

Benjamin Franklin

(1706–1790)

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston and learned the printing trade as his brother's apprentice before he moved to Philadelphia in 1723. Within 10 years Franklin acquired his own press, wrote and published the popular collection of witticisms and practical advice known as *Poor Richard's Almanack*, and became owner of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Franklin, as a founder of the American Philosophical Society, initiated numerous social improvements and displayed a keen interest in science. One of his inventions was the Franklin stove (which improved on the function of the fireplace); he conducted groundbreaking experiments with electricity as well.

Franklin became increasingly active in public affairs after 1754, the year he represented Pennsylvania at the Albany Congress. Convened by the British to settle affairs with the Iroquois, the congress also took up the matter of closer ties among the colonies. Franklin proposed a plan of union, which was adopted by the delegates but rejected by both Great Britain and the colonial governments.

In 1757 Franklin was sent to London for what would be the first of a series of diplomatic missions on behalf of the colonies. He was subsequently elected as a delegate to the second Continental Congress, becoming a member of the committee charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence. During the Revolutionary War, Franklin went to France to negotiate a treaty of alliance, emerging as a favorite personality of the French. Later he served as a member of the commission that drafted the treaty ending the Revolutionary War. Upon his return to America, Franklin became president of the executive council of Pennsylvania and in 1787, at the age of 81, was the senior delegate to the Constitutional Convention. His last years were spent at his home in Philadelphia.

One of the best-known American sculptors of his day, Hiram Powers began his career as a modeler of wax figures in Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1834, under the patronage of Cincinnati lawyer and horticulturist Nicholas Longworth, Powers moved to Washington, D.C. Longworth's influence inspired Powers to make busts of Andrew Jackson and other prominent citizens. As his talent increased, Powers decided to move to Florence in 1837, where he established himself as an outstanding sculptor.

Because of Powers's renown, Congress included in the Civil Appropriations Act of 1855 a provision that charged the president of the United States to "contract with Hiram Powers, for some work of art executed or to be executed by him, and suitable for the ornament of the Capitol." A maximum sum of \$25,000 was authorized. Senator Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, who introduced the legislation, commented on Powers's talent: "Let the renown of the great sculptor, whose works honor this country and his age, be the sufficient recommendation. . . ."¹

Powers immediately offered his allegorical female nude *America* for the \$25,000. However, when pictures of the statue were seen, its similarity to Thomas Crawford's *Statue of Freedom*, intended for the new dome of the U.S. Capitol, discouraged the sculpture's selection. Powers then offered a choice among several heroic portrait possibilities: likenesses of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Webster, or John C. Calhoun.

The contract finally executed between Powers and President James Buchanan in 1859 specified two statues—one of Benjamin Franklin and one of Thomas Jefferson—for the sum of \$10,000 each. The standing statue of Franklin arrived at the Capitol in November 1862 and was placed at the foot of the east staircase of the Senate wing. The Jefferson statue was installed at the foot of the east staircase in the House wing the following year.

The benignly impressive statue of Franklin includes a prominent allusion to the power of lightning, depicted in the tree trunk upon which he rests his left elbow. A deep channel is scored in the trunk from top to bottom. Between 1748 and 1752, working with his theories on electricity, Franklin devised the lightning rod to protect homes and public buildings from destruction. The invention made his name famous to a vast public at home and abroad, a fame further magnified by his

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Hiram Powers (1805-1873)

Marble, 1862

97½ x 34¾ x 21⅝ inches (247.7 x 88.6 x 54.9
cm)

Signed and dated (on right side of base):

H POWERS / Sculp. 1862

Inscribed (on front of base): FRANKLIN

Commissioned (appropriated by an act of

Congress approved March 3, 1855) by

President James Buchanan, 1859

Accepted by the U.S. government, 1862

Cat. no. 21.00008





Hiram Powers, far right, his family, and studio personnel and their wives pose in the garden of the artist's Florence residence, around 1856. The artist's model of Franklin appears in the background.

(Photo detail. Wunder, *Hiram Powers: Vermont Sculptor, 1805–1873*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991. Reprinted with permission of Associated University Presses)

1766 arguments to the British Parliament resulting in the repeal of the infamous Stamp Act. Painted portraits of Franklin frequently include a flash of lightning in the background, but the Powers likeness appears to be the only sculpture to attempt this iconographical reference.

The American sage is shown in a cogitative pose, hand on chin, standing at rest. He appears middle-aged, and it is likely that Powers, working a century later, chose to show Franklin at the early apogee of his renown in the mid-1760s. Powers's art was often cool and aloof, but here he created a plausible and dignified likeness, imbued with a great deal of humanity.

This life-size statue of Franklin depicts him wearing a contemporary costume. In his busts, Powers favored classical or quasi-classical drapery, but in his full-length portraits he depicted costumes appropriate to the sitter. Here the costume is in the English style of about 1750 to 1765 (although Powers called it "the continental suit").² The sculptor introduced interesting naturalistic details, such as the wrinkles in the hose and the tuck in the pocket flap where Franklin's thumb intrudes. Such details are particularly compelling in marble, and because they are not fussy, the appearance is ordered and

clean. The most striking item is the three-cornered hat, in fashion throughout the 18th century, especially before the French Revolution. Although the cocked hat was often worn at a rakish angle, Powers's Franklin wears his soberly, horizontally. This costume was not arbitrary or imagined. In the interest of documentary accuracy, Powers arranged through a Boston friend to obtain items of Franklin's clothing, loaned for the purpose by his descendants.

Franklin's pose is common in painted portraits and ancient sculpture, where the subject is depicted leaning on a tree trunk or spear, for example. Powers devised a variation on the pose that is a striking departure from tradition: The figure's firm, supporting leg is in the center (between trunk and outer leg), while the outer leg is relaxed, further from the tree trunk. The inner leg becomes the central support for Franklin's torso, establishing a strong vertical that rises straight to his left hand and his head. It is an almost literal expression of Franklin's celebrated sagacity and rectitude. Powers also makes a pleasing compositional congruence between the curve of Franklin's right leg and the strong curve of the lightning channel in the tree trunk.

Most important is the artistic source Powers consulted for Franklin's features. It was, indirectly, the great head of Franklin created by Jean-Antoine Houdon in 1778. The English sculptor John Flaxman made a plaster cast (ca. 1801–02) from Houdon's original, and it was given to the American Philosophical Society in 1802. Powers's friend Richard Henry Wilde managed to obtain a copy made from Flaxman's cast and, in 1847, sent it on to Powers in Florence, together with a painted miniature and engraved portraits of Franklin. The 1847 date draws attention to the fact that as early as 1844 Powers was maneuvering to seek a federal contract for a statue of Franklin for the Capitol. When Powers found that these negotiations were proceeding very slowly, he began work on a plaster model of Franklin for the city of New Orleans. The city was unable to procure sufficient funds for a commission, but luckily the federal contract materialized in 1858, by which time the plaster model for the statue was almost finished. The Senate's marble sculpture was signed and completed in 1862.

Powers subsequently executed a duplicate of the Franklin piece for the city of New Orleans after adequate funds were raised, and he later created several busts based on the same model. In addition to the Thomas Jefferson statue commissioned at the same time as that of Franklin, Powers is also represented in the Capitol by a bust of Chief Justice John Marshall (p. 272) in the Old Supreme Court Chamber.



Hiram Powers found inspiration in Jean-Antoine Houdon's 1778 plaster bust of Benjamin Franklin.
(Philadelphia Museum of Art)