

John Adams

(1735–1826)

John Adams, the first vice president and second president of the United States, was born in Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts, into a family noted for public service. As a young man, Adams practiced law while taking an active role in local politics. He attacked the Stamp Act of 1765, becoming an increasingly avid and prominent resister of British authority. Yet in defense of liberty—in this case against mob violence—Adams in 1770 agreed to represent the British soldiers accused of murder in the Boston Massacre. Although their subsequent acquittal angered some patriots, the politically independent Adams won enough approval to secure a seat in the Massachusetts assembly later that year.

An avowed supporter of American independence, Adams was elected a delegate from Massachusetts to the first and second Continental Congresses. As a member of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, Adams led the debate that ratified the document. Thomas Jefferson acknowledged Adams as the Declaration's "pillar of support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender."¹

During the war years, Adams held various diplomatic appointments in Europe and returned briefly to Massachusetts in 1779 to help draft the state's constitution. With John Jay and Benjamin Franklin, he negotiated the provisional articles of the peace treaty with Great Britain that ended the War of Independence, and he later became the first U.S. minister to Great Britain from 1785 to 1788. As the popular candidate of the New England Federalists, Adams was twice elected vice president under George Washington. After Washington's retirement, Adams was elected president in 1796.

Adams's presidency was dominated by strife within his cabinet over relations between the United States and France. Vice President Thomas Jefferson and his Republican supporters sympathized with France; the opposition, led by Adams's

The Senate's oil portrait of John Adams by Eliphalet F. Andrews is a reverse-image copy of a George P.A. Healy work now owned by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Andrews was a successful portraitist in the late 19th century who supplied several government agencies with images of famous Americans.

For more than a century after the founding of the United States, portraits of military figures, early presidents, and other heroes were in high demand. Gilbert Stuart, for example, might paint a hundred replicas or variants of his life portraits of George Washington, but there would still be room for hundreds more copies, as well as copies of copies by artists of varying degrees of skill. In this instance, the highly accomplished George P.A. Healy in 1860 copied Stuart's 1800/1815 portrait of Adams—now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—for a commission by Thomas B. Bryan of Chicago, who had purchased several other presidential portraits from the artist that same year.

The Healy copy in turn was copied by Andrews, who then sold his version to the federal government through Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark. Possibly commissioned by Clark on behalf of Congress, it is an odd work in two respects: First, the composition, as noted, is reversed, a decision and process that would entail a great deal of effort. Second, Andrews later professed no clear memory of painting the copy.

Andrews was born in Ohio and trained in Düsseldorf, Paris, and Berlin. He moved to Washington, D.C., following the election of his friend Rutherford B. Hayes as president. Andrews subsequently established the art instruction program at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1877 and served as the art school's director from 1887 until 1902. He became a greatly admired teacher, but as an artist he was less distinguished. His work as a portraitist—and there was a great deal of it—seems to have consisted, in large part, of copies of portraits (the capital city is replete with them). In her book *Ohio Art and Artists*, Edna Clark remarked, "He knew more than he painted."¹

It is hard to imagine why Andrews would choose to reverse the figure in this painting of Adams. He did not do so in his other copies, so far as is known. Otherwise, he stays close to Stuart's composition. Comparison of the Andrews and Healy copies with the original leads to the conclusion that Healy, a skilled copyist, is faithful to Stuart both in handling and in characterization. Andrews also retains the character,

John Adams

Eliphalet Frazer Andrews (1835-1915)

after George Peter Alexander Healy (1813-1894) after Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828)

Oil on canvas, 1881

29⁵/₈ x 24³/₄ inches (75.3 x 62.9 cm)

Unsigned

Purchased, 1881

Cat. no. 31.00005



rival within the Federalist Party, Alexander Hamilton, favored military action against the French. Adams sent peace commissioners to France and preserved United States neutrality—but at a personal cost. Alienated from the Federalists for avoiding war with the French and abandoned by the populace for his reluctant support of the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts, Adams lost the presidency to Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800.

