



The Apotheosis of George Washington

Intended Grade Level: High School

Lesson Purpose: For more than 200 years, George Washington has represented the embodiment of “republican virtues” for America. During his lifetime, he was not only referred to as the “Father of His Country,” he was even likened to the figure of Moses, leading his people to freedom. Beginning with his leadership in the Revolutionary War, Washington was loved and acclaimed wherever he appeared, whether it was en route to battle, on the battlefield, or at political appearances throughout the rest of his career. After his death in 1799, the high regard and reverence accorded Washington gave way to a full-fledged apotheosis, or deification, of this remarkable man. America began to immortalize its favorite hero and a plethora of paintings, sculptures, books, essays and speeches reflecting Washington’s celestial personification began to appear. Even after the end of the Civil War and Lincoln’s assassination, Washington’s deification did not diminish but, instead, combined with a deification of Lincoln and canonized the American ideals of liberty (Washington) and equality (Lincoln). The primary documents in this activity depict the apotheosis of Washington through visual images and writings.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will examine 19th century art to identify the symbolism used to support Washington’s apotheosis.
- Students will analyze primary documents to understand their relationship to Washington’s apotheosis.

National Standards:

NA-VA.9-12.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS

- Students describe the origins of specific images and ideas and explain why they are of value in their artwork and in the work of others
- Students evaluate and defend the validity of sources for content and the manner in which subject matter, symbols, and images are used in the students' works and in significant works by others

NA-VA.9-12.4 UNDERSTANDING THE VISUAL ARTS IN RELATION TO HISTORY AND CULTURES



- Students differentiate among a variety of historical and cultural contexts in terms of characteristics and purposes of works of art
- Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places
- Students analyze relationships of works of art to one another in terms of history, aesthetics, and culture, justifying conclusions made in the analysis and using such conclusions to inform their own art making

NL-ENG.K-12.7 EVALUATING DATA

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

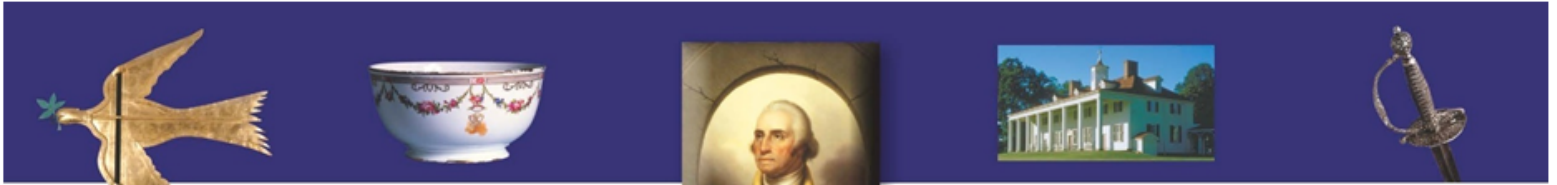
Timeframe: Approximately one class session

Procedure:

1. Define the term “apotheosis” for students as the act of ascending into heaven and becoming a god. Share the information in the “Lesson Purpose” section of this lesson above and ensure that students are comfortable with the concept of apotheosis.
2. Have students examine the four figures and answer the questions on the “Examining Art” worksheet (included below). Students will identify symbols that they see on each figure (ex. laurel wreath, angels, shield, eagle, arrows, toga, trumpet) and record the general impression they have as they look at the figure. Discuss what character traits the artists reflect in their images of George Washington.
3. Students should then analyze the three quotations and answer the questions on the “Analyzing Words” worksheet (included below). Discuss student answers as a class and have students consider how the images and quotations may have influenced the public perception of Washington.



