another deification of Washington was created inside of the Capitol rotunda. Constantino Brumidi completed *The Apotheosis of Washington* in 1865, as America was embroiled in a brutal civil war. While Brumidi's image of Washington draws on ideas similar to Greenough's, he clothed Washington from the waist up in a military jacket and from the waist down in a purple cloth, making reference to both his military service and civil authority in America. Seated next to Washington are the figures of Liberty and Victory. Liberty sits to his right and holds an open book and a fasces, which was a symbol of power in ancient Rome. On Washington's left, Victory plays a horn trumpeting the triumph of Washington and America. Given the date near the conclusion of the Civil War, the Revolutionary victory could have been seen as a prelude to the Union's victory over the Confederacy. In the circle below the pantheon there are six personifications of aspects of American life, starting above Washington with Commerce, and continuing clockwise with Mechanics, Agriculture, War, Science, and Marine. Each of these scenes combine historical and mythological figures. Brumidi likely learned from the controversy surrounding

Greenough's statue and created his image in a way that would not offend American sensibilities, while still incorporating classical imagery in a more palatable glorification of Washington.

Similar to Greenough, Brumidi drew on European images as a source of inspiration for his image of Washington. Brumidi was influenced by Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin*. Brumidi's fresco follows the same composition as Correggio's with a spiraling scene that draws the eye of the viewer upwards to the figure who is being honoured.¹⁴ While Brumidi was influenced by Correggio's style, he does not copy it directly, as he chose not to place Washington at the center of the image, instead placing him on the same level as the personifications of Liberty and Victory.

The center in most apotheosis images is the place of highest honor, as it was viewed as being representative of heaven in the work. In Correggio's piece, Mary is being raised into heaven and is placed in the center. Brumidi places Washington within a circle of figures, instead of the direct center. His decision to do this was twofold. In earlier versions Washington was in the center, but Brumidi decided against placing him there, as a figure in the center would require Brumidi to build the scene around him, giving the sense of the work having a right side up.¹⁵ The second part of this decision was to avoid making the same missteps as Greenough, placing a figure in the direct center of an apotheosis scene sent a signal that the figure in the center was no longer a human person, but was now a spiritual or holy entity. Placing Washington outside of the center allowed Brumidi to still honour Washington, without defying him outright. While both men drew on European art for inspiration, Brumidi was able to tactfully blend European symbols with American style to create a successful work.

The use of classical imagery in both Greenough's and Brumidi's works defied American conventions and were a bold shift in the iconographic legacy of George Washington. Greenough tried to connect to American traditions in his work, but he did so in a way that disconnected the American public from the art. Greenough's language was allegorical, and his style classical, both of which were incompatible with American sensibilities. Brumidi, while inspired by Greenough, learned from the controversy surrounding his statue and created an image that better blended classical allegorical language with images of American ideals. Brumidi understood American taste in a way that Greenough did not. This is reflected in his art as he avoided the ridicule suffered by Greenough, and his work remains in the Capitol rotunda today.

NOTES

- ¹ A prime example of this is the 1792 *Athenaeum Portrait*, off of which Stuart would base many of his images of Washington.
- ² "Online Library of Liberty." Presidents Day and the Apotheosis of Washington - Online Library of Liberty, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/presidents-day-and-the-apotheosis-of-washington>.
- ³ Ibid. There was a note about this being a funerary shroud.
- ⁴ Letter from Everett to Greenough, July 29, 1832.
- ⁵ Nathalia Wright, *Horatio Greenough: the first American sculptor*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963, 124-125.
- ⁶ Ibid, 37.
- ⁷ "Letter to the Editor of the New York Signal." *Alexandria Gazette*, 2 Jan. 1841. *America's Historical Newspapers*.
- ⁸ The letter was reprinted in many different newspapers, with some referring to an artist friend of Greenough, and

others simply saying "an artist."

⁹ The body of the statue would have likely been made of wood and would not have survived.

¹⁰ Katie Uva, "Parson Weems." *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/parson-weems/.

¹¹ Dan Lubin and Margaretta M. Lovell. *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. London: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008.

¹² Nathalia Wright, *Horatio Greenough: the first American sculptor*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963.,145.

¹³ Ibid., 148.

¹⁴ Barbara A. Wolanin, and Constantino Brumidi. *Constantino Brumidi: artist of the Capitol*. U.S. G.P.O., 1998., 132.

¹⁵ Ibid.,142.



Fig. 1
Horatio Greenough, *Washington*, 1841.