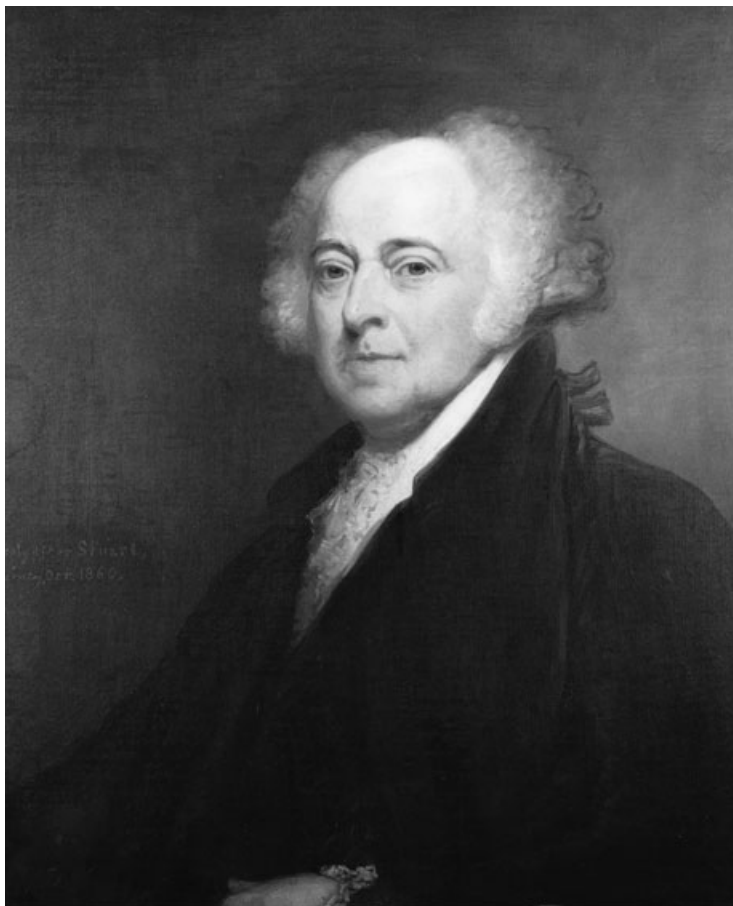
Adams retired from public life and spent his final years at the family home-
stead in Quincy. There he drafted lengthy letters to friends and former colleagues, including a notable 15-year correspondence with one-time opponent Thomas Jefferson. Both men died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of American independence.

but his Adams is less immediate, less vital. His modeling is effective, but his brushwork is thicker and more opaque than that of Stuart or Healy. For instance, the edge of the white shirt is a long, unsubtle brushload of paint, and the mass of hair is generalized and heavy. Stuart's trademark transparency of touch is absent. In addition, in Stuart's painting, the left forearm, cuff, and hand seem almost an awkward afterthought; Andrews suppresses the arm (now the right) still more. However, the silvery sheen on Adams's forehead, a mannerism of Stuart's later years, is very neatly imitated not only by Healy but also by Andrews.

On March 21, 1881, Eliphalet Andrews announced in a short note to Edward Clark, "I have the copy of John Adams finished and would be pleased to show it to you before returning the original to the Corcoran Gallery." But on July 2, 1910, in response to a query from Elliott Woods, superintendent of the U.S. Capitol building and grounds, Andrews wrote, "I do not remember having painted a portrait of John Adams although I may have done so as I have painted many public portraits for govt. in

Washington. If I did paint it, it must have been done during the life of Chief Architect Clark and if so it would undoubtedly have been copied from the one in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, copied by George P.A. Healy from the original Gilbert Stuart. I do remember Mr. Clark having given me an order for some portrait."

The final sentence here may suggest that Andrews was commissioned for the copy. As for forgetting the painting, Andrews was not only prolific, he was also 75 years old. Twenty-nine years had passed since he had painted the work.



This Gilbert Stuart 1800/1815 life portrait of President John Adams was copied by George P.A. Healy in 1860.

(Gift of Mrs. Robert Homans, Photograph © 2000 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington)

Elphalet F. Andrews based his portrait of John Adams on this George P.A. Healy painting, which is a copy of Gilbert Stuart's 1800/1815 portrait.

(Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund)



This bust of the first U.S. vice president occupies a commanding place in the Senate Chamber. It sits almost directly above the rostrum used since 1859 by vice presidents while presiding over the Senate. Daniel Chester French was awarded the commission for the bust of John Adams in May 1886. The piece was modeled at French's New York studio, pointed in Carrara, Italy, and finished in New York. It was placed in the Senate Chamber in 1890.

When the Joint Committee on the Library originally authorized the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection in 1886, the first announced commissions honored five men: the three former vice presidents then living—Chester A. Arthur, Hannibal Hamlin, and William A. Wheeler—and the first two holders of the office—Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Sculptors for the living vice presidents were selected based on the subjects' suggestions; artists to represent Adams and Jefferson came from the sitters' home states. French, although born in New Hampshire, had been raised in Massachusetts and initially trained there. He produced his first public work, the famous *Minute Man*, for the town of Concord.

French agreed to execute the bust of John Adams for the standard \$800 fee that the Senate had determined. He worried, however, that the sum might not be adequate to attract other artists of note. He wrote to Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark, "I consider it an honor and worth a good deal to have a bust of mine in so important a position. I do not know how many sculptors you will find who will look at it in the same way."

French rejected existing sculptures of Adams as unsuitable models for the Senate bust, commenting that they were not of the correct proportions for the niches in the Senate Chamber. On being pressed further to find a model to copy, French wrote to Clark in July 1886, "There is an absurd bust in Faneuil Hall, Boston, that was taken late in life and looks like a silly old woman, and there is another in the church at Quincy that was probably made after his death and is not necessarily authentic. I should not want to copy either of them."

French sought another visual resource. Although it has been suggested that he probably drew on the oil portraits of Adams by Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, and Mather Brown, a comparison suggests otherwise. French chose to sculpt Adams as an older man than the figure

John Adams

Daniel Chester French (1850-1931)

Marble, 1890

31 ¼ x 28 x 18 inches (79.4 x 71.1 x 45.7 cm)

Unsigned

Inscribed (centered on front of base): JOHN ADAMS

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1886

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1890

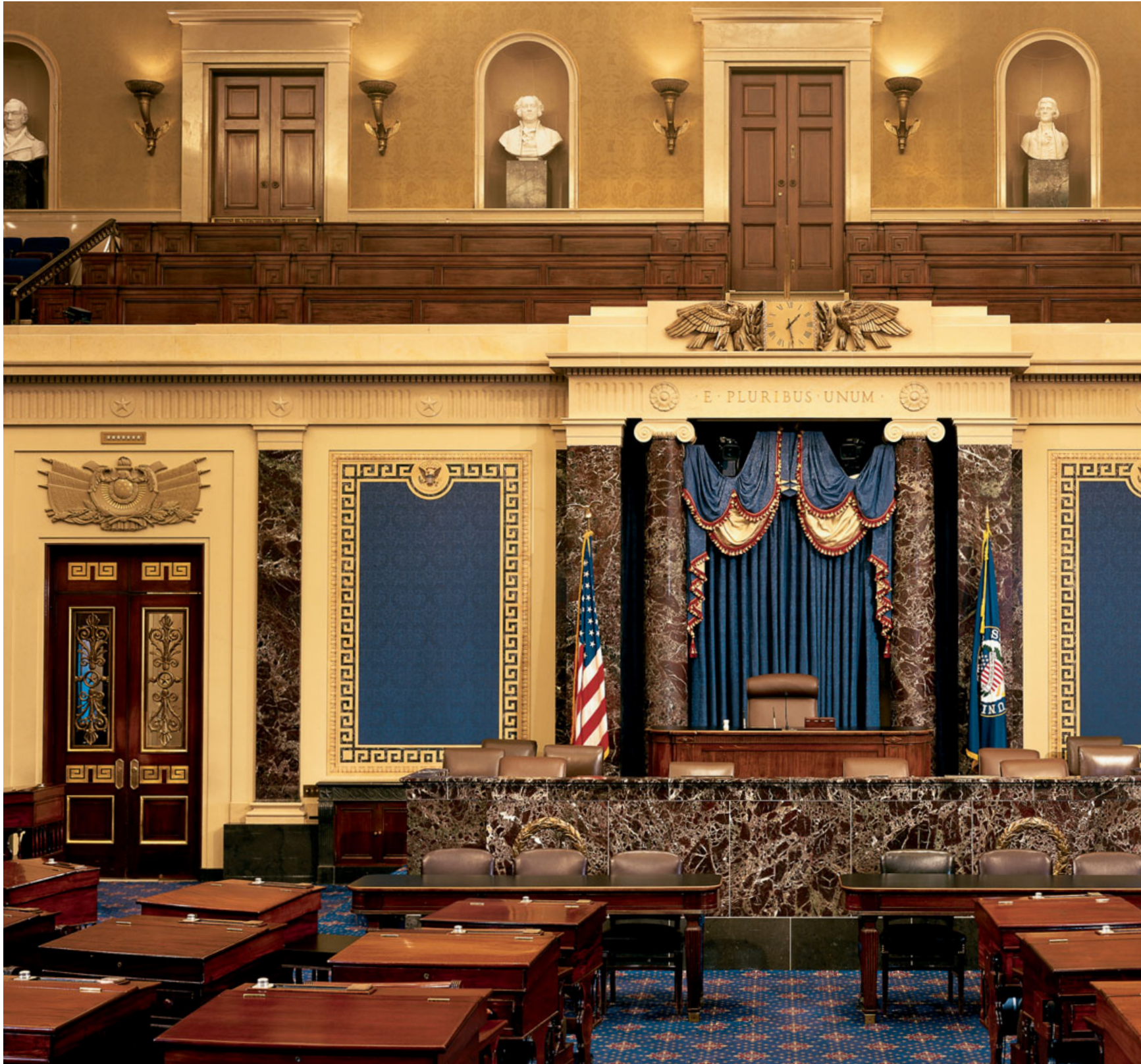
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John Adams—*continued*

