



# “The Boast and Pride of North America”

## Antonio Canova’s *George Washington*

Xavier F. Salomon

### PRELUDE

*Richmond, Mount Vernon, and Paris (1784–96)*

On June 22, 1784, the Assembly of Virginia passed a resolution to commission “a statue of General Washington, to be of the finest marble and best workmanship.”<sup>1</sup> This monument was to be housed inside the new Virginia State Capitol building, in Richmond, the cornerstone of which would be laid a year later, on August 18, 1785. The original plan for the Capitol building in a traditional English colonial style was superseded in 1786 by Thomas Jefferson’s new plan for a Roman temple-style building. On July 1, 1784, Governor Benjamin Harrison wrote to Charles Willson Peale, one of the most eminent American painters of the day, to ask for a version of his full-length portrait of Washington. A few years earlier, in 1779, Peale had painted, for the Assembly Room of the State House in Philadelphia, Washington’s first and grandest official portrait, showing him at the Battle of Princeton (fig. 1); and he had made a business of producing versions of the portrait for the American and international markets.<sup>2</sup> Harrison clearly intended for this portrait—which he planned to send to Thomas Jefferson in Paris, where he had established himself as Minister Plenipotentiary in August 1784—to provide a model for the sculpture to be made for Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1780s, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, the two most prominent Americans in Paris, were seen as important arbiters of taste, and so the question of who should be employed for the Virginia commission was put to them. By the end of 1784, just five months after the assembly’s resolution, Franklin and Jefferson had identified Jean-Antoine Houdon as the artist to be charged with sculpting Washington’s portrait and had also determined that the Peale painting would not be necessary as Houdon said he would travel to the United States in order to portray Washington from life. On December 10, 1784, Jefferson wrote to Washington from Paris: “I find that a Monsr. Houdon of this place possesses the reputation of being the first statuary in the world. I sent for him and had some conversation with him on the subject. He thinks it cannot be perfectly done from a picture; and is so enthusiastically fond of being the executor of this work that he offers

to go himself to America for the purpose of forming your bust from the life, leaving all his business here in the mean time."<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson had met Houdon soon after his arrival in Paris and must have visited his studio on the rue du Faubourg du Roule.<sup>5</sup> As one of the most established sculptors in Paris, Houdon had portrayed a number of prominent French figures, including Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and was well known for his sophisticated and elegant busts. He was also not new to working for American patrons: at the Salon of 1779, he had exhibited his bust of Benjamin Franklin and, in 1781, that of the admiral John Paul Jones.<sup>6</sup> Franklin had sat for Houdon, Jefferson was acquainted with him, and by July 1785 both Franklin and Jefferson knew that the sculptor had created a life mask of the Marquis de Lafayette that was intended to be used for a bust to be given to the

City of Paris from the Assembly of Virginia.<sup>7</sup> Houdon had also been previously (about 1783) involved with plans for a bronze equestrian portrait of Washington, though nothing had come of it.<sup>8</sup> In light of his rapport with Franklin and his recent contact with Jefferson, it is not surprising that Houdon volunteered to travel to the United States to meet and portray Washington, who had never traveled to Europe before and was never to do so.

Houdon planned to leave Paris for America in the spring of 1785, but a serious illness prevented his departure.<sup>9</sup> On July 10, 1785, a year after the original resolution of the Assembly of Virginia, Jefferson wrote to Washington to report that Houdon had only "recently recovered" from his illness and that "he comes now for the purpose of lending the aid of his art to transmit you to posterity. He is without rivalry in it, being employed from all parts of Europe in whatever is capital." Jefferson described him as "disinterested, generous, candid, and panting after glory" and concluded his letter with the request for an interpreter during the sculptor's stay in the United States, as Houdon did not speak English.<sup>10</sup> Jefferson also arranged for Houdon to receive 10,000 *livres* in life insurance coverage, to be paid to his family should anything happen during his trip.<sup>11</sup> The sculptor, together with Franklin, finally sailed for America from

