

AMERICAN ART AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Fig.1 Wilson MacDonald (after Jean Antoine Houdon)
Bust of George Washington, 1898, bronze, 18-3/8 x
12-9/16 x 8-7/8 inches Brauer Museum of Art, Gift of the
Class of 1898 in memory of Prof. Kinsey, 48.3

Since the early days of the British colonies, Anglo-Americans have been fond of claiming for themselves a sense of uniqueness, often expressed as a national mission or vocation. Although scholars of American history and culture over the past twenty years have criticized "American exceptionalism" as promoting national self-interest, the idea is still powerful among many Americans today. This is not really surprising since any nation will tend to seek out its own interests. Just as families, towns, and regions exhibit common features, a nation will install a particular character in the cultural representations it produces and uses as a way of establishing its identity for its members as well as for other nations. But determining what that character is, who has it, who does not, whether or not it is the only or official character, and what it all means is a thorny issue. Throughout their history, Americans have actually been a variety of many peoples joined by geographical and historical circumstances. Such shared experiences as war, national tragedy, political ideals, sports, religion, public education, popular entertainment, and the English language have provided a common albeit uneven and inconsistent culture.

The history of American art provides a rich record of the attempt among American artists and viewers to visualize American identity. In prints, paintings, sculptures, photographs, and drawings we can find diverse paths in the quest for national character. What are the memories and stories Americans treasure? What are the national rituals and ceremonies they preserve? What places capture the national imagination and what events occupy artists (and their publics) when they think about who Americans are? These are some of the questions that will guide our consideration of several works of art in the Brauer Museum of Art. One of the oldest, most traditional ways in which Americans have told themselves who they are is by erecting monuments to their heroes as a way of publicly remembering what they did and how the present is rooted in the achievements of the past. The head of George Washington is certainly the most widely recognized "American" image in our culture. From the earliest days of the American republic, first General, and then President Washington was the "father" of the American nation.[1] It was his

military leadership and republican wisdom that helped birth the nation and guide it through its first, perilous moments. In 1785, the French sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon came to Mt. Vernon, Virginia, to create a bust of Washington by taking a mold from life. Houdon then cast a clay model, which he retouched according the neoclassical fashion of his day. Washington looks more like an ancient Roman senator or Greek hero than he does an eighteenth-century landowner (fig. 1). But the solemn expression, smooth complexion, square features, and prominent forehead were conformed to the classical ideal of nobility. Washington's actual appearance was translated into the visual language of heroism.

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1. For a detailed discussion of the importance of the image of Washington in American public culture, see Karal Ann Marling, [George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture](#), 1876-1986 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988).

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