



# The Genius of Gilbert Stuart

*Dorinda Evans*

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Gilbert Stuart was probably the most gifted American portraitist of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. He is best known for his "Athenaeum" portrait of George Washington, which is today a national icon. In this book, Dorinda Evans combines a wealth of original insights with revealing new documentation to present a long-needed, scholarly treatment of Stuart's life and influential work.

Evans begins by tracing Stuart's early years and artistic beginnings in Rhode Island. She follows him to London, where he rose to prominence among such artistic luminaries as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Benjamin West. She then examines his career in the United States, where he became the favored portraitist for the country's leading citizens. In assessing Stuart's artistic importance, Evans argues that his 1796 "Athenaeum" portrait of Washington--the most recognized likeness of the president--was a landmark in the expression of contemporary ideas about moral strength. More generally, she shows that Stuart's painting reflected a genius for interpreting the sitter's personality and a growing awareness of painting's public role in conveying uplifting messages about social dignity and virtue. She challenges the view that his later paintings show a decline, revealing many as concerned with expressing the human soul in a fresh and naturalistic way.

Evans also explores Stuart's private life, discounting recent portrayals of him as an outcast and a confidence trickster. She concludes that his notoriously erratic behavior, which veered from prolonged lethargy to reckless activity and extravagance, was a sign of manic-depressive illness. Evans gathered information about Stuart from a wide variety of previously untapped sources, including unpublished interviews with the artist that shed new light on controversies over his portraits of Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The book presents not only Stuart's most famous pictures--including *The Skater* and his portraits of early American presidents--but also many paintings never before published. Meticulously researched, elegantly written, and richly illustrated, *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* will become the standard account of one of America's most important early artists.

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