Le Havre on July 28. They arrived in Philadelphia on September 14, and a few days later, on September 20, Franklin wrote to Washington:

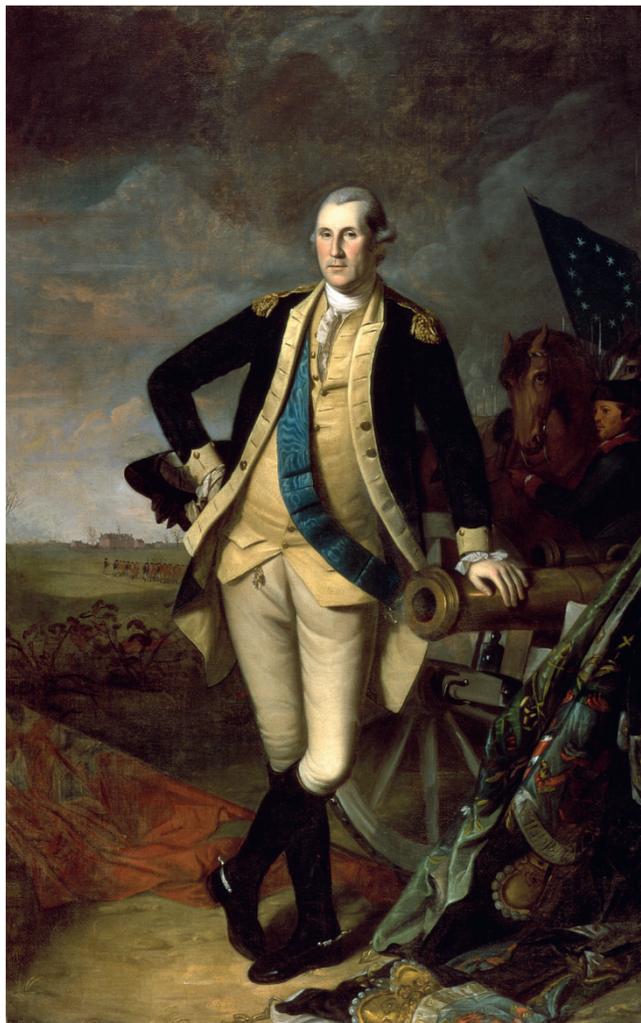
I am just arrived from a Country [France], where the reputation of General Washington runs very high, and where every body wishes to see him in Person, but being told that it is not likely he will ever favour them with a Visit, they hope at least for a Sight of his perfect Resemblance by means of their Principal Statuary Mr Houdon, whom Mr Jefferson and my self agreed with to come over for the purpose of taking a Bust, in order to make the intended Statue for the State of Virginia.<sup>12</sup>

Franklin continued: "he [Houdon] is here, but the Materials and Instruments he sent down the Seine from Paris, not being arrived at Havre when we sail'd, he was obliged to leave them, and is now busied in supplying himself here." None of Houdon's luggage and tools from Paris reached Le Havre, so he had to make the transatlantic crossing without them.<sup>13</sup> Once he had bought new things in Philadelphia, he was going to travel to Mount Vernon. Washington was pleased to host the French sculptor at his farm on the Potomac River, and he wrote directly to Houdon, on September 26, to welcome him:

By a letter which I have lately had the honor to receive from Dr Franklin at Philad[elphi]a, I am informed of your arrival at that place; many letters from very respectable characters in France, as well as the Doctors, inform me of the occasion—for which, tho' the cause is not of my seeking, I feel the most agreeable & grateful sensations. I wish the object of your mission had been more worthy of the masterly strokes of the first Statuary in Europe; for thus you are represented to me. It will give me pleasure Sir, to welcome you to this seat of my retirement: and whatever I have, or can procure that is necessary to your purposes, or convenient & agreeable to your wishes; you must freely command—as inclination to oblige you, will be among the last things in which I shall be found deficient, either on your arrival, or during your stay.<sup>14</sup>