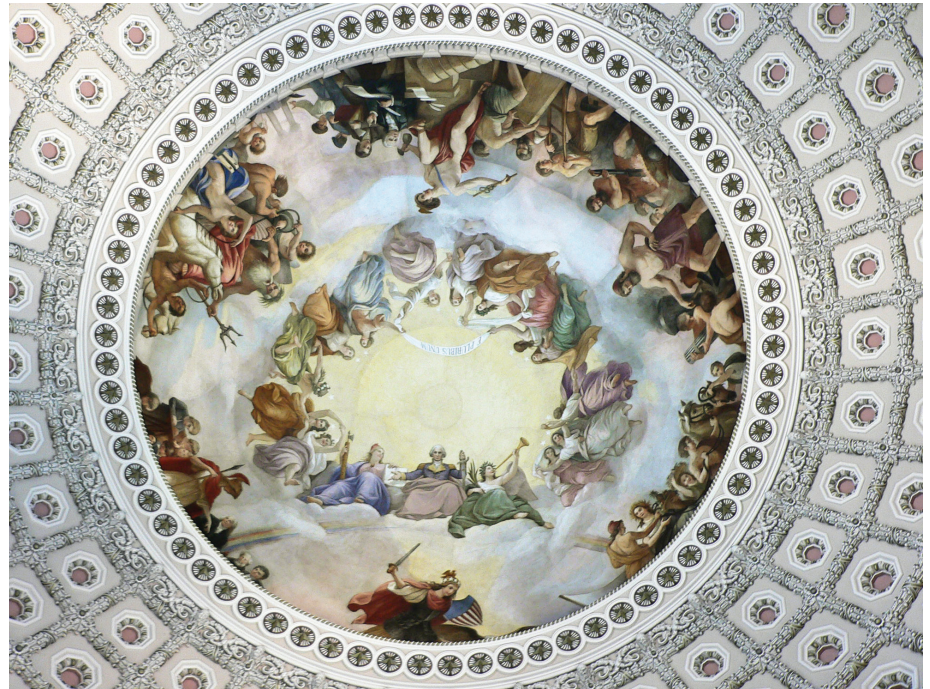


Fig. 2
Constantino Brumidi, *Apotheosis of Washington*, 1865.



Fig. 3
David Edwin, *Apotheosis of Washington*, 1800.



Fig. 4
John James Barralet, *Apotheosis of Washington*, 1802.



Fig. 5
19th Century Engraving of Phidias' *Zeus*.

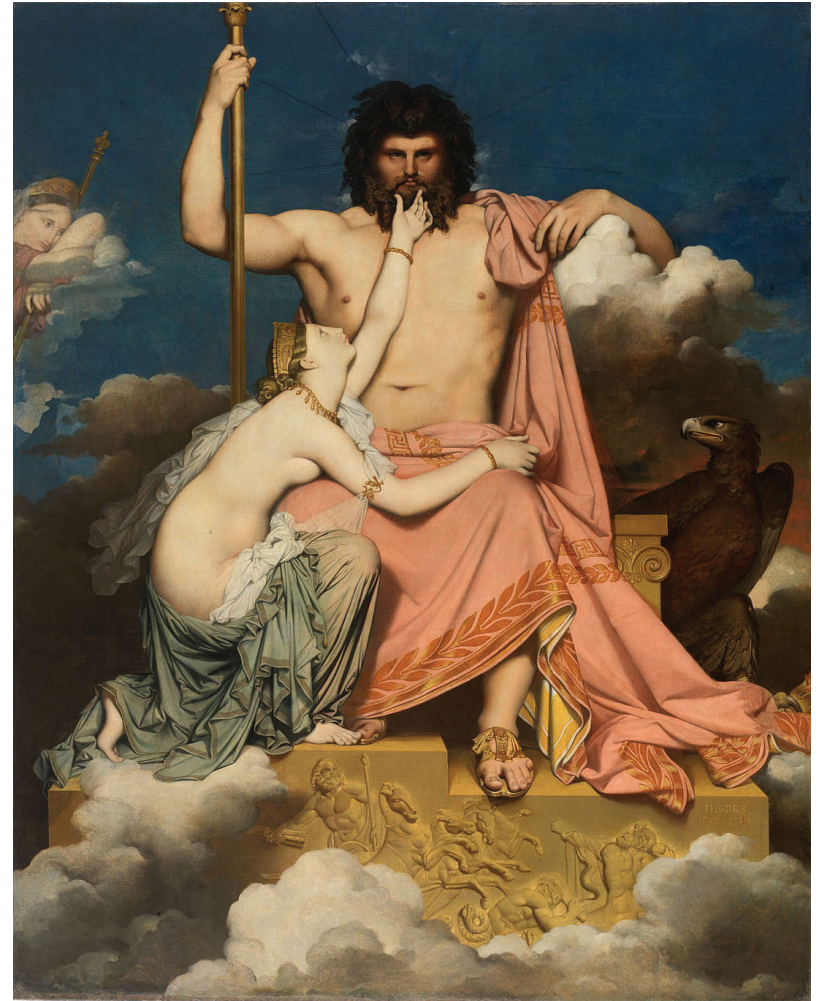


Fig. 6
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Jupiter and Thetis*, 1811.



Fig. 7
Remaining pieces of *The Colossus of Constantine*, 312 - 315
AD.



Fig. 8
Detail of Greenough's *Washington*, showing Apollo in his
chariot.



Fig. 9 Detail of Greenough's *Washington*, showing the infant Hercules wrestling snakes.



Fig. 10
Detail of Greenough's *Washington*, showing the figures of Columbus and the Native American.