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## THE MANY FACES OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

BY *Milton Esterow* POSTED 10/01/09 12:00 AM

Chinese copies of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of America's first president were denounced by the artist, desired by collectors—and ended up in some important museums.



It's an international exercise in intrigue," said Douglas Hyland, director of the New Britain Museum of American Art in New Britain, Connecticut.

He was speaking about a painting that was recently donated to the museum and is now on exhibition. The label reads: "George Washington c. 1800–1805." The work is a copy of a Gilbert Stuart painting attributed to a Chinese artist named Foeiqua—who, like other artists in China, made a number of reverse paintings on glass. (The artist paints on the back of the glass so that the image can be seen from the front.)

"The painting was donated by a Connecticut woman, Caroline N. Dealy," Hyland said. "She said her mother had died and that members of her family wanted to give the painting in memory of their mother. Since we are the oldest museum of American art in the United States, we were really thrilled. The museum has wanted to acquire a portrait of George Washington for many years.

"As soon as it went on display, it became the subject of a great debate: Should it be at an American art museum? Is it an American work of art? The truth is that it's a copy of a Stuart made by a Chinese artist for an American collector. It's a compelling story. It was painted 200 years ago, and 200 years later we're dealing with the same issues. There are still works being pirated in China today—movies, books, CDs."



A reverse painting on glass, 1800-5, attributed to the Chinese artist Foeiqua, is an unauthorized copy of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Washington.

NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, GIFT OF CAROLINE N. DEALY, FRANK P. DEALY, DARILYN H. DEALY AND WENSLEY A. DEALY IN HONOR OF CAROLINE H.P. DEALY

Stuart had to deal with the issues in 1802, when there was, according to Carl Crossman in his book *The China Trade* (1972), "a mania for Washingtoniana."

The situation bothered the painter so much that collectors of his portraits had to sign an agreement stating that only he had the right to reproduce the image. There was no American copyright law covering works of art, and forged and unauthorized copies of Stuart's portraits of Washington had become something of a growth industry.

"There was also a considerable demand for the Chinese Washington portraits in oil on canvas," wrote Crossman. One popular subject was the Apotheosis of Washington, which shows the president born aloft by angels. A glass version is in the collection of the Terra Foundation of American Art in Chicago. The original engraving, *Apotheosis of George Washington* (1802), was by John James Barralet (1747–1815).

Crossman noted that China trade paintings on glass based on American prints were also sought by American collectors. Among the favorites were *Liberty*, *John Paul Jones*, *America*, *Battle of Lexington*, and *The Landing of the Pilgrims*.

Two of Stuart's portraits of Washington made their way to China. American ship captains who traded with Chinese merchants commissioned Chinese artists to make copies, which were shipped to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and elsewhere.

One of Stuart's clients was John E. Swords, a Philadelphia ship captain involved in the China trade. Swords broke his promise that he would not have the image copied. He reportedly arranged to have Stuart's painting of Washington known as the Athenaeum portrait

reproduced on glass in China in an edition of about 100.

In 1801 Stuart, who was still a British citizen (his name was spelled Stewart), sued Swords in the United States Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Stuart was “deeply in debt as always and distracted for money,” wrote the late art historian E. P. Richardson. He appealed to the court to keep Swords’s Chinese copies off the market. A year later the court ordered Swords to desist.

One writer noted that a number of Chinese Washington portraits were already in the United States and that the court order did not prevent Chinese artists from selling to other merchants in Europe.

It is not known how many are now in this country. The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, has two paintings on glass similar to the New Britain version and a Chinese copy on glass of *Apotheosis of George Washington*. A few historical societies have copies of the Chinese version of the Stuart Washington portrait.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York also has a portrait of Washington on glass made in China. The work is in the museum’s Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art and was presented to the museum in 1964 by the late Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, who were important collectors of American art.

Hyland pointed out that the label of the New Britain acquisition states that the painting is “of superb quality and is the same size as the Stuart canvas from which it was copied.”

Not everyone is convinced of the quality of the Chinese paintings of Washington. *Antiques Magazine* reported in 1928: “A good many portraits of George Washington painted on glass are knocking about the country. Few of them are very good; many are very bad.”

Hyland said, “Our portrait exaggerates the natural warts and wrinkles. There is a pronounced jawline. You can see somewhat the hollow cheekbones. The coloration is a little sallow. It does not depict him as an Adonis figure but as an American man of republican virtue in later middle age. The Athenaeum portrait has subtle skin tones and makes him look considerably healthier.”

Karina Corrigan, H. A. Crosby Forbes Curator of Asian Export Art at the Peabody Essex, said that there “were nuances of differences” in the museum’s two paintings on glass.

She added, “There was a very large community of artists working in Canton in the late 18th and early 19th centuries producing works of art for foreign clients. Each studio had many different artists producing a significant number of works of the same image. It’s entirely plausible that New Britain’s work and ours are from that large group.”

David O’Ryan, project assistant in the Peabody Essex’s Asian export art department, pointed out that one of the museum’s Washington portraits “has gray eyes, while the other one has blue eyes.” Washington’s eyes were blue.

Occasionally a Chinese portrait of Washington appears at auction. In 2007 an oil on canvas described as “possibly” by Foeiqua was sold for \$17,250 at Northeast Auctions in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, according to a spokesperson for Northeast.

The Athenaeum portrait is considered Stuart’s most important life portrait of Washington. It was painted in 1796, when Washington was 64 years old. The portrait got its name because it was acquired by the Boston Athenaeum after Stuart’s death, in 1828. The painting is now owned jointly by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and was used as the basis for the engraving of Washington on the United States one-dollar bill.

The portrait was Stuart’s favorite. He wanted to keep it as a financial hedge and possible legacy for his family, according to Dorinda Evans in her book *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* (1999). She wrote, “In answer to the repeated efforts of the Washington family to retrieve the likeness after Washington’s death, Stuart circulated the probable fiction that the general himself, in private conversation, offered to let him keep the portrait.”

With many copies circulating, Evans wrote, Stuart’s patrons began to worry that their copies of the Washington portrait were fakes. She added, “To which Stuart finally replied wryly: ‘If the General had sat for all these portraits, he could have done nothing else; our Independence would have been a secondary matter, or out of the question.’”

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