

George Washington, marble statue

http://www.virginiamemory.com/online_classroom/shaping_the_constitution/doc/washington

In 1784, the Virginia General Assembly resolved to honor [George Washington](#) with a statue as “a monument of affection and gratitude.” [Thomas Jefferson](#) recommended famed French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, who agreed to the commission and began his work in 1785. After visiting with Washington at Mount Vernon in October to make measurements and a life mask, Houdon completed the statue in 1792. It was erected in the Virginia State Capitol's Rotunda in 1796 and still stands there today.

At the time the sculpture was commissioned, Washington was not involved in the government or in the military. When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, Washington resigned from the office of commander in chief of the Continental army and returned to Mount Vernon, his plantation home in Virginia. After the United States Constitution was ratified in 1788, Washington was elected the first president of the United States. He was inaugurated on April 30, 1789, and served two terms. He voluntarily left office in 1797 so as not to set a precedent of presidents holding the position until death. Washington died two and a half years later at Mount Vernon.

Houdon's statue of Washington, made of Carrara marble, depicts him as both a soldier and a citizen. Washington is dressed in his Continental army uniform, reminding viewers of his military significance. The objects around him portray Washington as a modern-day Cincinnatus, an ancient Roman farmer and general who, after leading the Roman army to victory, relinquished his power and retired to his farm to live a peaceful life. Contrasting his military uniform, Washington holds a walking cane in his right hand, a sign of his life as a civilian. To his left and behind him is a farmer's plowshare. Washington's left hand rests on a fasces, a bundle of rods that is an ancient symbol of authority. Houdon included thirteen rods in the bundle, alluding to the original thirteen colonies. The statue, with all of its elements, skillfully combines ancient and modern styles to illustrate both military and civilian virtues. When Houdon completed the statue, he inscribed the base simply with “[George Washington](#)” and his own name and a date. In 1813, the General Assembly added a longer inscription, which praises Washington as a hero and a patriot.

Houdon created this statue during the height of his career as a sculptor. He was born in Versailles, France, in 1741. He trained under some of France's best artists, such as Michel-Ange Slodtz, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, and Jean-Baptiste Pigalle. 1761 he won the Prix de Rome from the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, an award that allowed him to go to Rome to in 1764 to study at the Académie de France. In 1771 Houdon debuted at the Paris Salon, the premier exhibition in France, and he became famous throughout Europe. During his career, he was well known for portrait statues and busts of famous historical and contemporary persons, but also worked on outdoor statuary, interior sculpture, and decorative low reliefs. Houdon died in Paris in 1828, and is remembered as the finest sculptor in Europe in his time.