*This has been adapted from a lesson by Pamela Montague,
George Washington Teachers Institute.*



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Examining Art

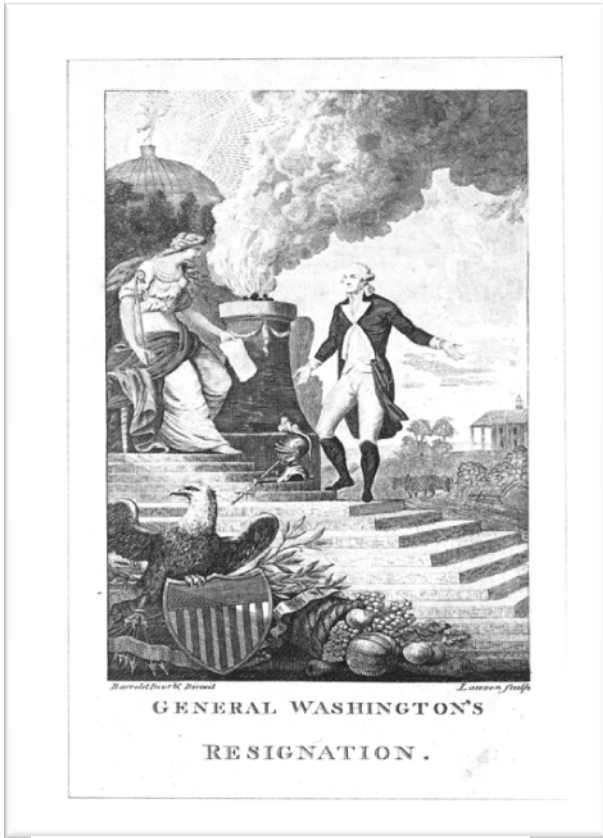


Figure 1 "General Washington's Resignation,"
Alexander Lawson, 1799

Symbols:

Impressions:



Figure 2 "Apotheosis of Washington,"
John James Barralet, 1800

Symbols:

Impressions:



GW



Figure 3 "The Apotheosis of Washington,"
Constantino Brumidi, 1865, fresco

Symbols:

Impressions:



Figure 4 "Washington & Lincoln (Apotheosis),"
Charles Shober, 1865

Symbols:

Impressions:



Analyzing Words

Washington's Eulogy by Henry Lee, December 26, 1799

After the death of Washington on December 14, 1799, Congress selected Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a former Continental army officer, a Virginia congressman, and a close associate of Washington for more than 20 years, to deliver a eulogy on behalf of the nation in honor of the fallen leader. Lee's words have endured for over two hundred years.

"First in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen, he was second to none in the humble and endearing scenes of private life. Pious, just, humane, temperate and sincere – uniform, dignified and commanding – his example was as edifying to all around him as were the effects of that example lasting. . . . Correct throughout, vice shuddered in his presence and virtue always felt his fostering hand. The purity of his private character gave effulgence to his public virtues. . . . Such was the man for whom our nation mourns."

President John Adams' announcement to the army regarding the death of George Washington, December 24, 1799

"THE President, with deep regret, announces to the Army the Death of its beloved Chief, General GEORGE WASHINGTON; sharing in the grief which every heart must feel, for so heavy and afflicting a public loss, and desirous to express his high sense of the vast debt of gratitude, which is due to the virtues, talents, and ever memorable services of the illustrious deceased, he directs, that Funeral Honors be paid to him at all the Military Stations, and that the Officers of the Army, and of the several corps of Volunteers, wear crape on the left arm, by way of mourning, for six months."

Abraham Lincoln - closing words of a speech:

"Washington is the mightiest name on earth -- long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty; still mightiest in moral reformation. On that name no eulogy is expected. It cannot be. To add brightness to the sun, or glory to the name of Washington, is alike impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce the name, and in its naked, deathless splendor leave it shining on."



Critical Thinking Questions:

1. Identify the character traits and qualities of Washington reflected in each document.

- a) Lee's eulogy:
- b) Adams' announcement:
- c) Lincoln's reflection:

2. How do these character traits and qualities you have identified support the apotheosis of George Washington?

3. Why do you think the high regard and reverence accorded Washington has continued for over 200 years?

4. Other than President Lincoln, can you identify other American leaders that have been apotheosized? What promulgates their apotheosis?