

The Icon of the American Republic: A Study In Political Symbolism

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Portraits of heroes and leaders have been among the most widely diffused and deeply cherished of all political symbols. The political functions of such portraits grow out of distinctive semiotic qualities that set the portrait apart from other types of symbols. Judging from their public reception, George Washington's portraits—and, we believe, many state portraits—have the qualities of likeness, manifestiveness, moral efficaciousness, and sacredness that traditionally were ascribed to religious icons. From these qualities the state portrait gains a special power to bridge the distances of space and time and bring a society's representative men and women to living presence for its members. By evoking loyalties and attachments not only to the persons portrayed but also to the larger collectivities that those persons represent, state portraits function as important agencies of political integration and solidarity.

Political symbolism has been an enduring concern of the social sciences, but the depth and range of that concern defy simple classification. On the one hand, studies of symbolism necessarily make assumptions about knowing and meaning. When these assumptions become an explicit concern, symbolism studies move into the areas of epistemology and semiotics. On the other hand, since symbolism is vital to the coherence and continuation of all societies, its study leads necessarily into the deepest problems of social organization and legitimation. We hope to contribute to both paths of inquiry by examining a particular type of symbol and its role in American political life. An important premise of our study is that symbols differ in kind and that a symbol's political functions depend on the kind of symbol it is. The type of symbol that we shall be examining is properly designated an *icon*. Our study thus seeks to make a contribution to the growing body of research on the iconic portrayal of political actors and events.¹

While anything perceptible to the human senses can become a symbol, some objects have a peculiar fitness to serve as bearers of political meaning. We shall be concerned with one of the most prominent of these objects, the portrayal of the human face. In our own time as well as in the past, portraits have been viewed by rulers and peoples alike as symbols with special potency and significance. It is true that numerous societies, such as the ancient Judaic, Islamic, and Zoroastrian nations, and many primitive peoples, have discouraged or forbidden the production and display of graven images, especially those of the face; but even these soci-

eties attest to the potency of images by their very anxiety to banish them.

In choosing to focus on portraits of the face, we leave aside more complex visual images, such as allegorical and historical paintings. Allegorical paintings place their human subjects in a mythic context and surround them with symbolic representations of intangible things, such as liberty, authority, or justice. Historical paintings recreate great events, such as a decisive victory, the founding of a political community, or an act of supreme statesmanship. It is true, of course, that allegories and histories portray the faces of their subjects, but even if the face should here be a prominent feature, its interpretation is meant to be governed by the broader setting in which it is presented.

The use of portraits as political symbols can be found throughout history. Alexander the Great wanted his image to be known to everyone in the territories he conquered, and he handpicked his own artists to carry the project through. Conspicuous among the Romans who made mandatory the public display of their own images were the Caesars, beginning with Julius and Augustus. In England, Queen Elizabeth I not only distributed approved likenesses of herself throughout the kingdom, but also sent agents to remove from public buildings and private dwellings, as well as from sellers' stalls, unauthorized portraits which failed to do her justice. In France a century later, Louis XIV distinguished himself by the number of portraits for which he sat and with which he burdened his subjects. In imperial Japan, the schoolchild's first duty, in case of fire, was to rescue the Emperor's portrait, which hung in every classroom. In the Soviet Union, the ubiquitous portrait of Lenin has replaced that of the tsar and the holy icons. Visitors to North Korea report that this country is saturated with portraits of its leader, Kim Il Sung, as well as that of his son and designated successor, Kim Jong Il.²

Since these examples are drawn exclusively from authoritarian regimes, they might lead one to think that the ritualistic veneration of great leaders and their images is somehow out of place in liberal democracies or republics. In fact, this veneration is often as strong in republics as in other regimes. Republics must be sanctified as well as rationalized for their subjects; and state portraits are conspicuous among the symbols of power that sanctify republican rule.³

Why do portraits of leaders and heroes emerge in many soci-

eties as a primary political symbol? What distinctive features set these state portraits apart from other kinds of political symbols? What symbolic functions do portraits perform in political life? These questions are of central importance to the understanding of political symbolism, but they have been largely neglected in studies of this topic. We intend to address them, taking as our point of departure the substantial body of information that is available about one collection of political portraits and its reception by the public. Observations drawn from this one case cannot, of course, be indiscriminately generalized, but we believe that its study can help to establish the main points of reference for analyzing a very broad range of state portraiture.

The political portraits that we intend to examine are those of George Washington. While many of us pay little attention to the images of Washington that surround us, these images are reminders of a period in American history, extending from the Revolution until the early decades of the twentieth century, when Washington's portrait enjoyed a circulation and a veneration comparable to that of any leader of any country that we know of. When to Washington's portraits are added the numerous allegorical and historical paintings in which he is featured as well as the many statues and busts of his person,⁴ we have striking visible proof that the image of Washington has been one of this nation's dominant political symbols.

STATE PORTRAITS AS ICONS

In order to understand the significance of Washington's portrait, and of state portraits generally, one is forced to address the question of just what kind of symbol the portrait is. A flag, a relic, a written document, and a portrait may all be symbols, in a broad and generic sense of the term, but they differ in what they are and in how they are related to the objects they represent. It seems likely also that these symbols perform different functions, or at least differ considerably in their capacity to perform common functions.

A clue to the nature of the state portrait can be found in Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs. Peirce, who was a leading figure in the development of modern semiotics, used the term *sign* broadly for all representative phenomena that stand for something to somebody, much in the way that social scientists have

used the term *symbol*. Peirce proposed several ways of classifying signs, but the most important, in his estimation, was the trichotomy of *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. A *symbol*, in the strict or narrow sense that Peirce uses the term, is something that comes to stand for an object merely through agreement or convention. The *index* is based on some sort of regular association or even physical connection between sign and object, while the *icon* is related to the object by a genuine likeness or similarity.⁵

Portraits are a type of icon. (The term *icon* is derived from *eikon*, which is the Greek word for image.) They signify by a likeness to their objects, although they may contain within themselves indexical and conventional principles of signification as well. Various recent studies have referred to the portraits of Washington as icons, although without examining the question of what icons are.⁶ As we explored the traditional literature on icons and reflected on what Washington's portrait meant to earlier generations of Americans, we discovered that American writers and viewers attributed to Washington's portraits the very properties that the fathers of the Church had found in the holy icons. The early theological writings on icons thus contained for us the key to understanding the political significance of these portraits. Washington's portraits turn out to be icons not merely in the rather superficial Peircean sense of a likeness, but in the richer and more profound sense of a sacred image.

To articulate this finding, we will consider: (1) the diffusion and veneration of Washington's portraits; (2) the properties of icons, as described by one of the early Church's leading iconophiles; (3) the iconic properties of the Washington portraiture, as these are identified in American writings; and (4) the ways that the political functions of portraits relate to the iconic properties thus described.

THE DIFFUSION OF WASHINGTON'S PORTRAITS

The remarkable thing about the diffusion of Washington's portraits, by contrast to those of authoritarian leaders, was its spontaneity. During the period when the demand for Washington's image was most intense, it was satisfied largely by private artists and entrepreneurs and not by a state propaganda apparatus. In fact, there was a strong feeling in Congress that any official sponsorship of a Washington iconography by the national government would represent a dangerous tendency toward monarchy.⁷ From

the beginning, the multiplication and diffusion of Washington's portraits were responses to insatiable public demand.

