
Thomas Jefferson

(1743–1826)

Father of the Declaration of Independence, the multi-talented Thomas Jefferson achieved perhaps his greatest renown as a political theorist and spokesman for democracy. He was born in what is now Albemarle County, Virginia, studied law, and was admitted to the Virginia bar in 1767. He served in the Virginia house of burgesses from 1769 until it disbanded in 1774. Virginia sent Jefferson to the second Continental Congress, where he was elected to the committee charged with drafting a declaration of independence. Although he was assisted by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and others, Jefferson was the document's primary author.

Jefferson served in the Virginia state legislature from 1776 to 1779, and he was governor between 1779 and 1781. After the Revolutionary War, he carried out various assignments abroad, including serving as minister to France. When he returned home in 1789, he accepted the post of secretary of state in George Washington's first administration. Following a brief retirement from public service, Jefferson, representing the Republicans, ran for the presidency in 1796. According to the election rules of the day, he finished second to Federalist John Adams and, as a result, was designated the nation's second vice president. This outcome, in which the president and vice president represented opposing parties, would prove unique in U.S. history.

As vice president, Jefferson devised the *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* guidebook for the Senate's presiding officer that is still relevant today. Meanwhile, he prepared for a second run for the presidency in 1800. This time, he tied in electoral votes with his opponent, Aaron Burr. After 36 ballots, the House of Representatives chose Jefferson as the country's third president.

The most significant accomplishment of Thomas Jefferson's first administration was the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which doubled the size of the United States.

The bust of Thomas Jefferson was one of the first executed for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection. The commission, authorized under a Senate resolution of May 13, 1886, was awarded to sculptor Moses Ezekiel. Ezekiel was in Rome when he received the first of several letters from Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark, requesting a proposal for a bust of Jefferson. Clark first wrote to Ezekiel on May 24, 1886, and the sculptor responded with an offer on June 6, on the assumption that he was being commissioned for more than one work. Clark corrected him in a letter of June 23, which also included the approximate dimensions desired for the Jefferson bust. Ezekiel accepted the commission on July 21, stated his usual fee, but candidly concluded, "I will leave the matter of price with you and be satisfied . . . as I would like to have the commission, having at present no work on hand and needing it." The commission was confirmed on August 2, and just over two years later, on September 12, 1888, Ezekiel announced that he had completed the bust, which "will I hope give you perfect satisfaction." The bust was shipped from Italy in January 1889, then transferred by railroad from New York by March 23, and received at the Capitol soon afterward.

Like other sculptors then engaged in carving portraits of deceased vice presidents for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection, Ezekiel needed a model, an earlier portrait on which to base his likeness. If, as has been suggested, he derived the features from those of the full-length statue of Jefferson by Pierre Jean David d'Angers, presented to the United States in 1834 by Uriah P. Levy, it is not known when he could have seen it. Ezekiel was living in Rome and did not return during the period of this commission.

Despite the uncertainty about Ezekiel's model, the work does resemble the David d'Angers statue, but with an odd, compressed appearance. Here, Jefferson looks a bit like a handsome, genial young clergyman. The long neck is factually accurate, the wavy hair more carefully coiffed than in some other portraits. The recessive, pushed-back shoulders probably were meant to suggest that the great statesman was clasping his hands behind his back. (It is also possible that the block of marble at Ezekiel's disposal was too small to accommodate broader shoulders or upper arms.) The steeply vertical coat lapels emphasize the long, slender torso of the tall, lanky Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson

Moses Jacob Ezekiel (1844-1917)

Marble, 1888

29½ x 20 x 16⅛ inches (74.9 x 50.8 x 41 cm)

Unsigned

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1886

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1889

Cat. no. 22.00002



Reelected triumphantly the following year, Jefferson spent much of his second term attempting to protect American rights against British and French interests by instituting a trade embargo, an effort that proved largely unsuccessful.

In 1809 he retired to his rural Virginia home, Monticello. There, he championed higher education by founding the University of Virginia, and pursued wide-ranging interests in the arts and sciences. Jefferson is considered one of the most versatile men of his age, one much respected for his significant contributions to political statesmanship and philosophy. He is also recognized for his scholarship and skill in architecture, music, botany, and agriculture. Jefferson's personal library was the foundation for the Library of Congress.

The bust is very competently carved, demonstrating why the now-neglected Ezekiel was honored and respected in his day. There is fluency to both the modeling and the carving. The sense of the body beneath the coat and vest; the crisp clarity of buttons and creases, of lacy shirtfront and cravat; and the organic rhythms of the hair achieved only with the chisel, not the drill, all attest to a decisive skill.

