

THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

**CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “Making History at the White House”**

***American Art in the White House***



**“George Washington”**

*by Gilbert Stuart*

Most of the early paintings in the White House were portraits of presidents and first ladies. The most famous and important painting in the White House is the full-length portrait of George Washington painted by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828) in 1797. This is the only object that has remained in the White House since 1800, when John Adams became the first president to live there. President Washington (1789-1797) never lived in the White House, but as our first president he led the nation through its first struggles. Stuart’s portrait is full of details that symbolize Washington’s career and the ideas that were important to his generation. The sheathed sword in his left hand reminds us that he was commander of the Continental Army in the Revolution. Washington wears the black suit of a civilian, though, not a military uniform. He gave up the army to lead as an elected citizen, not a military dictator. Under the table there are books on the history of the American Revolution and the Constitution and Laws of the United States. On August 24, 1814, as British soldiers approached the nation’s capital, First Lady Dolley Madison insisted that this portrait of Washington be saved. Since there was not enough time to unscrew the painting from the wall, Mrs. Madison ordered the picture frame broken and the actual canvas was safely stored. When the British burned the White House, most of the objects inside were destroyed. In 1817, after the President’s House was rebuilt, the Washington portrait was displayed in the White House. It has been there for visitors to see ever since.





## ***Native American Portraits***

*by Charles Bird King*

In 1821, President James Monroe (1817-1825) invited 17 Indians to the White House. Monroe wanted to convince the members of different tribes that the president and the United States were powerful forces. Monroe and the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs thought that the visit would show off the wealth and strength of the United States. They hoped they could convince the Indians to cooperate peacefully with the government as Americans pushed westward across the continent. The director of the Bureau asked artist Charles Bird King (1785-1862) to paint the portraits of Native Americans for an Indian museum in Washington. King eventually painted dozens of portraits. Five hang in the White House today. The subjects are shown in their tribal clothes. Petalsharro (Generous Chief), a Pawnee, is shown here in a portrait made during his visit to Washington. The great chief wears the warbonnet made of eagle feathers that he wore at the White House on New Year's Day in 1822. Around Petalsharro's neck hang necklaces made of trade beads and a "peace medal" with President Monroe's profile on it. The medals were given as a gift to remind the Indians of America's authority over them. Native American chiefs had visited presidents since they came to see George Washington. Rarely did their conversations result in keeping peace.



## ***"Ruth"***

*by Thomas Eakins*

The White House collects portraits that show American artists at their best, whether or not the artist paints a historical figure or scene. Ruth Warner Harding did not have any connection to the White House, but Thomas Eakins's famous portrait became part of the White House collection because of its artistic quality. Eakins (1844-1916) made the oil painting in 1903. Forty years after her portrait was painted, Ruth Harding told her husband that her sad expression was that of a ten-year-old who "wanted to be playing with the kids instead of sitting for the painting." The portrait is an outstanding example of Eakins's gift for expressing the emotions of his subjects. He was not interested in painting heroes in glorious poses. He showed complicated individuals — even ten-year-olds — being themselves.

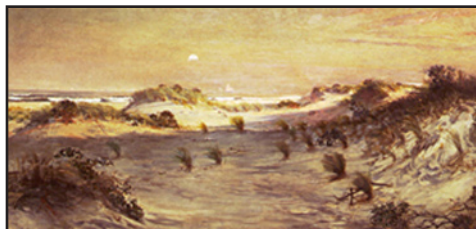




***“Rocky Mountain Landscape”***

*by Albert Bierstadt*

The American West was like a magnet for artists. While presidents in the White House dreamed of settling the frontier in the 19th century, a painter could still find places unspoiled by man. Artists captured the awesome beauty of nature in their landscape paintings. Using his imagination, an artist could create something better than the real world. This is what Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) did in “Rocky Mountain Landscape.” Over 30 years, between 1859-1889, Bierstadt traveled through the West six different times. But when he painted this mountain scene in 1870, he had not seen the Rockies for seven years. The artist often used photographs to remind him of scenes when he later painted them. He also drew many sketches that he could later study when he was ready to work with his large landscapes (this one is three feet tall and almost five feet wide). The landscape is beautiful and mysterious, like the American frontier must have seemed to settlers of Bierstadt’s time. If you think of the painting as a theatre stage, you can see how the darkened edges help focus your attention on the light at “center stage.” Bierstadt took parts of nature that he had seen in many places and brought them together in one painting to create a more perfect Rocky Mountain landscape. For example, the high snow-covered peaks seen to the left of center are probably closer to the Alpine peaks he saw in Europe than those in North America. Time seems to have stopped here. In reality, of course, man would make his mark and progress would not be halted.



***“Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City”***

*by Henry Ossawa Tanner*

When Henry Ossawa Tanner’s “Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City” was added to the White House art collection in 1996, it was celebrated for the excellence of the work and the character of its artist. The landscape was also the first painting created by an African American to be part of the permanent White House collection. Tanner (1859-1937) was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother was a former slave who escaped to freedom on the Underground Railroad and his father was a minister. He studied under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Tanner spent over half of his life in France, where he found people to be more accepting of the idea that a black man might also be a great artist. Still, as shown in his painting of the sunset along the New Jersey shore, America was never far from his mind.





***“Bear Lake, New Mexico”***

*by Georgia O’Keeffe*

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) is the first major 20th century American woman artist whose work is displayed in the public rooms of the White House. Her landscape shows an area north of Taos, New Mexico. Bear Lake is on Pueblo land and is a sacred site to the Taos Indians. O’Keeffe spent much of her life as an artist in New Mexico. She painted three scenes of Bear Lake. This one, which dates from 1930, was still owned by O’Keeffe when she died in 1986. It was only shown once to the public (at a New York City gallery in 1931) before it was added to the White House collection in 1997. Now millions of visitors have seen it in the Green Room. O’Keeffe came to the White House in 1977. At a special ceremony, President Gerald Ford (1974-1977) presented to her the Presidential Medal of Freedom for a lifetime of artistic achievement.



***“The Bronco Buster”***

*by Frederic Remington*

Before Frederic Remington (1861-1909) decided that he was a talented sculptor, he drew illustrations for magazines. He drew a picture of a broncobuster trying to tame a wild horse for an 1888 article in Century Magazine. The author of the article was Theodore Roosevelt. Before he served as president (1901-1909), Roosevelt owned a cattle ranch in the Dakota Territory and wrote articles about life in the American West. Remington and Roosevelt became friends at this time. Roosevelt wrote about the life of a broncobuster: he “receives high wages and deserves them, for he follows a most dangerous trade, at which no man can hope to grow old.” Remington became well known for his ability to capture the frontier spirit of Americans settling the west. “The Bronco Buster,” his first sculpture, was modeled in 1895. It became the most popular small American bronze sculpture of the 19th century and is still admired today.

