



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## WHHA PRESS ROOM | *Article*

### THE ACQUISITION OF PRESIDENTIAL PORTRAITS FOR THE WHITE HOUSE

Well into the twentieth century, the commissioning and acquisition of portraits of presidents for the White House was a haphazard affair that was largely dependent on gifts from families and friends of a president. Congress sporadically appropriated funds for presidential portraits for the White House. In 1800, seven months after the death of the revered first president, Congress allocated \$800 to purchase the full-length “Landsdowne” portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. The painting was purchased as a tribute to hang in the recently occupied President’s House in the new capital of Washington, D.C. It would be another half a century before Congress funded further acquisition of official portraits for the President’s House.

Finally, in 1857, Congress commissioned the Chicago artist, George P. A. Healy to paint portraits of several presidents, some of whom had sat for him in the 1840s. He had been commissioned by King Louis Philippe of France to paint American notables for a museum he intended to establish. The portraits, completed from life or Healy’s replicas of earlier life portraits, were of John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Millard Fillmore and Franklin Pierce. Finished by 1859, the portraits were stored in the White House attic, as no funds had been provided for framing them. After the Civil War President Andrew Johnson obtained funding to frame them and hung the portraits in the Cross Hall. Washington writer, Mary Clemmer Ames, observed Johnson walked by the portraits with a guest at his last state dinner in 1869 and dwelt “on the life and character of each.”

Abraham Lincoln sat for various artists and photographers while in office but none of their works were destined to stay in the Executive Mansion. Four years after his death Congress allocated funds for a competition leaving the selection of the winning portrait to the incoming president, Ulysses S. Grant. He selected a full-length study by William Cogswell, a Chicago artist. Healy had also entered the competition and when his portrait was not chosen, Robert Todd Lincoln, bought it. His widow bequeathed it to the White House in 1939. Today the Healy portrait hangs in the State Dining Room while the Cogswell portrait has been relegated to storage.

Rutherford B. Hayes and Mrs. Hayes took great interest in collecting presidential portraits for the White House, adding paintings of Ulysses S. Grant, Andrew Jackson, John



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Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, Zachary Taylor and William Henry Harrison in the 1870s. The group was painted by Ohio artist and friend, Eliphiant F. Andrews, who copied several life portraits in the Corcoran Gallery of Art; by the Boston artist, Edgar Parker, who copied Gilbert Stuart's works of the early presidents; and by German-born Henry Ulke who completed a fine portrait of Grant from life in 1875. In the 1880s, Andrews received additional commissions for oil portraits of Andrew Johnson, James Garfield and Thomas Jefferson (a composed work based on earlier portraits and the artist's imagination).

After he left office in 1881, Hayes selected the fashionable American artist Daniel Huntington, a former president of the National Academy of Design, to paint his portrait. Huntington, admired for his 1877 portrait of Mrs. Hayes, also received the commission for the official portrait of Chester Arthur in 1885. Arthur was the first president to be painted for the White House while in office. Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison, sat for the noted artist, Eastman Johnson, and they were the last subjects officially painted for the White House in the nineteenth century.

Twentieth century presidential portraits, some by such internationally renowned artists as John Singer Sargent (Theodore Roosevelt), Anders Zorn (William H. Taft), and Sir William Orpen (Woodrow Wilson), were painted from life during their administrations. However, no government patronage had been established for portrait acquisition and presidential families or friends often donated portraits to the White House years after the president's term of office. It was not until the founding of the White House Historical Association in 1961 and its commitment to fund the acquisition of portraits of both presidents and first ladies for the White House that life portraits of the presidents were consistently commissioned for the collection. Today, presidents and first ladies are assured that their portraits will be added, after their approval of the art, into the White House collection in a timely manner. The association and generous private donors have also made possible the acquisition of life portraits of earlier presidents to complete the presidential collection or to replace previous copies or replicas.

*By Betty C. Monkman, Curator Emeritus, the White House*

