



George and Martha Washington: Portraits from the Presidential Years

Ellen G. Miles

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RESPONDING TO a near-constant flow of requests, George and Martha Washington sat for about two dozen portraits from 1789 to 1797, collected here in this elegantly illustrated volume. From miniatures executed on ivory for family and friends to a historical portrait that depicts Washington during the Revolution, the images vary widely in treatment and setting. What they all reflect, Ellen Miles suggests, is the great need the new republic had for portraits of its first chief executive, often to stand in for Washington himself. In the portraits, Martha Washington is usually dressed plainly, her round face composed in a benign but cheerful expression. Portraits of George Washington often show him in military uniform, the pin of the Society of the Cincinnati on his lapel; others have him in black velvet, wearing a simple ruffled white shirt, his hair tied back in a queue. Most observers agreed that Martha was short and pleasant-looking, and that George was nearly six feet tall, had a long nose, large and penetrating light eyes, and a noble forehead. The state of his teeth affects his appearance in some portraits.

Washington responded to having his likeness taken with a characteristic mixture of pride in his position and mild irritation. Once, a painter in Boston hid behind a church pulpit to sketch him. Washington's mild chafing at requests for him to sit illustrates the conflict he felt between his obligation to the nation and his desire to return to private life. As Edmund Morgan writes in his preface, Washington "succeeded in clothing the new government with his own honor and left the presidency with a heritage of independence and respect which, despite the antics of so many of his successors, has never quite left it." George and Martha Washington: Portraits from the Presidential Years offers, quite literally, a unique portrait of the original First Couple.

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