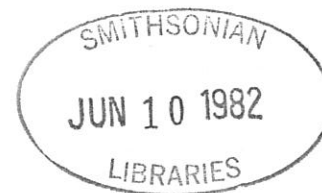


N
7628
W31T44
NPG

**The Image of
George Washington,
Studies in Mid-Nineteenth-Century
American History Painting**

Mark Edward Thistlethwaite



Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London



1979

restraint.

After Washington left his officers, he journeyed to Annapolis, where Congress was then in session, in order to tender his resignation as Commander-In-Chief of the American troops. General Washington Resigning His Commission (1824; fig. 93) was one of four Rotunda paintings executed by John Trumbull, consequently becoming famous. Like his other Rotunda works, the scene of the resignation toured the country before its installation in the Capitol, adding to its celebrity. Like his Declaration of Independence, Trumbull's Resignation of General Washington was intended to exhibit moral, rather than military power: " . . . this picture is a record of the loftiest degree of the moral sublime."⁸³ At least one writer, Samuel L. Knapp, believed, in 1829, that of all the Rotunda pictures, the Resignation of Washington was " . . . perhaps, to most spectators, the most interesting of the whole, rather, however from its moral than natural sublimity."⁸⁴ This common nineteenth-century bias of content over form was reiterated in C. Edwards Lester's 1846 account of Trumbull's painting, where he treats less the form and more the implications of the historical event, calling the scene: "one of the highest moral lessons ever given to the world."⁸⁵ The 1864 Yale catalogue of Trumbull's work, repeating claims earlier found in such catalogues, asserted:

The Caesars, the Cromwells, the Napoleons, yielded to the charm of earthly ambition, and betrayed their country; but Washington aspired to loftier, imperishable glory,--to that glory which virtue alone can give, and which no power, no effort, no time, can ever take away or diminish.⁸⁶

A work which never received the fame of Trumbull's, although

much publicized in its day, was Edwin White's version of the resignation (fig. 94). Several art journals, especially The Crayon, chronicled the painting's progress from its commissioning by the State of Maryland in 1856,⁸⁷ to its completion in 1859. The sustained interest in the work owed to the artist's stature, the governmental commission, and its subject matter.

A well-respected artist, White possessed, in James Jackson Jarves's words, "good taste, pure sentiment, industry and a correct intellectual appreciation of his historical subjects."⁸⁸ Regarded as a solid, if not a great artist, White executed numerous history paintings, including Washington Reading the Burial Services Over the Body of Braddock, a study exhibited at the Washington Art Association's fourth annual show in 1860. Artists, history painters in particular, must have been heartened when Maryland commissioned Washington Resigning His Commission for the room where the ceremony had taken place. Public patronage, a traditional source of livelihood for history painters, had, in America, been minimal and sporadic. The Maryland commission, coming in 1856, must have seemed auspicious, for, a year earlier, the last of the Rotunda paintings had been installed and talk among artists concerned the future of government patronage. Additionally, the completion of White's work in 1859, coincided with the widespread interest in the recently established Art Commission and federal support for the arts. The Crayon of October 1859, praised the order for the large (nine by fourteen feet) painting, noting that "Mr. White receives \$6,000 for the picture, under circumstances that show the house of assembly of

Maryland to be not only a considerate patron of Art, but a very generous one."⁸⁹ Despite its obvious appropriateness for the Maryland State House,⁹⁰ the subject of the work was eminently national, assuring its success: "The interest of the work depends upon the event which it commemorates, and the individuals who [*sic*] it represents."⁹¹

In praising White's painting, writers lauded not only the content, which was, as Rufus Griswold described the episode, "among the most sublime in human history,"⁹² but also the artist's successful handling of form. *The Crayon* wrote: "Having no energetic posture or dramatic action to express, he has yet contrived to render a formal assembly interesting."⁹³ The critic writing for *The Albion* also felt White managed well, considering that "the subject is incapable of very picturesque treat . . . There is, there could have been, no grouping, no action."⁹⁴ The artist succeeded through a creative figural arrangement, his varied use of costumes and accessories, by his handling of light and by focussing the participants's, as well as the viewer's, attention on the resigning Washington. The work ranked "with the best efforts of its class" and was felt to be as highly esteemed as "any in which the person of Washington has ever been the prominent figure."⁹⁵ Reviewers clearly acknowledged the importance of White's subject and its moral value, but also remarked upon the widespread difficulty of artistically rendering such group scenes. A further discussion of this issue will appear in Chapter V.