Sir Moses Ezekiel was one of America's most prolific late 19th-century sculptors. He was born in Virginia, served in the Civil War, then studied in Cincinnati and later in Berlin, where he became the first American to receive the prestigious Prix de Rome, for his bas-relief *Israel*. Knighted by the Italian government, the artist established a life-long studio in Rome (in a section of the ancient Baths of Diocletian), yet retained his American citizenship and a studio in Cincinnati. In 1879 William W. Corcoran commissioned Ezekiel to design statues of great artists and sculptors to fill 11 niches in the facade of the original Corcoran Gallery of Art (now the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery) in Washington, D.C. Today many of these sculptures are displayed at the Norfolk Botanical Gardens in Virginia. Other full-length Ezekiel statues of Jefferson are found at the University of Virginia and at the Jefferson County Courthouse in Louisville, Kentucky. Ezekiel's *Confederate Memorial* is located at Arlington National Cemetery; his bronze statue of Edgar Allan Poe—often considered his finest portrait statue—can be seen at the University of Baltimore's Law School; and his *Religious Liberty*, commissioned by the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith for the Centennial Exhibition of 1876, now stands on the grounds of the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. The artist received honorary titles from three European countries.



**Artist Moses Ezekiel relaxes while
visiting his brother in Ohio, ca. 1912.**
(Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution)

American artist Thomas Sully traveled to Monticello in March 1821 to capture a likeness of Thomas Jefferson. Sully was on commission to paint a portrait of Jefferson for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, which Jefferson established while president. Jefferson lightly observed that Sully might find “the trouble of his journey and the employment of his fine pencil, as illy bestowed” on his elderly person. But Sully, after two weeks of sketching and painting the great man at Monticello, “left the place with the greatest reluctance.”¹

The immediate result of that visit was a half-length oil painting (the torso not completed until 1830) of the former president that is one of Sully’s finest achievements. Sully subsequently sold the painting to William Short, Jefferson’s former secretary. Short, in turn, bequeathed the picture to the American Philosophical Society, a scientific organization that Jefferson had presided over from 1797 to 1814. This painting, in Philosophical Hall, Philadelphia, served as the study for the West Point commission—a full-length portrait, still owned by the Academy, which Sully finished the following year.

Sully painted two replicas of the half-length painting in 1856. Both are listed in a hand-written register of portraits created by Sully. No. 884 in the register was painted for the actor Edwin Forrest between December 6 and 11, and No. 885 was painted “for myself” (“second copy”) between December 11 and 29. No. 885, which remained in Sully’s possession during his lifetime, must be the one offered for sale to Congress in 1872 by the artist’s grandson, Garrett C. Neagle, for \$300. The Joint Committee on the Library took no action, and after Sully’s death later that year Neagle raised his asking price to \$500. The committee haggled, and the painting was acquired for \$200 in 1874.

In 1856 Sully was in his seventies, which probably accounts for a noticeable hardness in the handling and harshness in the coloring of the Senate’s painting, characteristics not found in the original. Despite the loss of the artist’s youthful finesse, the replica retains the extraordinary dignity and repose of the original. The magisterial head, with prominent brow and large, deep-set eyes, is serenely poised above the torso. Jefferson is wearing a white shirt, a black coat, a glimpse of a bright crimson waistcoat, and a greatcoat trimmed with sable furs given to him by Tadeusz Kościuszko (p. 240), who had received it from Czar Paul I on his release from prison in St. Petersburg. The waistcoat provides

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Sully (1783-1872)

Oil on canvas, 1856

28½ x 23⅝ inches (72.4 x 60 cm)

