**Historical Background**

George Washington is seen here in 1796, the last year of his presidency. The portrait was painted by Gilbert Stuart of Rhode Island, one of the premiere portrait painters in the Early Republic. Stuart had traveled to England and Ireland and spent many years learning European techniques of portraiture. Now known as the Landsdowne portrait, this painting was commissioned by William Bingham, a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, and presented to William Landsdowne, an English supporter of American independence.

This portrait is one of the most important visual documents from the founding of the U.S. One critical dilemma facing the U.S. was figuring out what the President would do and be. The portrayal of Washington in this portrait represents key decisions in how to present Washington and the U.S. President in general. Washington himself played a crucial role in defining the new nation. He served as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and then presided over the Constitutional Convention in 1787. In 1789, he was elected president. He served two terms as President of the United States, and then voluntarily relinquished power—his presidency serving as model for future leaders of the country.