Although Washington became increasingly exasperated with importuning painters, it is unlikely that any world figure before the age of photography, with the possible exception of Louis XIV and Napoleon, sat for portraits as often as he did. No fewer than twenty-seven artists made portraits of him from life.⁸ Eighteenth-century technology for the reproduction of these images was primitive by today's standards, but Washington's likeness could be found everywhere by the end of the Revolutionary War. Henry Tuckerman, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, recalls:

All over the land, at the close of the war, his beloved image was substituted on banner, seal, parlor wall, journal, and bank note, for royal physiognomies; and Rip Van Winkle was not the only conservative absentee, who incredulously rubbed his eyes at the appearance of our republican chief on the tavern sign so long radiant with a kingly visage. In every museum in America, his majestic figure stood prominent among the wax groups on which children gazed with delight, solemn in black velvet, ruffles, and hair-powder; grotesque transparencies on festal nights, Liverpool ware, primitive magazines, the figure-heads of ships, the panels of coaches, the engraved buttons, rude cotton prints, and melancholy samplers, — every object in the economy of trade and domestic life, was decorated, more or less truthfully, with that endeared and hallowed countenance.⁹

The diffusion of Washington's portraits by no means slackened after the Revolution. Jane Stuart reports that at the time her father, Gilbert Stuart, executed his last portrait of Washington from life, he "had so many commissions to copy the head of the President, and the anxiety to possess them was so great, that gentlemen would tell him if he would make only a sketch, they would be satisfied."¹⁰ Paul Svinin, a Russian diplomatic officer and artist who published a memoir of his travels in America during 1811 to 1813, noted that "Washington's portrait is the finest and sometimes the sole decoration of American homes." Svinin likened this to the veneration of the holy icons in his own country: "It is noteworthy that every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God's saints."¹¹ By midcentury, Walt Whitman could declare that "the name of Washington is constantly on our lips His por-

trait hangs on every wall and he is almost canonized in the affections of our people."¹²

With the outbreak of the Civil War, both sides laid claim to the sanctifying power of Washington's image. On Washington's Birthday (February 22) in 1862, the "permanent" government of the Confederacy was inaugurated on the public square in Richmond at the foot of Thomas Crawford's massive equestrian statue of Washington. A representation of that statue was to become the center of the Great Seal of the Confederate States of America. Washington's image would adorn Confederate as well as Union stamps and paper currency. A large portrait of Washington decorated the box at Ford's Theater where President Lincoln was shot; and in the apotheosis of Lincoln that followed his assassination, his portrait and Washington's were frequently displayed together and depicted in the same engravings. Sculptured portraits of Washington proliferated in the decades that followed, so that by 1932, Eisen could write: "There is hardly an association, community, village or city in the United States which does not possess one or more sculptured images intended to represent Washington."¹³ The elaborate bicentennial celebration in 1932 of Washington's birth produced not only a new quarter-dollar and twelve commemorative postage stamps with his image but also a grand and largely successful effort to place a portrait of Washington in every schoolroom in the nation.¹⁴ Since then, Washington's image has remained a very conspicuous part of the nation's iconography.

PROPERTIES OF THE ICON

As we have suggested, a key to understanding what Washington's portrait meant to previous generations of Americans can be found in the early theological writings on the holy icons. To appreciate the nature and significance of this parallel, let us first consider how the holy icons were conceived.

Whereas Jewish practice had opposed "graven images," portraits of Christ and the Saints were introduced rather early into Christian worship. During the long and bitter controversy between "iconoclasts" and "iconophiles" over the admissibility of icons in worship, St. John Damascene (ca. 675-749) became a leading defender of the holy icons, and his writings discuss the nature of icons in considerable detail. For our purposes, four points of this discussion are especially noteworthy.

1. *An icon must be a likeness.* In John's words, an image or icon "is a likeness and representation of some one, containing in itself the person who is imaged."¹⁵ The image is not the same thing as the person represented, nor is it an exact reproduction, but somehow the image is like the person and so "contains" him. The significance of the image thus depends on a quality of the image itself; it is not imposed on the image by the viewer.

2. *An icon or image has, by virtue of this likeness, a special power to show or manifest the person whom it represents.* Every image, John declares, "is a revelation and representation of something hidden."¹⁶ There are various reasons why something may be "hidden" from our clear knowledge and thus be in need of manifestation by images. It may be distant in time or space or, more importantly, it may be invisible to the eye, as is the case with the soul or spirit. Strictly speaking, what we see directly when we look at a person is the body, yet somehow the soul or spirit is visible through the body:

It is impossible for us to arrive at intellectual conceptions without corporeal things. Just as we listen with our bodily ears to physical words and understand spiritual things, so, through corporeal vision, we come to the spiritual.¹⁷

3. *An icon is a model for and stimulus to moral behavior.* John emphasizes that when icons bring things to presence for our comprehension, they affect us morally as well as cognitively. Their purpose is not simply to show things but to awaken our desires and direct our moral life.

The image was devised for greater knowledge, and for the manifestation and popularising of secret things, as a pure benefit and help to salvation, so that by showing things and making them known, we may arrive at the hidden ones, desire and emulate what is good, shun and hate what is evil.¹⁸

This point applies not only to the images of Christ but also to the images of valiant men that are set up "for an example and remembrance to ourselves."¹⁹ These mnemonic images are intended

for the honour and glory and abiding memory of the most virtuous, or for the shame and terror of the wicked, for the benefit of succeeding generations who contemplate it, so that we may shun evil and do good.²⁰

4. *Icons are sacred objects that deserve veneration.* John maintains that the icon of a venerable person is itself to be venerated. In venerating icons, we are worshipping the image as only a representation of a venerable person or object. The biblical injunction against the worship of graven images would be violated only if we were to worship in idolatrous fashion the physical vehicle that contains the image or else to give creatures the veneration due to God.

We submit that these four properties—likeness, manifestiveness, moral stimulus, and sacredness—have clear parallels in political iconography. They are characteristic, in varying degrees, of state portraits as well as religious portraits; they endow both with significance, and they enable both to perform very similar social functions. Some may object that in making this assumption, we are confounding the religious and the political spheres. It must be remembered, however, that the distinction between these spheres was not always drawn as sharply as we are likely to draw it today. St. John, for example, sanctioned a proper worship of political authorities and their icons. In his view, God is honored when we venerate those in power with authority from God.²¹ Moreover, the political portraiture of both ancient and modern times had its source in religious iconography and can be illuminated against this background. We know from the historian Pliny that the Greek and Roman practice of producing and distributing portraits of their rulers evolved from ancient religious art, with its images of the gods.²² The Church's iconographic tradition was directly influenced by this political practice.²³ Christian iconography served, in turn, as a source and precedent for the formal state portraiture of the sixteenth century.²⁴ Even in Protestant countries, state portraits became in some sense a substitute for the old icons, and Protestant writers applied the term *icon* to secular portraits.²⁵

In drawing these parallels and relationships, we do not intend to suggest that political portraits meant the very same thing to their viewers as the icons of the Church meant to the faithful. We contend only that political and religious images have comparable semiotic qualities and that their social uses are rooted in these qualities.