Battle scenes and depictions of the military history of America enjoyed high visibility during the middle decades. The form and content

of such works displayed visual excitement and aroused patriotic fervor. In addition, as interpretations of American history, these representations inherently possessed an *exemplum virtutis* quality, this being particularly true of those images involving George Washington. The military history of the country became, in fact, logically identified with Washington. Thus, when John McNevin showed, in 1859, his series of twenty-four paintings chronicling the Revolutionary War, the title given them was "The Washington Pictures."⁹⁶ Likewise, a travelling 1860 panorama featuring thirty scenes (with life-size figures) of American military history, including *Parade of the Stamp Act*, *Destruction of Tea*, *Boston*, and *Murder of Jane McCrea*, was called "The Washington Tableaux."⁹⁷

While the numerous mid-century depictions of American military history received praise for "kindling that holy patriotism which lies at the root of national improvement,"⁹⁸ their popularity was often rivalled by compositions of a more domestic nature. Stearns's *Marriage of Washington* attests to this interest. In the following chapter, the issue of "genreization" will be continued, by focussing on the domesticated hero.

Lippard's account of the "temptation of Washington" in his Washington and His Generals of 1847. As the hero prays in the snow, "reminiscent offers Lippard, of "that dark night in Gethesmane," his arch-enemy Sir William Howe materializes, offering the colonist a Dukedom and the Viceroyship of America. Washington is suitably shocked, telling Howe, in no uncertain terms, what he thinks of the proposal. All the while, an aged Tory has been surreptitiously watching. So moved is this witness, that he later volunteers for the American army (G. Lippard, Washington and His Generals: Or. Legends of the Revolution, Philadelphia, 1847, 108-109).

76. The Valley Forge Historical Society, Valley Forge, Pa., owns, apparently, the painting auctioned by Sotheby Parke Bernet in early 1976. In the sale catalogue, it is stated that the painting is inscribed on the back "Geo. Washington in prayer at Valley Forge/ by L. Sachs landscape by Paul Weber" (Americana, Sotheby Parke Bernet Sale Catalogue No. 3834, January 29-31, 1976, no. 355). The Pennsylvania Academy catalogue of 1854 lists only Sachs (who is also named as owner).
77. Numerous scholars have discussed this idea, for a summary, see B. Novak, "American Landscape: The Nationalist Garden and the Holy Book," Art in America, 60, February, 1972, 46-57.
78. McGuire, Religious Opinions of Washington, 159-160.
79. Sparks, Life of Washington, 371.
80. Headley, Washington and His Generals, 1, 77.
81. The drawing is reproduced as figure 91 in Slavin, "Thompkins Harrison Matteson."
82. The Chicago Historical Society, the present owner of the work, dates it as 1865. The date is a puzzle, as Chappel was not in the habit of duplicating a composition at a later time.
83. "The Trumbull Gallery and its Founder," The New-Yorker, 10, October 17, 1840, 76.
84. S. L. Knapp, Lectures on American History, with Remarks on Some Passages of American History, New York, 1829, 206.
85. C. E. Lester, The Artists of America: A Series of Biographical Sketches of American Artists with Portraits and Designs in Steel, New York, 1846, 159.
86. Catalogue of Paintings of Colonel Trumbull, New Haven, 1864, 26-27.
In 1864, the suit worn by Washington at his resignation was displayed at the Great Central Fair for the benefit of the United

States Sanitary Commission (see "The Last Day of the Fair," The Philadelphia Inquirer, June 25, 1864, 2).

87. A note appearing in an 1857 journal implies that White had just received the commission ("Domestic Art Gossip," The Crayon, 4, April, 1857, 123). However, the artist's study for the large painting at Annapolis is signed and dated 1856 (American Art Association catalogue, May 17, 1934, no. 212).
88. Jarves, The Art-Idea, 177.
89. "Sketchings--Domestic Art Gossip," The Crayon, 6, October, 1859, 319.
90. "Domestic Art Gossip," Cosmopolitan Art Journal, 3, September, 1859, 183, noted that the painting was to be exhibited in, presumably, New York, before it was sent to Annapolis.
91. "Fine Arts," The Albion, 37, October 1, 1859, 477.
92. Griswold, The Republican Court, 5.
93. The Crayon, October, 1859, 319.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.; quoted from the Evening Post, in "Sketchings--Domestic Art Gossip," The Crayon, 6, July, 1859, 221.
96. "The Fine Arts--The Washington Pictures," The Century, 1, February 26, 1859, 3, col. 3.
97. "The Washington Tableaux," The Daily Journal [Wilmington, N.C.], 10, October 1, 1860, 2 col. 1; 3, col. 2.
98. "A Hard Subject to Paint," Godey's Lady's Book, 30, February, 1845, 60.