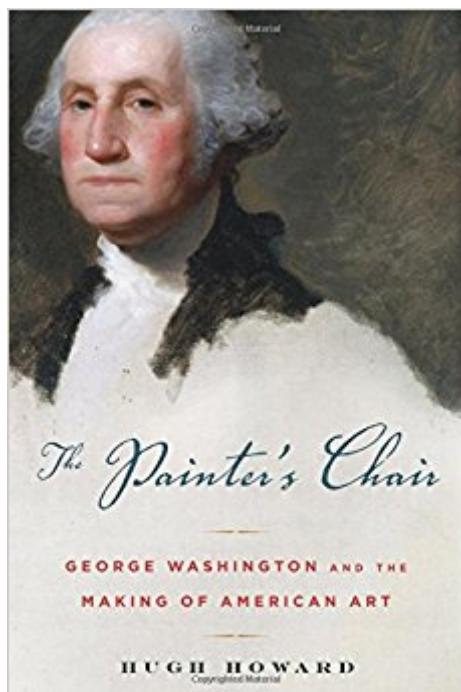


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The Painter's Chair: George Washington And The Making Of American Art



Synopsis

"I am so hackneyed to the touches of the painters pencil, that I am now altogether at their beck ... no dray moves more readily to the Thill, than I do to the Painters Chair." - George Washington, 16, 1785

When George Washington was born, the New World had virtually no artists. Over the course of his life, a cultural transformation would occur. Virtually everyone regarded Washington as America's indispensable man, and the early painters and sculptors were no exception. Hugh Howard surveys the founding fathers of American painting through their portraits of Washington. Charles Willson Peale was the comrade-in-arms, John Trumbull the aristocrat, Benjamin West the mentor, and Gilbert Stuart the brilliant wastrel. Their images of Washington fed an immense popular appetite that has never faded, Stuart's image endures today on the \$1 bill. The Painter's Chair is an eloquent narrative of how America's first painters toiled to create an art worthy of the new republic, and the hero whom they turned into an icon.

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Customer Reviews

Patron of the arts is not the first association one makes with George Washington, but Howard elegantly makes the case that the founder of the nation also helped establish Americas art. Though architecture, not painting, was Washingtons preferred art, Americas first prominent artists painted him: Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, Benjamin West and Gilbert Stuart, the most distinguished American painter of the period. Washington, who Howard argues was easier to see and admire than to understand, is subtly revealed in a narrative that is precisely paced and

elegantly composed. Howard (Dr. Kimball and Mr. Jefferson) illuminates Washington as an eminent patron of emerging American artists, who fostered nothing less than the birth of American painting. He also insightfully documents how Washington's evolving public image and often inscrutable character were diversely revealed by some of the most eminent visual artists of the 18th century, many of whose images propelled Washington's iconic status. This perspective will interest scholars of Washington and of early American art, as well as general readers seeking a refreshing angle on Washington and art in America. 8 pages of color photos. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“[A] lively narrative”¹ A novel, ingeniously executed approach to the inspiring man whose dollar-bill likeness is arguably the most reproduced painted image in history.² Howard’s story is not only about the birth of American painting, but--through the creation of its first, most long-lasting, and most transcendent human icon--about the invention of America itself.³ The American Scholar⁴ “Patron of the arts is not the first association one makes with George Washington, but Howard elegantly makes the case that the founder of the nation also helped establish America’s art. Though architecture, not painting, was Washington’s preferred art, America’s first prominent artists painted him: Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, Benjamin West and Gilbert Stuart, the most distinguished American painter of the period. Washington, who Howard argues was “easier to see and admire than to understand,” is subtly revealed in a narrative that is precisely paced and elegantly composed.”⁵ Publishers Weekly⁶ “In the delightful *The Painter’s Chair: George Washington and the Making of American Art*, Hugh Howard develops the idea of Washington as a patron of the arts and examines how art and the painting of portraits developed in the United States.”⁷ Book Page⁸ “Hugh Howard’s highly original work offers a completely new perspective on the Father of our Country, examining his life through the eyes of six of the 28 artists for whom he sat, showing how his increasing fame accelerated the development of American painting, and offering insight into how history and myth are made by images.”⁹ History is a story, a myth that we are told and that we tell one another, that defines our existence as a people and a nation. What Hugh Howard so deftly tells in this important book is how the arts of painting and sculpture came to take an increasingly central part in our understanding of the first decades of the United States. He also alters our understanding of that amazing man, George Washington.¹⁰ Dallas Morning News

Just as George Washington led the birth of the American nation, he also led the birth of American art. THE PAINTER'S CHAIR is about the early American artists who gained experience and fame by painting George Washington and his contemporaries. Before photographs were invented, painted portraits of leaders and events recorded American history. George Washington's career was illustrated in paintings by master artists, most of whom were related by blood, mentors, or friendships. The artists perfected their techniques by studying earlier portraits and by copying the techniques of predecessors. THE PAINTER'S CHAIR is an excellent history and art history book, which connects the artists, events, and leaders of the 18th and 19th centuries (in the United States and Europe) in profoundly interesting ways.