ICONIC PROPERTIES OF THE WASHINGTON PORTRAITURE

The question that we must consider now is whether or not it is correct to say that the portraits of Washington have served Ameri-

cans as a political icon. In terms of criteria identified in the preceding section, we may judge these portraits to be iconic if: first, the significance of the portraiture was believed by its viewers to depend on the likeness that it bears to the person of Washington; second, the portraits were believed to have a special capacity to “show” or “manifest” the person or character of Washington for intellectual comprehension; third, the Washington portraits were taken as a model for and stimulus to moral behavior; and, finally, they were deemed to be venerable and even sacred objects, which deserved to be cherished. In our judgment, there is evidence to satisfy each of these four criteria.

1. *Likeness*. Many today would deny that the Washington portraits—or, indeed, any portraits at all—are icons in any proper semiotic sense, and forceful arguments can be advanced on behalf of such a view. Portraits inevitably reflect the artists’ skill, selectivity, and emphasis, and they tend to ennoble or idealize their subjects. Thus there is usually great variation in portraits of the same subject by different artists. In the case of Washington’s portraits, even those by leading artists, this variation is quite striking. Moreover, many of the portraits that circulated at the turn of the nineteenth century were too crude to resemble any particular human being, much less Washington. That these primitive engravings continued to be used alongside better likenesses suggests that the meaning of the Washington portraiture may not have been derivative from its intrinsic qualities. A case can be made that Americans wanted a representation of Washington not to discover his true appearance, but to express the things that Washington stood for by means of a material sign, no matter how technically inaccurate that sign might be.

The fact remains, however, that Americans could not have been indifferent to Washington’s true appearance, for they placed great stock in the images which were thought to capture it best. The more cultivated interpreters, with the exception of a few, such as John Neal, were in this respect the most committed. Far from causing them to abandon the criterion of likeness, the diversity of the portraits served only to intensify their desire to find out which ones really looked like Washington. They approached the question of Washington’s true likeness with a sense of great urgency, for they were motivated not so much by artistic considerations as by moral and political concerns. Endeavoring to promote a clear standard of national morality, and persuaded that an influential

leader's moral character is revealed in the construction of his face (an assumption supported by the then respected science of physiognomy), these men firmly believed that the well-being of present and future generations was at stake in the discovery of Washington's authentic likeness. We see this urgency and concern in an 1824 circular that was issued by the American Academy of Fine Arts and reprinted in the *Atlantic Magazine*:

It was a wise decree of Alexander the Great that none should paint his portrait but Apelles, and none but Lysippus sculpture his likeness; we feel the want of such a regulation in the case of our Washington, whose countenance and person, as a man, were subjects for the finest pencil and most skilful chisel. But we are cursed as a nation with the common, miserable representations of our Great Hero, and with the shocking counterfeits of his likeness by every pitiful bungler that lifts a tool or a brush, working solely from imagination without any authority for their representations and deceptions, and bolstered up by every kind of imposture.

The evil has arisen to such a height that it is necessary for something to be done to rectify the public sentiment on this point, now so warmly agitated, so as to undeceive posterity.²⁶

The Academy, which included among its members three of the artists who had painted Washington from life (Trumbull, Robertson, and Dunlap), had been moved to action not only by the flood of representations by "pitiful bunglers" but also by two other considerations. First, there was the growing public acceptance of Gilbert Stuart's portraits, to the exclusion of others, as the standard likeness of Washington. Of Stuart's best-known portrait, the Athenaeum head,²⁷ Neal could say as early as 1832: "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."²⁸ The Academy refused, however, to endorse Stuart's or any other portrait as the true likeness, but insisted that all of the original portraits and sculptural busts are more or less like Washington. Their variations are explained by the fact that they were executed at different periods in Washington's life. Thus while Stuart's portraits show us how Washington looked as president, we must turn to the earlier portraits, at least those of the best artists, if we are to behold Washington in his prime. Tuckerman would employ this same argument later to establish that most of the major portraits

of Washington, despite their considerable diversity, are true likenesses.²⁹

The second consideration that moved the Academy to act was the remarkable circumstances surrounding the appearance in 1823-24 of a new portrait of Washington by Rembrandt Peale, whose father, Charles Willson Peale, had painted some of the best-known portraits of the great hero. In 1795, Rembrandt Peale, only eighteen and in the company of his father, had painted Washington from life, but the results were not satisfactory even to Peale. Convinced that no portrait of Washington, including Stuart's, had succeeded in capturing his likeness and character, Peale made repeated attempts in the years that followed to fix Washington's true image on canvas. His efforts met with only limited success until "the seventeenth trial, which resulted, under extraordinary excitements," in what Peale believed to be the best likeness of Washington ever produced on canvas.³⁰ Peale set out immediately to promote his portrait (which later would be acquired by the U.S. Senate) as the only true likeness of Washington. In 1824, he issued a pamphlet that reviewed critically the various life portraits of Washington and offered eighteen testimonials from distinguished persons who had known Washington, including Chief Justice John Marshall, attesting to the portrait's likeness to Washington's own countenance. The promotion and defense of this portrait would occupy Peale until his death in 1860. Whether Peale's entrepreneurial activities were motivated by self-interest or the public good, his claims engaged the attention of his contemporaries for over three decades. Indeed, the debate over which of Washington's portraits truly look like him continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.³¹

In sum, the Washington portraits were valued chiefly for their likeness to the original. Neither the diversity of these portraits nor their selectivity and idealizing tendencies could shake the conviction that Washington's true likeness could be captured or that the moral and political value of his portraits depended on that likeness. On this property, the property of likeness, all other iconic properties of Washington's portraits—their manifestiveness, their moral influence, their sacredness—were thought to depend.

2. *Manifestiveness*. A second property of the icon is its ability to show or manifest an object by bringing it to presence for cognition. Our intimate familiarity with portraits and with photographic and electronic images leads us to forget that there is some-

thing remarkable, even uncanny, about the capacity of an icon to present its objects with a vividness that approaches the direct perception of these objects. Indexical signs, by contrast, only point to their correlates; while symbols, in the strict sense that Peirce uses the term, can only deliver up those meanings or associations that they have received through convention.

American writers were certain that Washington's portraits had the ability to make Washington manifest. These portraits could help the viewer to *know* Washington by a kind of vision that is not reducible to affective responses or feelings.³² Custis points out that posterity will always inquire: "How looked the great of the olden time?"³³ Time and again, the artists who painted Washington from life and those who promoted the distribution of his portraits emphasized that it was their sacred duty to transmit a faithful image of Washington to posterity. They hoped in this way to make Washington's appearance and moral character known to those of his own time as well as of later generations who would never have the opportunity to see him in person. They believed that the portrait enables a populace to stay in proximity to revered but distant or deceased leaders whose character and actions deserve to be emulated.

Washington made a deep impression on those who saw him firsthand, and his contemporaries have left with us numerous descriptions of his appearance. This fact itself is noteworthy, for not all public figures inspire those who see them to report on the experience.³⁴ Yet there was something about the appearance of Washington which led those who saw him in the flesh to want to relate the experience to others. These accounts and memories of Washington became an important part of the standard for evaluating his portraiture.