Houdon was to visit Mount Vernon for a fortnight in October 1785.<sup>15</sup> The sculptor, with his assistants, arrived in the middle of the night on Sunday, October 2, as vividly recorded by Washington in his diary: "After we were in bed (about eleven o'clock in the evening), Mr. Houdon sent from Paris by Dr. Franklin and Mr. Jefferson to take my Bust, in behalf of the State of Virginia, with three young men assistants, introduced by a Mr. Perin, a French gentleman of Alexandria, arrived here by water from the latter place."<sup>16</sup> Washington's diaries convey a sense of Houdon's activities at Mount Vernon. He started

Fig. 1. Charles Willson Peale  
(1741–1827)  
*George Washington at Princeton, 1779*  
Oil on canvas  
93 × 58 1/2 in. (236.2 × 148.6 cm)  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine  
Arts, Philadelphia



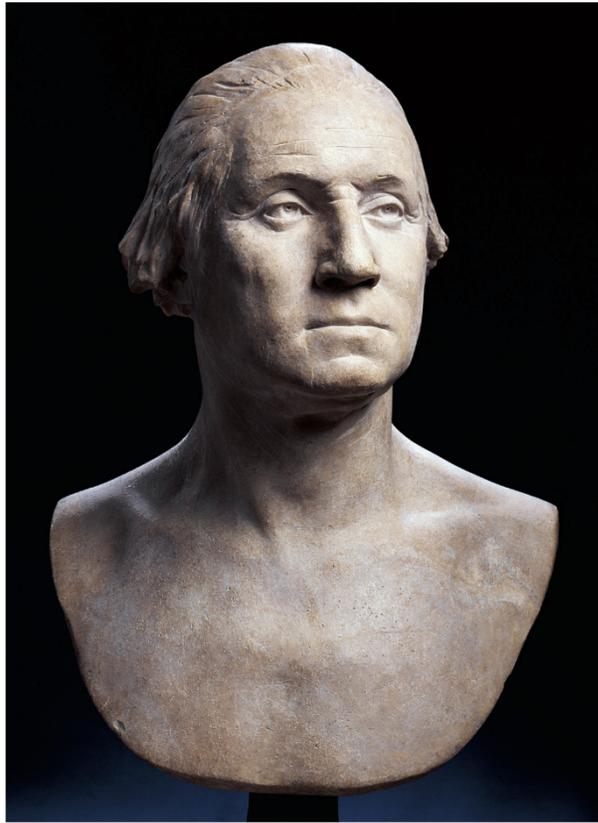


Fig. 2. Jean-Antoine Houdon  
(1741–1828)  
*George Washington*, 1785  
Low-fired clay, h. 22 in. (55.9 cm)  
Mount Vernon

Cat. 1. Jean-Antoine Houdon  
(1741–1828)  
*Life Mask of George Washington*, 1785  
Plaster, h. 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (31.8 cm)  
The Morgan Library and  
Museum, New York

