



1844-64, after original 1838-44

Marble

26 x 23 5/8 x 14 inches (66 x 60 x 35.6 cm)

HIRAM POWERS

American

The W. P. Wilstach Collection, bequest of
Anna H. Wilstach, 1893, W1893-1-173

LET'S LOOK

Take a few moments to look at all of the images of this sculpture.

What words would you use to describe George Washington as he is portrayed here? Describe what aspects of his pose, facial features, expression, and clothing make you feel that way.

Look carefully at Washington's face. How do you think he is feeling? What could he be thinking about?

If this sculpture came to life, what do you think Washington would say or do next?

Are there any ideas you have about George Washington that this sculpture does not express? What are they?

Compare this sculpture with a painting of George Washington. How are they similar or different?

BUST OF WASHINGTON

George Washington had been dead nearly half a century when prominent American sculptor Hiram Powers (1805–1873) fashioned this portrait bust. Numerous earlier images of Washington as military hero, president, patriarch, and demi-god had already been widely disseminated in America and abroad. Powers struggled with how to characterize the first president. He ultimately decided upon an “ideal” portrait in white marble, and imbued Washington with the Roman Republican virtues of restraint and rationality by depicting him unadorned and dressed in classical drapery (which, of course, the real Washington never wore). The actual likeness was based on the bust created by the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (French, 1741–1828) whom Washington had posed for in his home at Mt. Vernon in 1785. Realism is evident in the aging features, slack jaw line, and ponytail.

Encouraged by a growing list of patrons and government commissions, Powers moved to Florence, Italy, in 1837, where he joined a circle of international sculptors who were capitalizing on the tourist trade. He modeled Washington as a creative experiment and happily soon after began receiving orders for marble replicas.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art's bust is undated and could have been carved over a twenty-year period when the demand was so great that Powers found it necessary to employ Italian stonecutters to “rough in” the form so he could finesse the features. The Museum's bust may have been exhibited at the 1864 Great Central Fair in Philadelphia, further popularizing this prototype and resulting in a proliferation of replicas of all sizes and media into the twentieth century.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

In the aftermath of the Woodstock, Vermont famine of 1816, the Powers family abandoned their farm to try their luck in Cincinnati, Ohio. Shortly after arriving, fifteen-year-old Hiram made the bold move to find his own means of support. Naturally dexterous, he apprenticed at Luman Watson's clock and organ factory where he gained mechanical skills. After seeing Jean-Antoine Houdon's (French, 1741–1828) bust of George Washington in Cincinnati's Western Museum, Powers turned to sculptor Frederick Eckstein (German, c.1774–1852) for instruction in casting and modeling in wax, clay, and plaster. He created a local sensation with an imaginative mechanical waxwork that attracted the attention of Cincinnati art patron Nicholas Longworth, who subsequently funded trips to Washington, D.C. and Boston, where Powers modeled portraits of the leading statesmen of the day (including President Andrew Jackson). In 1837, armed with sponsorship money and commissions for marble replicas, Powers set forth for Florence, Italy. There he joined a circle of international artists and writers including Horatio Greenough, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Within a few years, Powers was acknowledged as the preeminent portraitist in Florence, and became a professor at the Florence Academy of Fine Arts. Powers' next challenge was to create idealized figures such as *Bust of Proserpine* (1844–45). He catapulted to international fame when his Greek Slave was exhibited in London and New York in the 1850s. Though patriotic, Powers never returned to America, where he believed financial success would elude him.