What did people see when they witnessed directly the imposing presence of Washington? As one would expect, the observers saw some strictly physical features, such as the color of his eyes and hair or the shape of his nose and his limbs. What is striking, however, is the frequency with which moral qualities are reported as part of Washington's appearance. Thus observers tell us that Washington looked great and noble, that he appeared as one fit to command, that they saw in him the qualities of dignity and modesty, perfect gentlemanship, serenity, dignity and grandeur, wisdom, philanthropy, magnanimity, patriotism, gravity, loftiness, masculinity, contemplativeness, and a strong passion controlled by

deliberate reason. These qualities were as much a part of Washington's appearance as the features of his body. The artist's aim, therefore, was to display to his audience the same combination of moral and physical qualities that observers saw when they viewed Washington firsthand. The aim was to create a moral emblem and not merely a physical reproduction.

This conviction that a good portrait could manifest Washington's character and moral qualities raises a crucial problem in the semiotics of the icon, namely, how can a portrait be *like* something invisible? How can the delineation of a person's physical appearance represent that person's soul and moral character? If these questions had been put to Washington's contemporaries and nineteenth-century admirers, they would have replied that the face is an index of a person's inward qualities. Certain features of the face, such as the set of the eyes and mouth, the expression, and the complexion, point not only to fleeting emotions but also to the durable moral character. While the portrait, strictly speaking, is a likeness only of physical features as they appear to the senses, it is also a likeness, indirectly, of those inner qualities to which the physical features point.³⁵

Most Americans believed that Washington's iconic presence in an accurate portrait was equivalent, in essential respects, to what one would see if the man himself were viewed in the flesh. John Marshall, after viewing Rembrandt Peale's portrait of Washington, attested that "it seems as if I were looking at the living man."³⁶ Peale, quoting Boaden, affirms that an exact portrait of someone enables us "to enjoy him in private life; to sit with him in the same room."³⁷ Washington's portraits would bring him to living presence not merely by reviving the memories of those, such as John Marshall, who had known him personally, but also by manifesting his character to those of his time and later who had never seen him firsthand.³⁸ Indeed, it was believed that a good portrait might actually reveal more about its subject than a firsthand view of him would reveal. As many observers explained, a skilled artist who studies the countenance of his subject will see more in it than a casual observer would see; and the artist can convey more of his subject's appearance to us in his portrait than we might have noticed from a firsthand view. Svinin, for example, remarked after a meeting with Stuart: "Now I am not surprised that his pictures are so vivid: he can apparently grasp not only the appearance, but the very innermost essence of a man."³⁹

3. *Moral Example and Stimulus.* The portrait is a special kind of icon or likeness. Whereas iconic emblems and totems come to represent political objects only for those who know the appropriate analogy or allegory, the portrait is a natural likeness or direct image of what many conceive to be the most expressive and revealing part of the human body. Many people believe that we can see in the face what is essential about a person—the emotions, mental qualities, and moral character. Portraits of the human face thus have a great evocative power. In revealing the face of a prominent person, portraits call forth loyalties, attachments, and sentiments of moral approbation and blame.

Knowledgeable Americans, especially public leaders, hoped that the portraits, by showing Washington's character to the people, would move them to admire and emulate his moral qualities. Portraits and likenesses of Washington thus came to be regarded as important agencies for building patriotism and reforming morals. In the forefront of the effort to select and disseminate Washington's true image was John Marshall, who wrote:

Cities may be founded bearing the name of Washington, columns may be erected, and his memory be cherished in the bosom of a grateful people; there would, nevertheless, be something wanting. Had his features been more ordinary, and his expression less distinguished, the rising generation would still wish to know his own peculiar look.

But when it is known and recognized that his aspect was as noble as his conduct, and that his countenance corresponded with his character, it is the more incumbent on us to seek for and transmit to posterity the true delineation and impressive image of that countenance. Nothing can more powerfully carry back the mind to the glorious period which gave birth to this nation—nothing can be found more capable of exciting the noblest feelings of emulation and patriotism.⁴⁰

Chief Justice Marshall was by no means the only one to regard Washington's likeness as an instrument for moral reform. When in 1800, the House of Representatives debated what the proper memorial for Washington should be, Mr. Claiborne stated his preference for "a statue to mausoleum, because the former, from representing the form and features [of Washington] would inspire the beholder with more lively emotions than a mass of stones formed into a pyramid."⁴¹ Mr. Champlin preferred a mausoleum, but he agreed that it is "of infinite importance to civil society, that

the memory of that great man should be perpetuated *by every means* in our power. We may thus sow the seeds of virtue, honor, and patriotism, in our country."⁴² A half-century later, Tuckerman entertained the prospect that the circulation of Washington's image on the new adhesive postage stamp might by itself reform the nation's morals:

. . . that dear and hallowed countenance now appropriately forming the postage stamp of the nation, which thus coming hourly before the American vision, ought to reform, by its silent monition, political varlets and degenerate citizens.⁴³

Throughout this period, the primer, from which children learned their first lessons were ennobled by Washington's portrait. As Wick explains, this requisite Washington frontispiece "served not only as a national symbol but also as a paragon of moral conduct for all children to emulate."⁴⁴ The spirit of the 1932 bicentennial celebration of Washington's birth is captured well in Norman Rockwell's painting for the Washington bicentennial entitled: *The Guiding Influence*. The painting depicts an earnest and well-groomed young man at work at his desk on a composition. Placed on the desk before the young man is a copy of Houdon's bust of Washington, while above him we see an image of what the young man is contemplating so seriously—Washington, in heroic pose, with arm raised and pointed ahead.⁴⁵

Since Washington's image could be a powerful example and stimulus to moral reform, the artists who depicted Washington and those who promoted the diffusion of his likeness viewed their own work from the standpoint of moral duty. In 1857-58, for example, Rembrandt Peale toured the country, giving a lecture on "Washington and His Portraits." This was the very time, we might note, that Edward Everett went on tour to deliver his famous oration on "The Character of Washington" some 129 times to raise funds for the Mount Vernon Association. The epigraph to Peale's speech was a passage from Chateaubriand: "There is a Virtue in the looks of a Great Man." Peale begins with a paraphrase of the passage cited above from John Marshall, which speaks of the obligation to seek for and transmit to posterity, as far as possible, Washington's true and impressive image. It was in this spirit that Peale had collected letters from Washington's acquaintances, including Marshall, attesting to the likeness of his 1823 portrait to Washington himself. Peale relates that when he

told Marshall of his failure to write down approving comments about the portrait by Judge Peters, Marshall replied: "Sir, . . . you ought not only to have written it down, but you should have *gotten* him to write it, as a duty he and we, who knew the original, owe to posterity."⁴⁶ Such statements as these help us to understand why the likeness of the portraits to Washington himself was such a crucial issue for people of the time. A portrait of Washington loses its moral force if it fails to look like him. It gives the wrong impression of his moral character. Defects in portraiture are not merely technical flaws but moral evils—a curse on the nation that must be rectified.

