

In the Spotlight

Grades
4+

by | Sharron L. McElmeel

The Many Faces of George Washington: Remaking A Presidential Icon
by Carla Killough McClafferty. CarolRhoda Books, 2011.

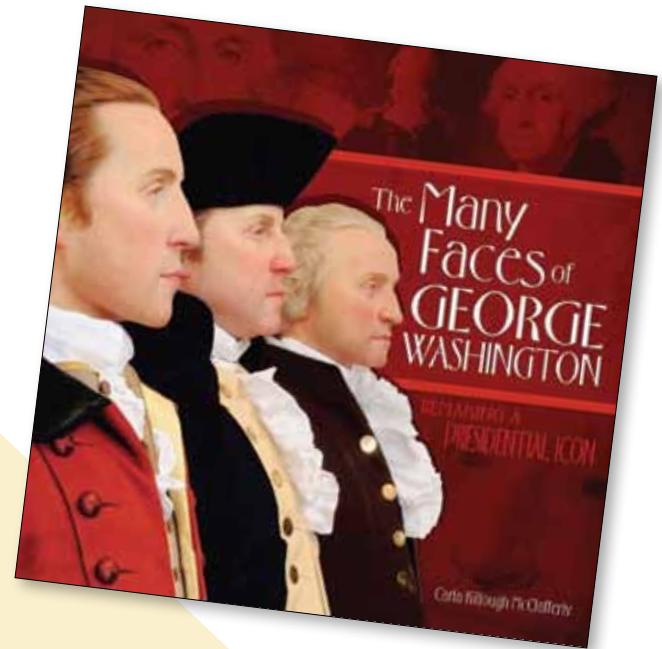
U.S. History Meets CSI

Most young scholars third grade and older know the man on the U.S. dollar bill, and most adults also recognize George Washington from that image. In Carla Killough McClafferty's *The Many Faces of George Washington*, we learn this iconic rendering of our first president was based on a well-known, unfinished portrait of Washington, begun in 1796 by Gilbert Stuart.

Famous as Stuart's painting may be, many historians, including those at the Mount Vernon Historic Site, feel the portrayal is not necessarily the ideal representation of George Washington. The portrait, commissioned by Martha Washington, was begun late in George Washington's life. Was Washington's image at sixty-four the image that should stand out in our minds today?

The curators at Mount Vernon believe there was much more to the man than what the grumpy-looking, older fellow we see on the dollar bill suggests. After all, at the time Washington sat for the portrait, he had just had his last tooth pulled and his false teeth were held together by a heavy spring that made speech difficult. The dentures also made his lips bulge out.

But dental issues aside, these historians also believe that the Stuart portrait may not be an accurate likeness of Washington at all. The first American patent for photography was not issued until 1840, decades after Washington's death. Photography was not part of his culture—people learned about how others looked by studying their portraits. But portraits are the result of an artist communicating his own observations and perspectives of a subject—and a single subject can have different interpretations.



McClafferty demonstrates this issue by juxtaposing two portraits on page 7. As a young, 17-year-old artist, Rembrandt Peale was given the opportunity to paint George Washington. Understandably nervous, he asked his father, the well-known painter Charles Willson Peale, to paint along side him. Father and son worked simultaneously, but the resulting portraits are much different. The son captured an older, tired man on his canvas, while his father portrayed a much younger man who looked more serene than weary.

So just what *did* George Washington look like? In 2005, curators at the Mount Vernon museum sought to provide the public with a depiction of Washington as the robust, intelligent, physically fit man that they felt the written record demonstrated. The staff aimed to create a full-body wax sculpture of Washington at three critical ages: 19, 45, and 57. But given the many images of Washington, which was the authority on Washington's looks? Did he look the same at 19 as he did at 57?

Many famous artists painted Washington during his life: Charles Willson Peale, Rembrandt Peale, Gilbert Stuart, Archibald Robertson, John Ramage, Christian Guallager, William Joseph Williams, and dozens more. The museum experts finally settled on using the life mask created by the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon as the basis for their project. McClafferty explains the process Houdon used to create both the bust of Washington and the plaster cast, which included Houdon taking meticulous measurements of Washington's body. Years later, Houdon's finished statue would be a reference point for the new, full-sized figures of Washington created by the museum staff.

To measure and examine the life mask as accurately as possible, the staff called in researchers who used cutting-edge technology, including spatial modeling (PRISM), to create a 3-D image of Washington. The computer image could then be manipulated to show an aging jawline and skin. Artisans were called in to employ centuries-old techniques to create appropriate clothing for the sculptures. Scientists were called in to determine the color of Washington's skin, hair, and how he would have aged from 19 to 57. McClafferty describes the detailed work of each step of the reconstruction, including how each strand of hair was put into Washington's head, one at a time.

The Many Faces of George Washington does not need to be read from front to back, but individual readers will likely want to do just that—the science is fascinating, as is the information about the Revolutionary War and Washington's personality as a leader. He was much respected among his fellow countrymen and wholly dedicated to the Union.

For a group of young scholars, however, sharing the photographs and information in specific chapters will likely be enough to entice them to learn more about how science and CSI-type forensics can do more than solve murders on television. This nonfiction book may require some creative introductory effort, but it will yield continued interest and further reading about Washington and the Revolutionary War era.