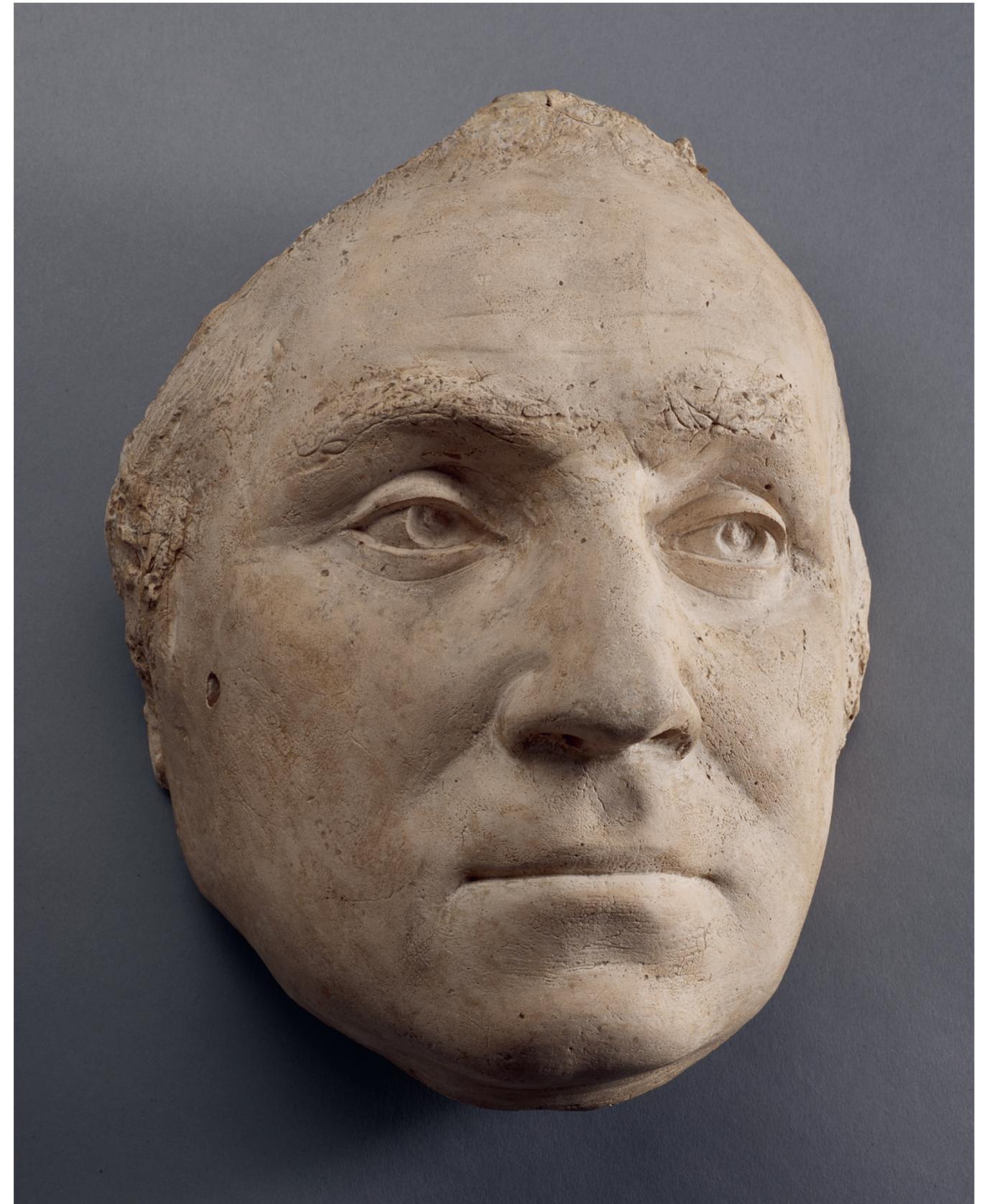
by modeling a terracotta bust that he worked on in front of his subject and then fired at a low temperature, probably in the kitchen oven (fig. 2). On October 7, Washington recorded: “Sat this day, as I had done yesterday, for Mr. Houdon to form my bust.”<sup>17</sup> The bust, which remained at Mount Vernon and was displayed by Washington in his study, remains one of the most important portraits of Washington, created from life and described frequently in the literature as having been made with and on American soil.<sup>18</sup> Washington’s family believed this portrait to be the most faithful to the sitter. A few days later, on October 10, Washington “observed the process for preparing the plaister of Paris and mixing of it according to Mr. Houdon.”<sup>19</sup> Houdon was preparing to take a life mask of Washington, just as he had of Lafayette in Paris, in preparation for his bust.

