

Special Feature: Seeking the Real Artist....

By Bill White

The other day I was sitting at the WI desk with Marty McKnew, she was reading one of the booklets we were given in our training class. The booklet is titled Arts and Antiques of the State Capitol. It was published by the California State Legislature Joint Committee on Rules in 1984. While reviewing the Notes on page 20, Marty discovered some puzzling information regarding the portrait of George Washington which hangs prominently above the Senate dais. Now we have all been told that the portrait is thought to have been painted by Jane Stuart who was the daughter of Gilbert Stuart, but according to the notes in the booklet that may not be the case. Now I am not an art expert, but I have seen Washington portraits in the National Art Gallery (there is also one in the White House), and I have researched Stuart online to some extent. It is clear that both he and his daughter painted many versions of Washington. Since portraits were the only means at the time if you wanted a "shot" of George, you had to commission a painting, and apparently many folks did.



California Senate Chamber

In my online research of Stuart, I discovered an article written by Daniel Visnich published in 2000 by the United States Capitol Historical Society. Visnich was the Director of the California Capitol Historic Preservation Society and Executive Officer of the Historic State Capitol Commission. In the article Visnich attributes the painting to Gilbert, not Jane. Interesting I thought, and I began pointing out to guests that the painting could in fact be by Stuart, the father -- and not the daughter. Now back to the information that Marty discovered in the booklet she was reading. According to the notes in the booklet, both the painting in the White House and in our Senate were most likely painted by William Winstanley, who began making copies of Stuart's portraits after Washington died. The note goes on to say that the Senate portrait had been X-rayed by a noted art expert and confirmed to be by Winstanley and not Stuart. This find was confirmed by Charles Muskavitch, former conservator of the Crocker Art Museum. Having said this, if you check out the links below you will see that there is ongoing controversy as to who did the portrait that hangs in the White House and therefore perhaps in our California State Senate Chamber, as well.

So who really painted the portrait? I have tried to contact Gilbert, Jane and William, but I have been informed that they are not available for comment. I also tried to track down

Daniel Visnich but did not receive a response to my letter. So I guess I will leave it up to you to decide how to reply when asked the question "Who painted the portrait of George Washington in the Senate Chamber?"

Consult the links below for more information on the controversy.
<http://www.artnews.com/2004/10/01/the-white-house-washington/>
http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_Stuart