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Political Scientist Examines National Identity through Art

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One of the biggest challenges following the adoption of the Constitution was establishing credibility and legitimacy of the newly-created republic, Howard notes. Citizens at the time were often more likely to think of themselves as citizens of a state, rather than citizens of the United States.

“The Founders realized that creating a national identity that would nurture the new form of government was necessary,” Howard says.

Art was an important part of creating a foundation for a national identity and a secular American civil religion.

“Art contributed to creating the necessary shared identity, civil religion, and national narrative that allowed the United States to keep its republic in its formative years,” Howard says.

The article, “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Building American National Identity Through Art,” appears in the current issue of the quarterly publication. Howard is an assistant professor in [Dominican’s Department of Political Science and International Studies](#). The article is co-authored by Donna R. Hoffman, associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Northern Iowa.

By studying portraits, sculptures, and paintings of the time, Howard and Hoffman found that the art of the early republic with its clear symbolic meanings provided the necessary visual images to help turn abstract political concepts into something more concrete.

The authors examined selected pieces of art from the early republic, including depictions of the Founders in portraiture and sculpture, with a particular emphasis on George Washington. Portraits of Washington take pains to present Washington as the antithesis of a king, accessible, and rather ordinary, Howard says.

“Part of the challenge of the new Constitution’s adoption was that it would vest some power in a single individual in the form of the president, unlike the very decentralized form of government under the Articles of Confederation where there was no single executive,” Howard says.

For example, Gilbert Stuart’s 1796 *The Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington* clearly depicts the leader of a republic. In the picture, there are no monarchical accessories. Instead, the artist includes symbols of the new American Republic. Book volumes - *Federalist* and *Journal of Congress* – sit on top of the table.

“By including the Journal of Congress, Stuart reminds the viewer that in the new Constitution, Congress - not the executive - was the institution laid out in Article I,” Howard says. “The presence of the Federalist reminds the viewer that the executive is constitutionally limited.”

Washington's clothing is plain, signaling the lack of any regal manner. A sword is placed near Washington's hand, but he is not holding it by its hilt. Instead, the book volumes and a pen and inkwell are more prominently displayed than the sword, depicting Washington as a statesman, not a soldier.

Howard and Hoffman also examine works by John Trumbull and sculptors Jean-Antoine Houdon and Horatio Greenough. Trumbull's historical paintings for the Capitol Rotunda emphasize an orderly depiction of acts where written documents are presented by a collective governing entity.

“These images fostered the formation of an American civil religion that, in the first few decades, was secular,” Howard says.

Howard's interest in studying art as a form of political and social commentary grew as she and Hoffman visited local galleries and museums while in U.S. and European cities, presenting at academic conferences.

“Over the years, we saw many examples of American and European historical painting and commemorative art and we started to think about how we could explore the connection between art and politics,” Howard recalls.

“One of our first projects examined FDR's” Four Freedoms” Speech, and Norman Rockwell's illustrations of the four freedoms that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. After that project we became interested in learning about how art could have been used to promote the values and ideas of the early republic given that, at the time, these were new concepts and would need to be accepted, supported, and understood by the public if the new government was to succeed.”

Please [CLICK HERE](#) to read PDF of the full article in *Perspectives on Political Science*.

[Image Credit: Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796 Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia www.pafa.org.]

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