4. *Sacredness.* Wills observes that Washington was "the icon our ancestors turned to most easily and often," and he goes on to speak of "their willingness to see in him something almost more than human."⁴⁷ We would put Wills's point more strongly: Washington was, in his lifetime, sacred to his countrymen in a very literal sense. Cunliffe points out that to his admirers, "he was 'godlike Washington,' and his detractors complained to one another that he was looked upon as a 'demi-god' whom it was treasonable to criticize."⁴⁸ This aura of sacredness surrounding the figure of Washington became even more pronounced in the nineteenth century. Gustav de Beaumont, who visited America with Tocqueville in the early 1830's, observed:

In America . . . do not look . . . for monuments raised to the memory of illustrious men. I know that this people has its heroes; but no where have I seen their statues. To Washington alone are there busts, inscriptions, columns; this is because Washington, in America, is *not a man but a God.*⁴⁹

Those religious sentiments which had animated praise for Washington during his lifetime were now diligently exploited to sanctify his memory. Not only was the pronoun "Him" capitalized in many accounts of Washington's life; he was frequently compared to Christ, with due note taken of the fact that the mothers of both men were named Mary and that the births of both were the only two celebrated nationally. The comparison was belabored in much detail, leading John Adams, in 1812, to complain:

Among the national sins of our country . . . [is] the idolatrous worship paid to the name of General Washington by all classes and *nearly* all parties of our citizens, manifested in the impious application of names and epithets to him which are ascribed in Scripture only to God and to Jesus Christ. The following is a part of them: "our Sav-

iour," "our Redeemer," "our cloud by day and our pillar of fire by night," "our star in the east," "to us a Son is born," and "our guide on earth, our advocate in Heaven."⁵⁰

It is not surprising that the quality of sacredness that surrounded the person of Washington was ascribed also to his portraits, making them icons in the fullest sense of the term. They were objects for veneration and not merely pictures for decorative, mnemonic, or even inspirational purposes. Thus Tuckerman tells of a portrait of Washington held by its owner "in such veneration that he requested, on his death-bed, to have the picture exhibited to his fading gaze, as it was the last object he desired to behold on earth."⁵¹ Likewise, John Trumbull so adored Washington, whom he had served under in the Revolutionary War and painted from life, that he guarded all of Washington's letters, cherished his bosom pin containing a lock of Washington's hair, and ordered for his tomb on the Yale campus the inscription: "Colonel John Trumbull, Patriot and Artist, Friend and Aide of Washington." Above this inscription, Trumbull arranged for the placement of a full-length portrait of George Washington. As late as 1880, Hubbard could write that "the authentication and erection of a standard image to represent the Nation's Father, is an act of sacred dedication to the claims of eternal posterity."⁵²

The icons of the Church have often been associated with miraculous events. Many have believed that icons can manifest in their own substance the vital qualities of the person signified. Hence the frequency with which holy images are "seen" moving, talking, crying, even bleeding. Washington's portraits, too, were sometimes rumored to have a miraculous quality, although perhaps not as the consequence of divine agency. Jane Stuart, daughter of Gilbert Stuart, reports her amusement "at several discussions upon the singular circumstance that a Chinese artist should be inspired to make the finest portrait of our great patriot without ever having seen him."⁵³ She also relates the story of a fine portrait of Washington, somewhere in Vermont, painted on glass, that smiles on the Fourth of July! "I have often thought," she adds ironically, "if I could witness such a miracle, on that glorious day, it would be well worth the pains of a pilgrimage."⁵⁴

Perhaps nothing indicates better the sanctity of an object than the sense of outrage and even horror that follows upon its desecration.⁵⁵ In 1779, the Executive Council of Pennsylvania com-

missioned a portrait of Washington for the State House, both to show its respect for the General and so that the contemplation of the portrait “may excite others to tread in the same glorious and disinterested steps which lead to public happiness and private honor.”⁵⁶ A few years later, someone defaced the portrait. As we see from the account in the *Freeman’s Journal*, this act, which was viewed as the work of Satan, evoked the repugnance that one would expect from the destruction of a sacred icon:

Last night [Sunday], a fit time for the sons of Lucifer to perpetuate the deeds of darkness, one or more volunteers in the service of hell, broke into the State House in Philadelphia, and totally defaced the picture of his Excellency George Washington. . . . Every generous bosom must swell with indignation at such atrocious proceedings. It is a matter of grief and sorrowful reflection that any of the human race can be so abandoned, as to offer such an insult to men who are and have been an honor to human nature, who venture, and have ventured their lives for the liberties of their fellow-men. A being who carries such malice in his breast must be miserable beyond conception. We need wish him no other punishment than his own feelings. “The motions of his spirit are black as night, and his affections dark as Erebus.”⁵⁷

Even as late as the 1960’s, iconoclasts recognized implicitly the sacredness of Washington’s portrait for American society by selecting it for caricature.⁵⁸

ICONIC FORM AND POLITICAL FUNCTION

In this essay we have sought to understand why portraits of heroes and leaders often emerge as dominant political symbols. We started from the premise that portraits are a distinctive kind of symbol and that the political functions of portraits are related to their distinctive qualities. Using the writings of Peirce and St. John Damascene as a touchstone, we hypothesized that political portraits are properly to be classified as icons and, indeed, may often have qualities similar to those that St. John attributed to the holy icons. This hypothesis was borne out, at least insofar as Washington’s portraiture is concerned, by our examination of what Americans themselves said about this portraiture. Washington’s portraits were regarded as sacred objects with the capacity to bring Washington to living presence so that the viewer could know his character and be moved by it to moral exertions. The worth of

these portraits was thought to depend on an inherent quality—their likeness to Washington himself.

Our analysis suggests that the political functions of state portraits grow out of the distinctive qualities of their iconic form, even though such portraits may seldom embody these qualities as fully as the Washington portraiture did. Portraits can bridge the distances of space and time to bring a society's heroes and leaders to living presence for its members. Since moral qualities are commonly attributed to the countenance of public leaders, their portraits can exhibit to everyone those human qualities that the society looks up to and promotes. Great leaders are "representative men," that is, persons who embody a community's most cherished ideals and virtues.⁵⁹ Their portraits thus play a vital role in civic education, because they provide examples to live by and a rich source of moral inspiration. Since portraits evoke loyalties and attachments not only to the persons portrayed but also to the larger collectivities that those persons represent, they are important agencies of integration and solidarity. The viewing of portraits brings ordinary people into contact with something great, even sacred, and allows them to reaffirm those precepts around which the society is constituted.

The functions that we have just enumerated are not universal. There is evidence to indicate that political icons are more likely to be found in large and highly differentiated societies than in societies of limited size, complexity, and differentiation.⁶⁰ This point is important, because it bears on an important practical problem faced by many political regimes, namely, the production and maintenance of unifying sentiments in the context of cultural differences and conflicting interests. Many thinkers have addressed themselves to this problem, but Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, a leading eighteenth-century critic of Hobbes, was one of the first to articulate it clearly.