Years later, in 1849, Eleanor Parke “Nelly” Custis Lewis, Martha Washington’s granddaughter, recorded the event:

I was only six years old at the time, and perhaps should not have retained any recollection of Houdon & his visit, had I not seen the General as I supposed, dead, & laid out on a large table cover’d

with a sheet. I was passing the white servants Hall & saw as I thought the Corpse of one I consider’d my Father, I went in, & found the General extended on his back on a large table, a sheet over him, except his face, on which Houdon was engaged in putting on plaster to form the cast. Quills were in the nostrils. I was very much alarmed until I was told it was a bust, a likeness of the General, & would not injure him.<sup>20</sup>

From the negative of this life mask, Houdon produced at least one positive mask (cat. 1), which he brought with him to Paris. On October 19, Washington annotated in his diary: “Mr. Houdon, having finished his business which bro’t him hither, went up on Monday (17<sup>th</sup>), with his people, work and implements, in my barge, to Alexandria, to take passage in the Stage for Philadelphia next morning.”<sup>21</sup> Houdon left the terracotta bust with Washington and returned to Paris with the life mask and measurements of Washington’s features. Jefferson wrote to Washington on January 4, 1786, to report that Houdon was “safely returned” and “has brought with him the mould of the face only, having left the other parts of his work, with his workmen to come by some other conveyance.”<sup>22</sup>



In the same letter, Jefferson raised the important issue of costume for the final marble monument:

Doctor Franklin, who was joined with me in the superintendence of this just monument, having left us before what is called the costume of the statue was decided on, I cannot so well satisfy myself, and I am persuaded I should not so well satisfy the world, as by consulting your own wish or inclination as to this article. Permit me therefore to ask you whether there is any particular dress, or any particular attitude which you would rather wish to be adopted.

Washington replied tactfully on August 1, 1786, suggesting that “perhaps a servile adherence to the garb of antiquity might not altogether be so expedient as some little deviation in favor of the modern costum” and adding that he had learned that the new plan for modern dress had already been “hinted in conversation by Mr. West to Houdon.”<sup>23</sup> More than a year later, on August 14, 1787, Jefferson wrote again to Washington: “the modern dress for your statue would meet your approbation. I found it strongly the sentiment of West, Copeley, Trumbul and Brown in London, after which it would be ridiculous to add that it was my own. I think a modern in an antique dress as *just* an object of ridicule as an Hercules or Marius with a periwig and chapeau bras.”<sup>24</sup> While at work on the monument, Houdon showed a bust of Washington at the Salon of 1787, but the sculpture was not completed until 1792 and not installed in Richmond until four years later, in 1796 (fig. 3).<sup>25</sup>

Shown full-length and lifesize, Houdon’s *Washington* wears a contemporary military uniform, as agreed. The artist chose to represent the general standing next to the fasces, the bundle of rods that in ancient Rome was a republican symbol of power; it is composed, in this case, of thirteen rods to symbolize the original states of the Union. The uniform, fasces, and sword may seem to represent Washington as a military hero, but he is also shown holding a walking stick; behind him, Houdon carved a plow. The iconography was meant to evoke not only Washington’s military accomplishments but also his stepping down from his role as commander-in-chief, in 1783, to return to his life as a gentleman farmer. His surrender of power in 1783, and again in 1797—after two terms as the first president of the United States—led many contemporaries to liken him to the Roman general Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, who, after becoming a dictator in Rome in the fifth century BC and fighting victoriously for his country, stepped down to return to his farm.<sup>26</sup> The painter John Trumbull, writing from London on May 10, 1784, commented on Washington’s resignation and its reception in Europe: “[it] excites the astonishment and admiration of this part of the world. ’Tis a Conduct so novel, so inconceivable to People, who, far from giving up powers they possess, are willing to convulse the Empire



Fig. 3. Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828)  
*George Washington*, 1785–92  
Marble, h. 79½ in. (201.9 cm)  
Capitol, Richmond