Unsigned

Purchased by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1874

Cat. no. 31.00006



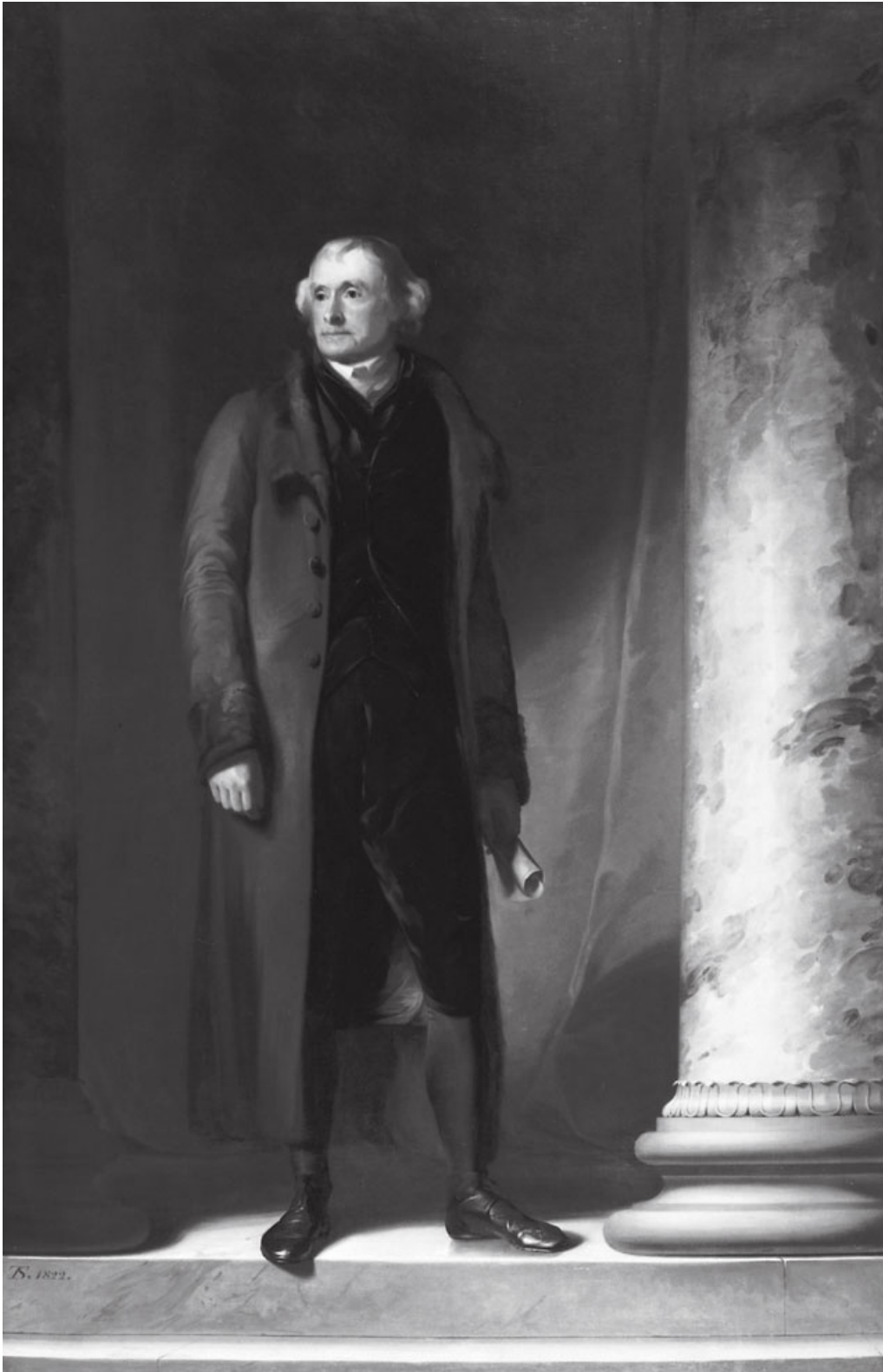
an effective note of color, repeated in the shadows above the eyelids. Behind the head, Sully has painted a vague sky effect with his favorite robin's egg blue, mingled with tawny hues.

In several of Sully's Jefferson portraits (though not the Senate version), the subject stands majestically beside a marble column from the U.S. House of Representatives. The symbolism is significant: Jefferson was closely involved in the construction of the new Capitol building, and he insisted that architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe use the Corinthian order for the new House Chamber. The president was keenly aware of the importance of evoking the Roman aesthetic and its association with a republican form of government.

Thomas Sully was the leading American portrait painter in the romantic style during the first half of the 19th century. He was born in England, moved to the United States with his family at the age of nine, and lived in both South Carolina and Virginia during his youth. Sully studied briefly with Gilbert Stuart in Boston and in 1808 took up permanent residence in Philadelphia. He later traveled to London, where he was influenced by the work of Benjamin West and Sir Thomas Lawrence. On his return to Philadelphia, Sully began a long and successful career painting the fashionable men and women of the day; he produced more than 2,000 portraits during his 70-year career.

One important replica by Sully of his half-length portrait of Jefferson—this one a bust-length likeness—was formerly owned by President James Monroe and is now on permanent loan to the University of Virginia from the Jefferson Literary and Debating Society. The location of another Jefferson portrait, once owned by the Marquis de Lafayette, is unknown. Sully's likenesses of Jefferson became standard, and many later artists and engravers replicated them.

A painting of Andrew Jackson attributed to Thomas Sully is also in the Senate (p. 196). In addition to his portraits, Sully created landscapes, history paintings, and fanciful compositions. He was a respected teacher, and his treatise on painting methods, *Hints to Young Painters*, was published posthumously.



**This full-length portrait of President
Thomas Jefferson was executed by
Thomas Sully in 1822.**

(West Point Museum Collection, United States Military Academy)