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WASHINGTON
By JOSEPH WRIGHT, 1784

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The Powel Portrait of Washington
by Joseph Wright

IN THE EARLY 1930's when the selection of the best likeness of Washington for official use during the Washington Bicentennial was being made, the choice narrowed down to a portrait painted by Joseph Wright for Mrs. Samuel Powel and the bust by Houdon. Though the experts agreed that the portrait was probably the better likeness, the bust was selected since it had long been nationally known. The portrait, on the other hand, had never been on public display and had been seen only by generations of Powels and their friends.¹ It was not until the 1930's that it emerged from that state of privacy.

Its history dates back to the autumn of 1783 and the arrival at Washington's headquarters at Rocky Hill, near Princeton, New Jersey, of a young artist, Joseph Wright. Born in nearby Bordentown in 1756, the son of Patience Wright, who was probably America's first sculptress, Wright had accompanied his mother to England in 1772. There he studied painting under Benjamin West

¹ John C. Fitzpatrick, editor of *The Writings of George Washington*, told Mr. Powel this anecdote. Robert J. H. Powel, *Notes on the "Wright" Portrait of General George Washington*, copy provided by the Newport Historical Society.

and John Hoppner, who married his sister. After a brief stay in France, where he painted Franklin, he returned to America intent on capturing a likeness of Washington. A letter of introduction from Franklin guaranteed his entree, and he became the second or third artist to paint the General.²

Instead of canvas, Wright used a mahogany panel, 14 by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and it appears that everyone was pleased with the result, as well as with his portrait of Martha Washington. The artist William Dunlap, who was similarly engaged, later observed: "Wright's pictures I then thought very like."³ From Rocky Hill, Wright went to Philadelphia, where he established his studio.

His life study was fresh in Washington's mind when, two months later, the Virginian received a letter from the Comte de Solms, Commandant of the fortress of Königstein in Saxony, asking for a picture of the General to add to his gallery of military heroes. In response, Washington commissioned Wright to paint a large portrait based on the Rocky Hill study, informing the Count that Wright "is thought on a former occasion to have taken a better likeness of me, than any other painter has done: His forté seems to be in giving the distinguishing characteristics with more boldness than delicacy. . . ."⁴

Washington was in Philadelphia in December, 1783, and probably gave Wright the commission prior to his departure for Mount Vernon. On May 1, 1784, Washington returned to Philadelphia to attend a meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati, and there on May 15 he paid Wright £18 for the portrait, the current price for a large painting.⁵ While the safe arrival of this portrait at Königstein

² Charles Henry Hart, "An Original Portrait of Doctor Franklin Painted by Joseph Wright . . .," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXII (1908), 328. Charles Willson Peale was the first to paint Washington, in 1772. In 1779 du Simitière drew a pencil likeness. William Dunlap's portrait of Washington was painted at Rocky Hill at the same time Wright was also painting the General. John Hill Morgan and Mantle Fielding, *The Life Portraits of Washington and Their Replicas* (Philadelphia, 1931).

³ Fiske Kimball, "Joseph Wright and His Portraits of Washington," *The Magazine Antiques*, XV (May, 1929), 379.

⁴ John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, XXVII (Washington, 1938), 291, 296-297.

⁵ Kimball, 380. In 1786, C. W. Peale advertised that among the sizes of portraits he painted was "half-length" (actually three-quarter length), 50 x 40 inches, sixteen guineas. This price was about one-quarter lower than he had received for some nine years past. Charles Coleman Sellers, *Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale* (Philadelphia, 1952), 18-19.

was subsequently acknowledged by Solms, unfortunately it has long since disappeared.⁶ Another replica, hastily painted for Jefferson in May and then sent to him in Paris, is in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society and may approximate the one done for Solms. Its head is a copy of the Rocky Hill life study and is probably the only part of the portrait Wright had time to complete, the body being later filled in by another hand.

Wright also completed yet another portrait of Washington that May, and this one was probably exactly like the one sent to Saxony. Signed and dated "J. Wright 1784" at its lower left, and inscribed on the reverse "Gen Washington Painted at Philadelphia May 1784," this portrait is 48 by 40 inches and shows a majestically dignified Washington in three-quarter-length life-size. In the background a military action takes place and clouds of smoke billow up behind the fifty-two-year-old General. Carefully painted in this much more demanding interpretation than his portrait for Jefferson, this latter portrait was presumably completed simultaneously with the one for Solms and before the artist undertook the replica for Jefferson.