While I was initially unsure whether I would be interested in the subject of portraiture of Washington, I learned that this book had so much more to it. The whole phenomenon of building our nation's art culture is contained within the pages. I'm even planning to use the information for a club presentation as it really covers a lot of information on the artists of the day. Because my book club had chosen this for us to read, I unsuspectingly learned something having long-term effects. Thank you, Mr. Howard.

The challenges & techniques of capturing the image and essence of the subject are vividly rendered....an added bonus is the insight into the life's and personalities of the painters & their clients!!!

This book is interesting and tells unique insight into George Washington's life. I love the use of different paintings and the anecdotes in between them.

This is an excellent book--I have not finished reading it from cover to cover, but have used it as a reference....well written and very informative. William Goetz

have not read it yet, but it looks good

The Painter's Chair by Hugh Howard is a wonderful book comprising two subjects, one is of course George Washington and the other about art and early artists of which the two seemed to go hand in hand. It appears that early American painting especially those of portraiture were a bit lacking in substance and depth. One dimensional depictions of various wealthy people, the only people who

could, at that time afford to commission them. They were rather boring likenesses, flat and uninspiring. Along came Washington, a man who had no taste for it but knew the need of a likeness of him was sorely needed and desired. He soon became big business as the world wanted to see the most popular man in it. Photography being many years away, the only choice was a portrait. This book explores the many artists of the day and how they exploited this need for profit and fame. Copely, Trumbull, West, Stuart, all the Peales and even Houdon are examined here, with their contribution to early American art and how they gave us the only reliable likeness of the father of our country. The need was there, Washington knew it but truly disliked it. He did it anyway sitting still for hours in the painter's chair, a device designed to turn with the light so as not to disturb the subject. Washington was a busy man and did not like to sit still; he also did not appreciate the banter of artists as they attempted to amuse, distract or cajole him to gain more insight into his countenance in order to represent the true self, a self he chose to keep private. The man even tolerated straws in his nostrils and being quite smothered in plaster as Houdon created what was to become the only true likeness, warts and all, of Washington. The likeness used today to digitally recreate his face as it was then as the portraits tended to vary by painter. Within these pages are not only the stories of how these painters came to be but of their training and later how they came to grovel at his feet to get a sitting. It is interspersed with many tidbits of history and insights into Washington, Martha, the kids at home and Mt Vernon. The historical background of much of what we now have of the family Washington is due to these few men who had little time to do their jobs but got it done nonetheless. We can now thank them and their labors because we can now look at him as he in turn looks back at us. My own copy of Peales' porthole portrait with Washington in his military uniform is a joy to peruse whenever I get the need for inspiration, confidence or if I'm feeling down. If you like art, the history and development of early American portraiture or art museums for that matter as the need to show the work required space and for a small admission fee you too could be among the lucky few to see George in all his glory. He became, as he wanted, more accessible to his public if not in person, then through his likeness. His popularity soared as did the income of many early painters. There are many other areas of painting such as Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" as well as other battle type scenes which are barely touched upon as the author puts it "despite its inaccuracies, it would become a part of American mythology. But that's another story entirely". It is and can be clarified in "Washington's Crossing", (see my review). All in all, a good book to read, you won't get bored. There is enough here to whet your appetite and keep you interested in this fascinating part of history many people tend to forget about and overlook. Just think, you'll know who painted him, when, why and how, each and every time he looks at you from a poster, a

painting, an ad or even your dollar bill. That's right, someone had to paint that picture and he had to pose for it. Over two hundred fifty years later we are still looking thanks to his foresight, their talent, and more than a little grumbling from George as he sat, squirmed and put up with it for your viewing pleasure. Truly a poster boy for the ages, nicely explained in a highly readable, enjoyable, book. You won't regret this purchase.

In "Dr. Kimball and Mr. Jefferson," Hugh Howard included a history of early American architecture in tracing the career of architectural historian Fiske Kimball. Now, in his latest book, "The Painter's Chair: George Washington and the Making of American Art," he has accomplished a similar tour de force for American painting. His argument is simple: the image of Washington was so desired by the American public that the first president's portraiture encouraged early American painters to establish an art culture that was previously non-existent. Washington sat in "the painter's chair" for Charles Wilson Peale, his son Rembrandt, John Trumbull, and perhaps most importantly, Gilbert Stuart, whose portrait is on the one-dollar bill. Washington hated to sit for his portrait, but he obliged a series of painters by posing for them, and in doing so, established portraiture, and subsequently landscape painting, as an art form to be admired and encouraged in the newly-created nation. In this well-researched account, Howard's narrative of the lives and careers of the nation's first painters is a short history of early American portraiture, and of the popularity of Washington to his countrymen. As is true of Howard's earlier works, this is a gracefully-written, highly-readable book, an engaging feast for anyone interested in American history or American art.

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