

Examine the Artwork

Question.

Without inferring anything about the scene, list what you see in the painting.

What/who is the central focus of the painting? What or who do you recognize in the painting?

When, where, and why was the work painted?

How are the people and objects positioned? What does that tell you about the scene?

Read.

“The painting *General George Washington Resigning His Commission* by John Trumbull is on display in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. This painting depicts the scene on December 23, 1783, in the Maryland State House in Annapolis, the then capital of the United States, when George Washington resigned his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. The action was significant for establishing civilian authority over the military, a fundamental principle of American democracy. Washington’s action was unprecedented and founded in his belief in the Republic.

Washington, illuminated by the light falling into the room, stands in uniform before the president of the Continental Congress, Thomas Mifflin, and the delegates, among whom is Thomas Jefferson. Behind Washington are his aides-de-camp, Col. Benjamin Walker and Col. David Humphreys, and spectators. The delegates and spectators direct their attention to Washington as he extends his right hand to return his commission. The empty chair draped in a cloak, suggestive of a throne covered with a king’s robe, symbolizes Washington’s act of retiring from his position of power.

General George Washington Resigning His Commission, painted between 1822 and 1824, was the last of the four paintings that John Trumbull created under his 1817 commission from the U.S. Congress. To depict accurately the figures in the painting, Trumbull copied miniatures he had painted previously, studied portraits by fellow artists, and contacted members of Congress for portraits of the delegates. He based the representation of George Washington on one of his own earlier portraits. Some figures not present at the actual event are shown, including James Madison and Martha Washington and her grandchildren, who appear in the gallery. Trumbull visited and sketched the room, the Senate Chamber of the State House, in 1822, but in creating the painting he altered some elements. The Chamber no longer contained the furnishings used at the time of Washington’s resignation. Rather than depict the newer furniture created for the room in 1796, Trumbull copied the chairs he had painted in *Declaration of Independence*; Washington’s larger chair differs from those in which the delegates are seated, which contributes to the suggestion of a throne. The painting was completed in April 1824.”

Source: <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/general-george-washington-resigning-his-commission>

Consider.

Is this a primary source? Why or why not?

What does the painting suggest about the event? Does it seem historically accurate?

How do you connect with the painting?



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“Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull depicts the moment on June 28, 1776, when the first draft of the Declaration of Independence was presented to the Second Continental Congress. The document stated the principles for which the Revolutionary War was being fought and which remain fundamental to the nation. Less than a week later, on July 4, 1776, the Declaration was officially adopted, it was later signed on August 2, 1776.

In the central group in the painting, Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration, is shown placing the document before John Hancock, president of the Congress. With him stand the other members of the committee that created the draft: John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Benjamin Franklin. This event occurred in the Pennsylvania State House, now Independence Hall, in Philadelphia.

This is the first completed painting of four Revolutionary-era scenes that the U.S. Congress commissioned from John Trumbull (1756–1843) in 1817. It is an enlarged version of a smaller painting (approximately 21 inches by 31 inches) that the artist had created as part of a series to document the events of the American Revolution.

When Trumbull was planning the smaller painting in 1786, he decided not to attempt a wholly accurate rendering of the scene; rather, he made his goal the preservation of the images of the Nation’s founders. He excluded those for whom no authoritative image could be found or created, and he included delegates who were not in attendance at the time of the event. In all, 47 individuals (42 of the 56 signers and 5 other patriots) are depicted, all painted from life or life portraits. Some of the room’s architectural features (e.g., the number and placement of doors and windows) differ from historical fact, having been based on an inaccurate sketch that Thomas Jefferson produced from memory in Paris. Trumbull also painted more elegant furniture, covered the windows with heavy draperies rather than venetian blinds, and decorated the room’s rear wall with captured British military flags, believing that such trophies were probably displayed there. The exhibition of this small painting (now owned by the Yale University art gallery) was instrumental in securing for the 61-year-old artist a commission to create monumental paintings for the U.S. Capitol.”

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Source: <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence>

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“In the *Kitchen at Mount Vernon*, artist, Eastman Johnson uses dramatic light and a dilapidated interior—peeling plaster, broken bricks, and objects strewn around the room—to introduce a romantic, melancholy mood to this domestic scene. Although Johnson portrays an African-American woman and children on the Washington plantation, who may have been enslaved, his composition harkens back to the 18th-century, European tradition of depicting peasants at work and play amidst ruins, a conceit he would have studied during his years living abroad. The Kitchen at Mount Vernon appears to be an early attempt by Johnson to find a subject matter—in this case, slave life—that captured the American scene and the mounting tensions surrounding the question of abolition with honesty and accuracy.

Eastman Johnson (1824-1906) was an American genre painter appreciated for presenting scenes of everyday life. George Washington Riggs and his wife, Janet (Sheddon) Riggs, Vice Regent for Washington, D.C. (1858-1867) commissioned this version of the Kitchen at Mount Vernon from the artist in 1864.”

Source: <https://emuseum.mountvernon.org/objects/6118/kitchen-at-mount-vernon>

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What does the painting suggest about the event? Does it seem historically accurate?

How do you connect with the painting?

How is this painting different than the other two you have looked at?



Source: <https://emuseum.mountvernon.org/objects/61.18/kitchen-at-mount-vernon>