Marble busts of the earliest vice presidents encircle the gallery of the Senate Chamber, including the one of John Adams, second from left.

(1999 photograph)





seen in those paintings—indeed, older than he appeared during at least his first term as vice president, if not his second. Adams also wears his own unadorned hair—distinctive, winglike puffs—instead of the fashionable peruke or powdered hair of earlier years. It seems most likely that French used the superb portrait of Adams begun by Gilbert Stuart in 1800 but, to the consternation of the family, not completed and delivered until 1815 (p. 4). This painting, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., had remained in the Adams family and was lent by them (with an Abigail Adams portrait, also by Stuart) to the 1889 Centennial Celebration of George Washington’s inauguration. French would certainly have seen the Stuart painting at that time, the year in which he was working on his bust of Adams.

If anything, French offers a less idealized Adams than does Stuart. For instance, the folds of material at the bottom of the vest suggest the girth that led Adams to be dubbed “His Rotundity.” The creases and wrinkles of the face are also stressed more, and the face is expressive and full of humanity. Although the downturned corners of Adams’s mouth suggest the acidity of his personality, they also carry the promise of an ironic wit. The frontality of the bust, with only a slight turn of the head, is emphasized by the high, bladelike coat collar that frames and accents the face. It projects a briskness, a sculptural analogy to both the sharp intellect and the sharp tongue that characterized Adams. But then French softens and enriches his presentation of the head by cushioning it within a triangulation of the elaborate, improvised lateral hair puffs and the blossoming shirtfront. This bust matches the description of Adams by a contemporary (who was looking at the Stuart portrait): “Age has given a softness and mellowness to the countenance . . . without losing the characteristic vigor of former years.”¹

French, one of the premier sculptors of his day, was principally concerned with expressing naturalism in the human form, in contrast to the neoclassical idealism of his predecessors. Noted for his public monuments, allegorical sculptures, and portrait busts, the popular and prolific artist is most celebrated for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 1922. He also executed the Senate’s bust of Vice President Henry Wilson (p. 428) and a full-length marble statue of Michigan Senator Lewis Cass in the U.S. Capitol’s National Statuary Hall Collection.