

THE WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON

One well-known picture wasn't invited to the party. The "Lansdowne" portrait of George Washington that has hung in the White House since 1800 is the fourth rendering of this image attributed to Stuart. It has been the subject of controversy for many years.

"The painting is not by Gilbert Stuart," former National Portrait Gallery director Marvin Sadik told *ARTnews* in 1975, igniting the conflict. He described Washington's head as "dead."

"We do not care to get into any argument with anyone about it," responded the late Clement Conger, at the time White House art curator. "We say it's Stuart, and we're content to let it go at that."

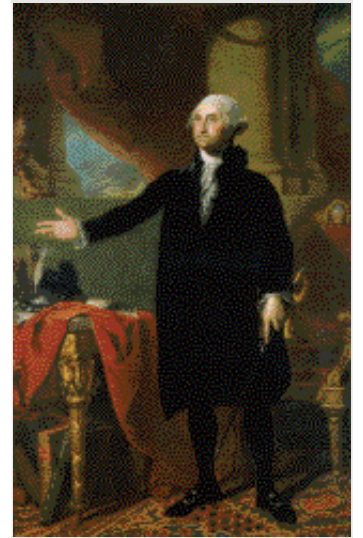
Nevertheless, Sadik's charge spurred the angry Conger to have the painting treated to a full-scale conservation and restoration for the first time in more than a century.

Conservators Marion F. Mecklenburg of the National Portrait Gallery and Justine S. Wimsatt of the Washington Conservation Studio, in Kensington, Maryland, agreed with Conger. The painting, they said in 1978, was an authentic Stuart.

Current White House art curator William Allman has no doubt about the work. "We are very comfortable with the conservators' opinion," he says.

The painting hangs prominently in the East Room, which is used for dances, after-dinner entertainments, concerts, church services, press conferences, and bill-signing ceremonies. The White House Web site calls the portrait the "cornerstone of the collection."

Sadik remains unmoved by the conclusions reached by the conservators. "I am completely convinced that the painting is not by Stuart," he recently told *ARTnews*. "What counts is what is on the canvas, and that is not the hand of Gilbert Stuart."



Did Stuart tell a lie? He denied painting the full-length portrait of Washington in the White House.

WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION/WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The painting has always been highly valued by the White House's occupants. During the War of 1812, Dolley Madison refused to abandon it when she fled the British bombardment in 1814. She had it removed from its frame and taken away for safekeeping. It was returned to the White House in 1817.

But Stuart himself disowned the work. "I did not paint it," he reportedly said in 1802, "but I bargained for it." What did that mean? Historians have offered various interpretations of Stuart's cryptic statement, but none is conclusive.

Of the four nearly identical "Lansdowne" paintings, the White House version is acknowledged to be the weakest in esthetic quality, and some scholars suggest that Stuart didn't want to be associated with such careless work in such a prestigious setting. Another story suggests that he was embarrassed because he had been paid for it twice.

The four full-length portraits were commissioned from Stuart in 1796–97. The first went to Lord Lansdowne of England, who had been a good friend of the American colonies in Parliament, as a gift from Pennsylvania senator William Bingham. This work was recently acquired by the National Portrait Gallery. Bingham commissioned the same image for himself; this one later went to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

For two centuries, no one knew which of these versions was the original. Prior to the current exhibition, the two works were brought together only twice, in 1876 and then in 1974, when the order of their creation was decided through careful study.

Just as Stuart was completing these two canvases, a third "Lansdowne" was commissioned by William Constable, a wealthy New York merchant; this one now belongs to the Brooklyn Museum. But a fourth picture, commissioned by Charles Pinckney, the newly appointed American minister to France, was never received. Instead, an identical painting surfaced in 1798, owned by Gardiner Baker, who was exhibiting it as part of the collection of the Tammany Museum, a small private museum in New York City that showed objects of cultural interest to the public.

Baker soon died, and the painting went to a man named William Laing, who sold it to the White House in 1800. Laing consigned the painting to be packed and shipped by

William Winstanley, a minor landscape painter, and its authenticity was not questioned until Stuart himself denied it. Some historians believe that Winstanley substituted a copy for Stuart's original. Others have suggested that the Pinckney commission and the Baker painting are the same, and that Stuart collected two fees for one work.

It wouldn't have been the first time Stuart had failed to deliver. His most famous image of Washington, known as the "Athenaeum" portrait because the Boston Athenaeum owned it for 150 years, was never finished and remained with the artist until he died. Stuart couldn't part with his masterpiece, which captured the great man's moral character as well as his physical likeness. This image became the source for all Stuart's later portraits of Washington, from the "Lansdowne" pictures to the reproductions he dashed off for \$100 each for the next 30 years.

Was Stuart sincere when he denied the White House painting, or was he lying to cover up his failure to deliver to Pinckney?

Cocurator Ellen G. Miles's research delves deeper into the riddle without solving it. In Constable's papers, she discovered evidence that Constable helped Baker acquire and pay for the painting from Stuart.

Moreover, says Miles, "the papers indicate that Baker accused Stuart of a breach of contract. But what kind of breach is not stated. The dispute was apparently resolved, and Stuart received his full fee of \$500," the same fee Constable had paid for his painting.

Based on her research, Miles believes that the Baker painting is different from the painting that was meant for Pinckney. Whether the Pinckney work was ever painted is still an open question, she says. Miles further believes that Baker's painting is the one that is now in the White House. There is no corroboration, she says, for the story about Winstanley's substitution.

What's more, Miles says, "the evidence shows that the Baker painting came from Stuart's studio. But Stuart denied the painting. If he didn't paint it, then who did? We still don't know the whole story."

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