

Why Presidential Portraiture Lost Its Stature

By Catesby Leigh

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Days after President Ford's death on Dec. 26, his portrait appeared on the Washington Post's front page. The picture hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, the only venue besides the White House with likenesses of all the nation's past presidents. The Post photo of this rather bland and ingratiating production -- the work of Everett Raymond Kinstler -- served as a poignant reminder that the once-august genre of presidential portraiture has lost its shine.

Think of presidential portraits and the first that comes to mind is most likely Gilbert Stuart's iconic George Washington, possibly followed by John Singer Sargent's very differently conceived Theodore Roosevelt. Though technically at least as competent as the general run of portraits of postwar presidents in the gallery and the White House, this work by Mr. Kinstler -- painted in 1987, a decade after the artist's prominently displayed White House portrait of the same president -- is a far cry from Stuart's or Sargent's achievements.

In spite of Mr. Kinstler's loose brushwork, his Ford reads too much like a touched-up photograph. It operates at the factual, prosaic level. Absent are poetic evocations of character, such as the virtues required to shoulder the burdens of the presidential office, let alone any symbolic indications of the ties that link Ford to the nation's ideals and destiny. Mr. Kinstler's Ford is just a likeable, smiling, aging hunk of a guy standing next to a table. Attired in a dark, pinstriped, three-piece suit, with one hand perched on the table, he boasts a healthy, ruddy complexion. He might as well be a bank president or Major League Baseball commissioner.

How did we get to this point? The answer comes by way of Sargent's Roosevelt portrait, which hangs in the White House's East Room. But we must begin at the beginning, with Stuart's Washington, on view in the very same room. While inspecting the T.R. portrait in person can be a problem, as public access to the White House has become more difficult since 9/11, the Washington is actually a replica, from Stuart's own hand, of his so-called Landsdowne portrait. The original hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Washington sat for Stuart in 1796, the last year of his presidency. The painter crafted a truly definitive, characteristic image -- the *idea* of Washington. This idea was not confined to the realm of perception, for Stuart employed the close observation of natural appearances as a means to an end, not as a factual end in itself. His Washington is no hunk, but his defining features are nobly distilled and clarified. The origins of this classical approach to realism lie in the sculpture of the Hellenistic period (which extends from Alexander the Great's lifetime to that of Augustus), when artists developed a more particularized approach to the portrayal of philosophers, poets, statesmen and peasants, which they added to the more

idealized genres reserved for gods and heroes. The supreme exponent of this realism among the artists who portrayed America's Founding Fathers was, not surprisingly, a sculptor: the great French master Jean-Antoine Houdon, whose statue and portrait busts of Washington are unsurpassed in any medium. (A plaster bust of Washington is on view in the National Portrait Gallery, while Houdon's life-size marble statue stands in the state capitol in Richmond, Va.)

The Landsdowne Washington is situated in a pictorially and symbolically complex setting. He is situated, in other words, within the grand tradition of European portraiture. Behind him columns -- emblems of order -- are arranged on a diagonal, as are a chair and draped table. Symbols of republican principles and ideals, ranging from leather-bound tomes to an exposed table leg in the form of the Roman fasces, abound. Washington loosely grasps the sword of victory in his left hand while beckoning with his right, creating a certain visual tension as he turns slightly to align himself with the dominant diagonal. He beckons not to us but to the future, to an era of promise it opened by the constitutional covenant, itself evoked by the a rainbow in the background. Hanging folds of rich fabric intensify the aura of grandeur.

Fast forward to Sargent's T.R., painted little more than a century later. (I had the opportunity to see the picture earlier this month during a White House tour.) As the artist and his subject walked around the White House in search of the right light and pose, Sargent, so the story goes, back-talked to the impatient and irascible Rough Rider. Roosevelt turned in indignation at the top of a p stairway, clasping a globe finial, and Sargent told him to hold it right there. a

Sargent's wonderfully effective use of middling tones in this portrait's otherwise blank background casts Roosevelt into bold relief. Left hand assertively perched on hip, he faces us squarely, full of authority and executive energy. And yet the portrait is very much an optical record, devoid of symbolic content. A quite noticeable penumbra that follows the outline of Roosevelt's head and left shoulder, combined with Sargent's fluid handling of the figure itself, conveys an almost eerily dynamic sense of the act of perception. It's as if T.R. were coming it into focus before us. He squints out at us through his spectacles, and we find ourselves squinting back at him. N

The rich color harmonies and attention to finish evident in this and other Sargent portraits may link him to the Old Masters, but he fully subscribed to the modern notion that reality lay in perception and that the artist's duty was to accurately transcribe natural appearances as they appeared to him or her. This concept may not have originated with photography, but it was vastly reinforced by it. And when we see the National Portrait Gallery's rather depressing trove of "traditional" portraits of our postwar presidents, from Greta Kempton's *Truman* (begun in 1947, completed 1970) to Nelson Shanks's *Clinton* (2005), it is obvious that photography has completely displaced classical sculpture as the conceptual model.

Backdrops like the Capitol or the Oval Office assume a merely incidental significance because, unlike

the Landsdowne, these portraits are not conceived in symbolic terms. In this narrowing of the gap between art and life, art has been drastically short-changed.

True, Norman Rockwell's *Nixon* -- painted in 1968, prior to his inauguration early the following year -- is eye-catching in its emphatically asymmetric design; the color scheme, the seated, pensive pose and close-up view are also interesting. Robert Sherr's *George H.W. Bush* projects authority, and the integration of the standing president with the East Room background -- largely a result of harmonious color tonalities -- is very nicely handled. But make a black-and-white reproduction of his face, or of Nixon's as rendered by Rockwell, and they might well pass for the work of a photography studio picking up where Fabian Bachrach left off. The poetry is just about gone. With Elaine de Kooning's JFK, one of a series of likenesses of the slain president she produced, the torso and extremities are a rather insubstantial matter of slashing brushstrokes and clashing colors capped with a more fully modeled head. It is a diverting image, particularly in this setting -- but hardly projects gravitas.

Presidential portraiture should bind the national leaders of our time and of times to come to their predecessors, rather than forcing a chasm between past and present. A presidential portrait need not remind you of George Washington -- after all, a variety of character types have shown themselves equal to the office -- but it should be an inspiring image. Accordingly, the portraitist should also consider incorporating his subject into a pictorially and symbolically complex setting that evokes an enduring national heritage of liberty.

Sargent, of course, followed a very different path. But he had the good fortune to have as his presidential model a flagrantly powerful personality in the prime of life. The fact remains that Sargent's pictorial outlook was too narrow, as a rule, for this genre, and it is hardly surprising that his less talented successors should have produced a bumper crop of dullness. Stuart's broader outlook admittedly does not lend itself to formulaic regurgitation, starting with the fact that the modern business suit is a very prosaic garment indeed. But such an outlook would almost certainly yield a richer harvest, if only our presidential portraitists could learn to see their objective as something other than an optical -- let alone a quasi-photographic -- record.