Whereas Hobbes had argued that nature dissociates men, Shaftesbury maintains that the "*herding* Principle, and *associating* Inclination" is natural to man and very strong in most human beings.⁶¹ Shaftesbury points out, however, that our social inclination favors smaller associations, whose members can know each other intimately and view the whole compass and extent of their community. Here men can better "taste Society, and enjoy the *common* Good." They can "see, and know particularly whom they serve,

and to what end they *associate* and *conspire*.”⁶² Vast empires, by contrast, are in many respects unnatural,

but particularly in this, That be they ever so well constituted, the Affairs of many must, in such Governments, turn upon a very few; and the Relation be less sensible, and in a manner lost, between the Magistrate and People, in a Body so unwieldy in its Limbs, and whose Members lie so remote from one another, and distant from the Head.⁶³

Shaftesbury’s analysis enables us to see why integrating symbols are needed in large states, regardless of the nature of their regime. The body politic at large, he tells us, is a remote sphere that is inaccessible to immediate perception and feeling:

For here perhaps the thousandth part of those whose Interests are concern’d, are scarce so much as known by sight. No visible Band is form’d; no strict Alliance: but the Conjunction is made with different Persons, Orders, and Ranks of Men; not sensibly, *but in idea*: according to that general View or Notion of a State or Commonwealth.⁶⁴

But where does this idea of the state come from? How does the state become visible to its members? Shaftesbury does not take up these questions, but by the nineteenth century they were treated rather fully by students of social integration.

Emile Durkheim viewed the problem of cohesion in large and highly differentiated societies very much as Shaftesbury did. He maintained, however, that the loss of primary relations could be offset, and social solidarity restored, by the creation and use of integrating symbols. These symbols, he believed, could overcome not only the remoteness of political centers but also the vagueness that attends basic moral concepts in all social systems, large and small. In Durkheim’s view, moral entities have an abstract character; and “we cannot explain them to ourselves except by connecting them to some concrete object of whose reality we are vividly aware”.⁶⁵ Symbols, he concluded, “are necessary if society is to become conscious of itself, and no less indispensable for assuring the continuation of this consciousness.”⁶⁶

Granting that symbols are powerful vehicles of political integration, the question remains as to why this power resides so fully in portraits of heroes or heads of state. The answer seems to be that nothing represents a political community’s aims, continuity, and

destiny quite so well as an actual person. Ever since Walter Bagehot's mid-nineteenth-century study of the role of the monarch in the British constitution,⁶⁷ it has been a commonplace in political science that heads of state perform a symbolic function that is quite distinct from the exercise of actual powers. Looking at the large anonymous state of the sort that Shaftesbury had already described, Bagehot concluded that the great advantage of a monarchy, as contrasted to a republic, is its intelligibility. Republics, he asserts, are weak because they lack personal symbols of national unity. They depend for their legitimacy on abstract principles that are difficult to comprehend rather than on basic emotions that animate everyone. Thus in England, Bagehot observes, "we have whole classes unable to comprehend the idea of a constitution—unable to feel the least attachment to impersonal laws."⁶⁸ For these classes, whose members make up the great majority of English society, the queen (or king) is "a visible symbol of unity."⁶⁹ These classes come to see the state by personifying it: "the action of a single will, the fiat of a single mind, are easy ideas: anybody can make them out, and no one can ever forget them."⁷⁰ The person of the monarch becomes a symbol of unity not only by aiding comprehension but also by evoking diffused feelings of loyalty and obligation. The monarch's religious sanction and moral authority confirm the whole political order. The monarch gives "a vast strength to the entire constitution, by enlisting on its behalf the credulous obedience of enormous masses."⁷¹

Our study of the Washington portraiture leads us to correct and supplement Bagehot's reflections on two points. First, his analysis does not bring out the important role of visual imagery in presenting symbolic persons to the public at large. We have shown that Washington's images performed this vital role, and we expect that further investigation will show that the same is true of state portraits in general. The portrait, by virtue of its iconic qualities, has the capacity to make a society's representative men and women known to a dispersed population and to evoke the common feelings about them. Our findings indicate the need also to correct another facet of Bagehot's argument, namely, his belief in the affective poverty of republics. Bagehot failed to understand the emotional bonds that attach a republic to its heroes and leaders. As Rossiter has pointed out, the president "is the one-man distillation of the American people just as surely as the Queen is of the British people."⁷² Just so, the person of Washington has served

Americans as a powerful symbol of their common principles and aspirations at those very times when national unity has been most precarious—during the Revolution, the drafting and implementation of the new Constitution, the decades leading up to the Civil War, and the Great Depression. These were the times when the demand for Washington's image was most intense, the debate over the comparative merits of different portraits most prolonged, and the moral inspiration from even the crudest likeness most deeply felt.

The ubiquity of state portraiture and the rapidity with which a new leader's countenance is dispersed with a change in governments or regimes suggest to us this general rule: that images of prominent individuals are bridges that lead us to a conception of political society at large. Since portraits can hold these images and make them widely accessible, they are crucially important means by which a society represents, and so becomes conscious of, itself.⁷³ Moreover, it is through this optical imagery that a society's moral authority is apprehended and inculcated. A political society is constituted by what it esteems or looks up to. These estimable qualities come to presence in representative men and women who embody, in their deeds and character, the moral principles and the way of life to which society is dedicated. In viewing these persons or their portraits, we see what the society stands for and why it has a claim on our allegiance. Through the medium of political portraiture, authority becomes a sensate thing. It appeals to us through the elementary senses. It embraces us, as we embrace it, in a visual way. By the reproduction and diffusion of the images of its heroes and leaders, political society represents itself and affirms its own sanctity.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Marianna Jenkins, *The State Portrait: Its Origin and Evolution* (Archaeological Institute of America and the College Art Association of America, 1947); Nicolai Rubenstein, "Political Ideas in Siense Art," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21 (1958), 179-207; William Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Roy C. Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); David C. Skaggs, "Postage Stamps as Icons," in *Icons of America*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall Fishwick (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1978); Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., "Icons of Justice," *Past and Present*, No. 89 (1980), pp. 23-38; Barry Schwartz "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," *Social Forces*, 61 (1982), 374-402; and Barry Schwartz and Eugene F. Miller, "The Icon and the

Word: A Study in the Visual Depiction of Moral Character," forthcoming in *Semiotica*.

² See C. I. Eugene Kim and B. C. Koh, eds. *Journey to North Korea* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1983).

³ Our findings in regard to the Washington portraiture will support this observation about the character of symbolism in republics, at least the large republic of modern times. Walter Bagehot has presented an alternative view of republican symbolism, which we consider later in this essay.

⁴ For an account of the major historical and allegorical paintings that feature Washington, see Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1984). Wills fails to recognize how important the display of Washington's face in portraiture was to earlier generations of Americans. Portraits were valued even above allegorical and historical paintings because of a significance that was thought to lie in the portraits themselves.