Perspectives on a Subject

Before sharing this book, inform students that prior to photographs, drawings and paintings were used to record how a person looked. Ask a friend

or an anonymous school volunteer to “sit” for a portrait and have your students to create a drawing or painting of the model. Ask them to make a likeness that a stranger who has never met the model could use to identify the model when seeing him or her for the first time. Caution the artists to remember that clothes probably will not be a key for identification, as the model might be wearing a different outfit when the meeting takes place. Ask the artists to put their own name only on the back of their drawings, and take a picture of the model before the end of the sitting. Keep the identity of the subject secret for the time being.

A day or two later, conduct a research study. Number each student portrait and display them where they all can be seen with the numbers. On a bulletin board, post at least five photographs of people who are the same gender and approximate age as the subject for the drawings, and include the photo you took of the actual subject, as well. Label these photos A, B, C, etc. Then, invite members of the school community to come into the room. Suggest that the students have drawn pictures to represent one of the subjects shown on the bulletin board. Do not tell them that all of the drawings are of the one subject. Provide them with a checklist with numbers running down the left side vertically, and letters across the top, horizontally. Ask visitors to use the checklist to match the illustrations to the photograph of the person they believe is the subject of each drawing.

Once at least ten checklists have been returned, tally how many visitors selected the correct subject and how many did not. The results should be collated, but individual portraits should *not* be identified or reported to student artists as being representational or not. The idea is to show that different perspectives result in different artistic interpretations—and these interpretations are interpreted yet again by the people who view the art. As McClafferty says on page 5 of her book, “If Washington should appear on earth just as he sat to Stuart, I am sure that he would be treated as an imposter.” After a discussion about perspective, introduce the idea of how historical figures are portrayed in history. The Mount Vernon curators wanted Washington to be viewed in a different way than his iconic portrayal on the dollar bill.

In the Spotlight

Research

Research the era and circumstances under which each of the following artists portrayed George Washington. Use images of their work to create a time line demonstrating how Washington was perceived over the years. Add significant events from U.S. history, such as the Revolution, the Constitutional Convention, etc.

- Charles Willson Peale
- Rembrandt Peale
- Gilbert Stuart
- Archibald Robertson
- John Ramage
- Christian Guullager
- William Joseph Williams
- Jean-Antoine Houdon

Discussion

Download a two-page discussion guide for *The Many Faces of George Washington* created by the publisher at www.mcbookwords.com/books/mcclafferty_washington.pdf. The site also includes links to the author's website, and resources about Washington's portrait artists.

Primary and Secondary Sources

In her book, McCafferty relates how the team creating Washington's full-body representations used primary sources to learn more about him. Assign small groups of students a specific chapter to read, and have them identify primary or secondary sources that the Mount Vernon staff used in their research (see sidebar for a review of source information for students). Among the primary sources will be diaries and letters, and of course, the portraits, dentures, life masks, and the marble statue created by Houdon during Washington's lifetime.

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

A *primary source* is generally defined as an original document unfiltered by someone else—a document or object written or created during the time under study. For example, a primary source might be a page of original U.S. Census data showing an ancestor's information (generally, a photographic image of the document is considered unaltered). If someone then takes the page and types up what it says, the new document is a *secondary source*, as its accuracy depends on the person transcribing it. (Was the handwritten name really *Leo*, or was the scrolling L really a G, and the name an abbreviation for George?) Interpretations creep into even the most carefully transcribed documents.

Further Reading

- *George Washington and the Story of the Constitution* by Candace Ransom (Milbrook Press, 2011). Emphasizes Washington's role during the Constitutional Convention.
- *George Washington's Breakfast* by Jean Fritz (Puffin, 1998). A classic fictionalized account of a boy's research using primary documents to discover what his namesake, George Washington, ate for breakfast. Make hoe cakes!
- *Who Was George Washington?* by Roberta Edwards (Grosset & Dunlap, 2009). The fascinating life of George Washington.



Sharron L. McElmeel is the director of *McBookwords*, a literacy organization, and an instructor of children's and young adult literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Her latest book is *Picture That! From Mendel to Normandy: Picture Books and Ideas, Curriculum and Connections—for Tweens and Teens* (Libraries Unlimited, 2009). Visit her website at www.mcelmeel.com.

About the Author: Carla Killough McClafferty

A few years ago, Carla Killough McClafferty was watching a show on the History Channel titled *The Search for George Washington*, which chronicled the Mount Vernon Historic Site's quest to determine what George Washington really looked like. The documentary intrigued McClafferty so much that she knew the story had to be a book. She contacted the staff at Mount Vernon and they welcomed her project. And as luck would have it, even though the three new sculptures of Washington were already display, the staff was in the midst of creating a touring exhibit that would feature three figures identical to those made for Mount Vernon. McClafferty was able to follow the process firsthand—the perfect scenario for an author. Carla Killough McClafferty loves history and has written other books including the story of a little-known American Holocaust rescuer (Varian Fry) and Nobel prize-winning scientist Marie Curie. Read more about the author and her books at www.carlamccafferty.com.