The story frequently associated with it was that Washington commissioned this portrait as a gift for his friend Mrs. Samuel Powel, but, as there is no documentary evidence on the point, it is more probable that Mrs. Powel ordered the painting herself. With its head based on the Rocky Hill study, she had the satisfaction of knowing that it met with the General's favor. Handed down through generations of the Powel family was Washington's comment: "A good likeness, but not flattering."⁷

From Wright's studio, the portrait was taken to the residence of Mayor and Mrs. Powel at 244 South Third Street, which, beautifully restored and furnished, is today one of Philadelphia's tourist attractions. Five years after the deaths of both her husband and Joseph Wright in the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, Mrs. Powel moved to a mansion on Chestnut Street, between Sixth and Seventh, where the picture was to be seen until her death in 1830. Among those who viewed it was Bushrod Washington, the General's nephew and heir who spent much time in Philadelphia and died there in

⁶ Unsuccessful searches were made for it about 1903 and 1928. Kimball, 380.

⁷ Powel, *Notes*.

1829. He maintained that Mrs. Powel's portrait was "the most literal similitude" of his uncle.⁸

From Mrs. Powel the painting passed to her nephew, Colonel John Hare Powel, and in the years that followed it had various homes before being hung in the drawing room of the house Colonel Powel's son Samuel built on Bowery Street, Newport, in 1853.⁹ In November, 1887, it was reproduced in the form of a crude, unsatisfactory woodcut on the cover of *The Century Magazine*, and the same woodcut was illustrated again in the February, 1897, issue of *McClure's Magazine*. When, thirty-two years later, Fiske Kimball wanted to feature the painting in his *Antiques* article on "Joseph Wright and His Portraits of Washington," he, too, had to resort to the woodcut as "This portrait by Joseph Wright is known to the public only through this wood engraving. . . . It conveys but a poor idea of the original."¹⁰ In 1932 it was finally published from a photograph.¹¹

By that time the Powels had sold their Newport house and the painting, still owned by the Estate of Samuel Powel, came out of seclusion. It was hung for several years in the Powel House ballroom, which had been removed from the building on Third Street and reconstructed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1936 it was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Benjamin Franklin and His Circle," and the next year at the Philadelphia Museum of Art's "150th Anniversary of the Signing of the Constitution." And then, sometime after 1940, it was sold to the late Marion Eppley, who hung the painting in his house at Newport and later in his residence at Long Island. Until 1972, it was not again shown publicly except for an exhibition at Marble House, Newport, during the 1955 Washington-Rochambeau Celebration.

In March, 1972, Mr. Eppley's widow, Mrs. Walter K. Earle of New York City, generously returned the portrait to Philadelphia by presenting it to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, whose building at 1300 Locust Street occupies the site of Colonel Powel's

⁸ Kimball, 381.

⁹ Robert Johnston Hare-Powel, "Hare-Powel and Kindred Families . . . , 1807-1907" (388-page typescript at HSP), 69.

¹⁰ Kimball, 377.

¹¹ Gustavus A. Eisen, *Portraits of Washington* (New York, 1932), 663.

house where the painting hung from 1832 to 1835, just ten blocks west of its original home in the Powel House. About this little-known portrait the New York dealer Victor D. Spark has written "Of all the portraits of Washington this may be considered one of the most important . . . it can be compared favorably with the best portraits of Gilbert Stuart, Charles Willson Peale, and Rembrandt Peale."¹² And the noted authority on American art, E. P. Richardson, has ranked it among the five or six outstanding portraits of our first President.

At the Historical Society, the portrait has returned to the company of the Rocky Hill life study, a pleasing coincidence uniting the two for the first time since they shared the artist's studio in 1784. Wright either sold or gave the life study to his distinguished friend Francis Hopkinson, himself a would-be artist who is better remembered as a Signer of the Declaration of Independence. The portrait descended in the Hopkinson family until 1891, when it was presented to the Historical Society.

Fiske Kimball in his article on Wright has disputed the claim that this little portrait was the artist's original study, but his argument in favor of the originality of a rather insipid painting by Wright has not met with the acceptance of such authorities as John Hill Morgan, Mantle Fielding, and E. P. Richardson. Washington's commendation of Wright's original portrait and the subsequent completion of three replicas in May, 1784, the two surviving ones of which are based on the panel rather than on the portrait favored by Kimball, is evidence that the panel portrait was the original life study.

The great replica which Wright made from it for Mrs. Powel has thus become one of the Historical Society's greatest treasures. Showing Washington in his full vigor as army commander, it contrasts with the Society's Rembrandt Peale portrait from life of 1795, in which the President appears as an aged man. Other distinguished paintings of Washington, long owned by the Society, are the work of Charles Willson Peale, Charles Peale Polk, Gilbert Stuart and Adolph Ulrich Wertmüller.

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¹² George Washington by Joseph Wright portrait file, HSP.