⁵ Peirce discusses the types of signs throughout his *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-35); for a selection of key passages, see his *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), pp. 98-119. A lucid introduction to the topic is provided by J. Jay Zeman, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," in *A Perfusion of Signs*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) pp. 22-39. For interpretive difficulties in Peirce's theory, see Douglas Greenlee, *Peirce's Concept of Sign* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), and the 1976 symposium on Greenlee's book in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 12 (1976), 97-147. Peirce's trichotomy has been utilized by Harold D. Lasswell in "Key Symbols, Signs and Icons," in *Symbols and Values: An Initial Study*, ed. Lyman Bryson et al. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), pp. 199-204. Nevertheless, the tendency in political science has been to treat all representative phenomena as "symbols" without considering the possibility that they might differ in kind and that some might signify naturally, by their own inherent qualities or relations, and not merely by convention or arbitrary imposition. For an illustration of this tendency, see Charles D. Elder and Roger W. Cobb, *The Political Uses of Symbols* (New York: Longman, 1983), especially their characterization of the symbol as "a human invention" that "arises from the process of attributing meaning to an object" (p. 29). Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol has come to play an important role in recent discussions of symbolism by anthropologists. See Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 60-67; and the collection entitled *On Symbols in Anthropology* (Malibu, Cal.: Undena Publications, 1982), especially the Editor's Introduction and the essay by Milton Singer.

⁶ See Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment*; Wendy C. Wick, *George Washington: An American Icon* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press); Richard C. Blodgett, "What Did George Washington Really Look Like?" *Review* (1981), pp. 53 ff.; and Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans* (New York: Random House, 1965).

⁷ Although Washington's portrait appeared on some locally minted coins, the use of his image on federal coinage was precluded by the Mint Act of 1792. The Senate, in its version of the Mint Bill, had agreed that on each denomination of coins there should be impressed the head of the incumbent president, which meant that Washington's countenance would be displayed on the Mint's first coins. This plan was debated and rejected by the House of Representatives. The concerns of the House were perhaps voiced best by Representative Page, who warned of the danger of "imitating the flattery and almost idolatrous practice of Monarchies with respect to the honor paid to their Kings, by im-

pressing their images and names on their coins" (*Annals of Congress*, 1791-92 [March, 1792], p. 488). Page feared also that cabals, corruption, and animosity "might be excited by the intrigues of ambitious men, animated with the hope of handing their names down to the latest ages on the medals of their country" (*ibid.*, p. 489). Congress decided on the emblem of liberty as a substitute for the president's image and thus found a solution that was, in Representative Williamson's words, "consistent with Republican principles" (p. 484). Washington, who opposed the Senate's plan from the beginning, applauded this outcome.

⁸ See C. McCombs, *George Washington, 1732-1932: An Exhibition Held at the New York Public Library* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1932), p. 1.

⁹ Henry T. Tuckerman, *The Character and Portraits of Washington* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1859), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Jane Stuart, "The Stuart Portraits of Washington," *Scribner's Monthly*, 12 (1876), 370.

¹¹ In Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Picturesque United States of America . . . A Memoir of Paul Svinin* (New York: William E. Rudge, 1930), p. 34.

¹² Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out*, ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 59. Whitman did not exaggerate. Washington's portrait could be found in the homes of notables as well as in the lowliest domiciles. Thomas Jefferson had no fewer than four representations of Washington on display at Monticello (see Wills, *Cincinnatus*, p. 112); and Ralph Waldo Emerson had a portrait of Washington in his dining room, of which he said: "I cannot keep my eyes off it" (quoted by Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, p. 104). In describing the sparsely furnished interior of Uncle Tom's cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes: "The wall over the fireplace was adorned with some very brilliant scriptural prints, and a portrait of General Washington, drawn and colored in a manner which would certainly have astonished that hero, if ever he had happened to meet with its like" (see Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962], p. 25).

¹³ Gustavus A. Eisen, *Portraits of Washington* (New York: Robert Hamilton, 1932), 3:745.

¹⁴ These and other bicentennial activities are detailed in the massive *Report of the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission* (Washington: Bicentennial Commission, 1932), 4 vols.

¹⁵ Saint John Damascene, *On Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), p. 92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²² See *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. K. Jex-Blake (Chicago: Argonaut Inc., 1968).

²³ Hetty J. Roozmond-Van Ginhoven, *Ikón: Inspired Art* (Echteld, Netherlands: The Wijenburgh Foundation, 1980), p. 13.

²⁴ See Jenkins, *The State Portrait*, pp. 3-7; and Strong, *Portraits of Queen Elizabeth*, pp. 33-41.

²⁵ Strong discusses the religious overtones of the portraits of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, and observes: "The sacred images of Christ, the Virgin, and saints had been cast out of the churches as so much rubbish, while in their place we see the meteoric rise of the sacred images of the *Diva Elizabetha*" (*Por-*

traits of Queen Elizabeth, p. 36). In 1580, Theodore Beza published in Geneva a work whose Latin title can be translated as: "Icons, that is to say, true portraits, of men illustrious in the Reformation of Religion and Restoration of Learning." The first icon is that of King James VI of Scotland, who was only fourteen, but the chief Protestant king then extant. See Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 5:313-16.

²⁶ William T. Whitley, *Gilbert Stuart* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), p.180.

²⁷ This portrait is so named because it was acquired by the Boston Athenaeum from Stuart's widow in 1831. A heated controversy arose a few years ago over the National Portrait Gallery's effort to purchase the Athenaeum portrait of Washington, along with a companion portrait of Martha Washington, for \$5 million and to move the portraits from Boston, where they had long resided, to Washington, D. C. The dispute was finally settled by an agreement between the National Portrait Gallery and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts to acquire the paintings jointly and to move them back and forth every three years between Boston and Washington (see Blodgett, "What Did George Washington Really Look Like?"). This controversy shows that the old portraits continue to be objects of special importance, despite the surfeit of reproductions and our fading memory of Washington's deeds and character.

²⁸ John Neal, *Observations on American Art: Selections from the Writings of John Neal*, ed. Harold E. Dickson (State College, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State College, 1943), p. 3.

²⁹ Tuckerman, *The Character and Portraits of Washington*, pp. 85-87.

³⁰ Rembrandt Peale, "Letter to William Dunlap (December 27, 1834)," reprinted in *Magazine of American History*, 5 (1880), 129-32.

³¹ The United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, as one of its numerous projects, established a Portrait Committee, consisting of art critics and historians, to select the one portrait of Washington which would receive official sanction and be issued in hundreds of thousands of copies as part of the observance of Washington's Birthday. With an eye to the long debate over which of Washington's portraits truly look like him, the Commission expressed its hope that "the stamp of approval by this committee to the selected portrait, will give it the highest authoritative endorsement and it is hoped bring to a satisfactory conclusion the contention as to which is the best likeness of the first President, that has occupied artistic minds for more than a century and a half" (*Special News Releases Relating to the Life and Time of George Washington* [Washington: Bicentennial Commission, 1932], 1.69). After studying all available portraits of Washington, the committee was unable to arrive at a majority vote on any one. It finally gave its unanimous choice to the Houdon bust of Washington at Mount Vernon.

³² These writers held that portraits make a cognitive presentation, just as perception and speech do, so that portraits can be judged by the standard of truth or falsity. Thus Dunlap, in a work published in 1834, recalls Horace Walpole's observation that an authentic portrait "is truth itself; and it calls up so many collateral ideas, as to fill an intelligent mind more than any other species of painting." See William Dunlap, *History of the Arts of Design in the United States*, ed. Alexander Wyckoff (New York: Blom, 1965), 2:588. This contrasts with the tendency today to depreciate the cognitive dimension of political symbols and to emphasize only their ability to condense feelings or emotions and to stimulate behavior.

