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Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*

Dominic Carter: This portrait of our first president is loaded with the pride and dignity and insecurities of a new nation. The composition, the details, and even the stiffness of George Washington's pose are meant to link him, and America, to the great civilizations of the past.

Terry Carbone: He didn't need to be turned into a hero, but he needed to be portrayed in as grand a manner as possible.

Dominic Carter: Curator Terry Carbone says that Gilbert Stuart achieved this grand manner in part by imitating classical Greek and Roman sculpture as well as more recent European portraits of famous orators. The oversized columns and imposing curtains imply the massive architecture of a powerful civilization and suggest the style in which Washington, D.C., would eventually be built. As for the table and chair in the portrait:

Terry Carbone: Stuart invented this very flashy, gilded furniture with symbolic items—for instance, on the table leg the group of eagles referring to republican Roman symbolism.

Dominic Carter: If you think you've seen this image before, you probably have. It's one of several portraits that Gilbert Stuart did of George Washington, and it was widely reproduced as an engraving.

Terry Carbone: By the mid-nineteenth century people were very fascinated by the whole issue of Washington's dentures. He lost his teeth before the end of his presidency and had an inventor make him a set of spring-loaded dentures. He had a hard time keeping his mouth closed. And that's partially why his expression is somewhat labored in his later portraits.

Dominic Carter: Along with the portrait, the table to its right came to this museum in 1945 from a mansion in Brooklyn Heights owned by the Pierrepont family. Notice the winged figures and dolphins that support the table. In their florid elegance, the table and the painting show the heavy French influence on American tastes of the time.