³³ George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1860), p. 529.

³⁴ Of Benjamin Franklin, one of Washington's greatest contemporaries,

Charles Coleman Sellers has written: "It is profoundly significant that in an age intensely interested in the characters of its great men not one contemporary has left us a complete and adequate description of Franklin's appearance. For all the interest, excitement, and controversy surrounding him, his face, figure, and habitual manner received only cursory or superficial remark." See *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 2.

³⁵ Peirce recognized that while icons, indices, and symbols rest on their own distinctive principles of signification, they need not exist only in a pure form. The difference in practice is often one of relative hierarchy or the predominance of one kind of relation over another. Thus, for example, symbols often involve a sort of index, indices may also resemble their objects, and the likeness in icons may be aided by conventional rules. See Roman Jakobson, "Quest for the Essence of Language," *Diogenes*, 51 (1965), 21-37. The portrait is an example of a sign that mixes principles of signification. It becomes an icon or likeness of character by virtue of the indexical relation between physical features and moral qualities.

The name traditionally assigned to the study of character through physical indices was *physiognomy*. There was an elaborate and highly influential effort in the eighteenth century by the Swiss author Lavater to develop physiognomy as a systematic science. Theories of portraiture drew heavily from Lavater; and he, in turn, regarded portrait painting as the highest and most useful of all the arts. See Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Henry Hunter (London: John Stockdale, 1810), vol. II, pt. 2, pp. 23-49. For our purposes, it is important to note that the American artists and critics were avid readers of Lavater, if not his disciples. As Neal observes of Stuart, "he believed in Lavater, or at least in the leading principles of physiognomy" (*Observations on American Art*, p. 73).

³⁶ See Rembrandt Peale, *The Portraits of Washington* (Washington, D. C. : 1824, n.p.), p. 9.

³⁷ Rembrandt Peale, "Washington and His Portraits," in Eisen, *Portraits of Washington*, 1:299.

³⁸ A present-day theory of the portrait holds that it is primarily a mnemonic device, something that helps us remember objects that we were acquainted with beforehand. See Wendy Steiner, "The Semiotics of a Genre: Portraiture in Literature and Painting," *Semiotica*, 21 (1977), 117. Those who painted Washington's portraits and promoted their distribution were convinced, however, that these portraits could make Washington's person and character manifest to those who would never have the opportunity to see him in person.

³⁹ Yarmolinsky, *A Memoir of Paul Svinin*, p. 34.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Eisen, *Portraits of Washington*, 1:xvii.

⁴¹ *Annals of Congress*, 1799-1801 [December, 1800], pp. 858-59.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 859.

⁴³ Tuckerman, *The Character and Portraits of Washington*, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁴ Wick, *George Washington: An American Icon*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ See the Frontispiece in Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

⁴⁶ Peale, "Washington and His Portraits," p. 315.

⁴⁷ Wills, *Cincinnatus*, p. xix.

⁴⁸ Marcus Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1958) p. 6.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 19.

⁵⁰ See John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of*

John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813 (San Marino, Cal.: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 229.

⁵¹ Tuckerman, *The Character and Portraits of Washington*, p. 54.

⁵² William J. Hubbard, "A National Standard for the Likeness of Washington," *Magazine of American History*, 4 (1880), 85.

⁵³ Stuart, "The Stuart Portraits of Washington," p. 369.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Attempts to mock, deface, or destroy sacred images, whether of political or of religious subjects, have very often been punished severely, sometimes with death. In 1501, for example, Antonio di Giuseppe Rinaldeschi was hanged by the city of Florence for flinging horse dung at a little outdoor painting of the Annunciation. See Edgerton, "Icons of Justice," p. 30.

⁵⁶ Supreme Executive Council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council*, II (18 January 1779), p. 671.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Frank Moore, *Diary of the American Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1860), 2:492-93.

⁵⁸ Marshall W. Fishwick, "Did Anyone Ever See Washington Nude?" in *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), pp. 297-307.

⁵⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men* (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1900).

⁶⁰ In a separate study, one of the present authors (Schwartz) drew a sample of 60 from the 250 societies on which there is detailed Human Relations Area File information. Material on graven imagery is available for 51 of these societies. The 17 societies which produced sculptured, lifelike images of their leaders or other sacred or authoritative figures were distinguished from those 10 societies whose art forms incorporated some human features but which did not include distinct likenesses. The remaining societies, 24 in number, produced art objects containing no human features at all. If our assumptions about the integrating function of icons in large societies are correct, then we should find a direct correlation between social differentiation (which is strongly correlated with population size and territory) and the presence of lifelike images. The results of the analysis conform to this expectation. As we move from low through intermediate to high social differentiation, the percentage of societies in which distinct and revered human forms are displayed increases from 5 through 18 to 100 percent. This very pronounced relationship becomes even stronger when the three moderately to highly differentiated Islamic societies (which proscribe graven imagery) are removed from the sample. Based as they are on only a handful of societies, findings like these cannot lead to any definite conclusions; however, the direction and strength of the association suggest a distinct functional relationship. Political icons counteract the differentiation of enlarged systems by their centripetal attraction of the moral sentiments of dispersed and specialized peoples.

⁶¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (2nd ed., corrected; London: John Darby, 1714), 1:111.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14. Shaftesbury goes on to argue that our associating inclination has little tendency to support a society when it grows to the point where it can no longer be seen and felt immediately. In large states, therefore, this inclination seeks to satisfy itself through the formation of what eighteenth-century writers could call "parties" or "factions," thus undermining attachments to the larger whole. "To *cantonize* is natural," Shaftesbury observes, "when the Society grows vast and bulky" (p. 113).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.

⁶⁵ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263. More recently, Michael Walzer has argued along similar lines that political symbols are necessary to give sensible expression to the idea of a large community of human beings and thus to make this remote body visible to its members. In Walzer's words, this union of individuals "can only be symbolized; it has no palpable shape or substance." Politics is thus an art of unification, of making one from many; and symbolic activity is "perhaps our most important means of bringing individuals together, both intellectually and emotionally, in a political union." See "On the Role of Symbolism in Political Thought," *Political Science Quarterly*, 82 (1967), 194.

⁶⁷ Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). This book was first published in 1867.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷² Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 11.

⁷³ At the turn of the present century, Charles Horton Cooley maintained that a nation or country is best symbolized by some actual persons, and that these persons must be present to the citizenry in pictorial representation, whether in thought or in visual imagery. Cooley writes: "The idea of country is a rich and various one and has connected with it many sensuous symbols—such as flags, music, and the rhythm of patriotic poetry—that are not directly personal; but it is chiefly an idea of personal traits that we share and like, as set over against others that are different and repugnant. We think of . . . [national] traits by imagining the people that embody them. . . . Where the country has a permanent ruler, to typify it in his image is doubtless a chief element in the patriotic idea. On the other hand, the impulse which we feel to personify country, or anything else that awakens strong emotions in us, shows our imaginations to be so profoundly personal that deep feeling almost inevitably connects itself with a personal image" (*Human Nature and the Social Order* [New York: Schocken, 1964], pp. 113-14).