

*George Washington's*  
**Mount Vernon**



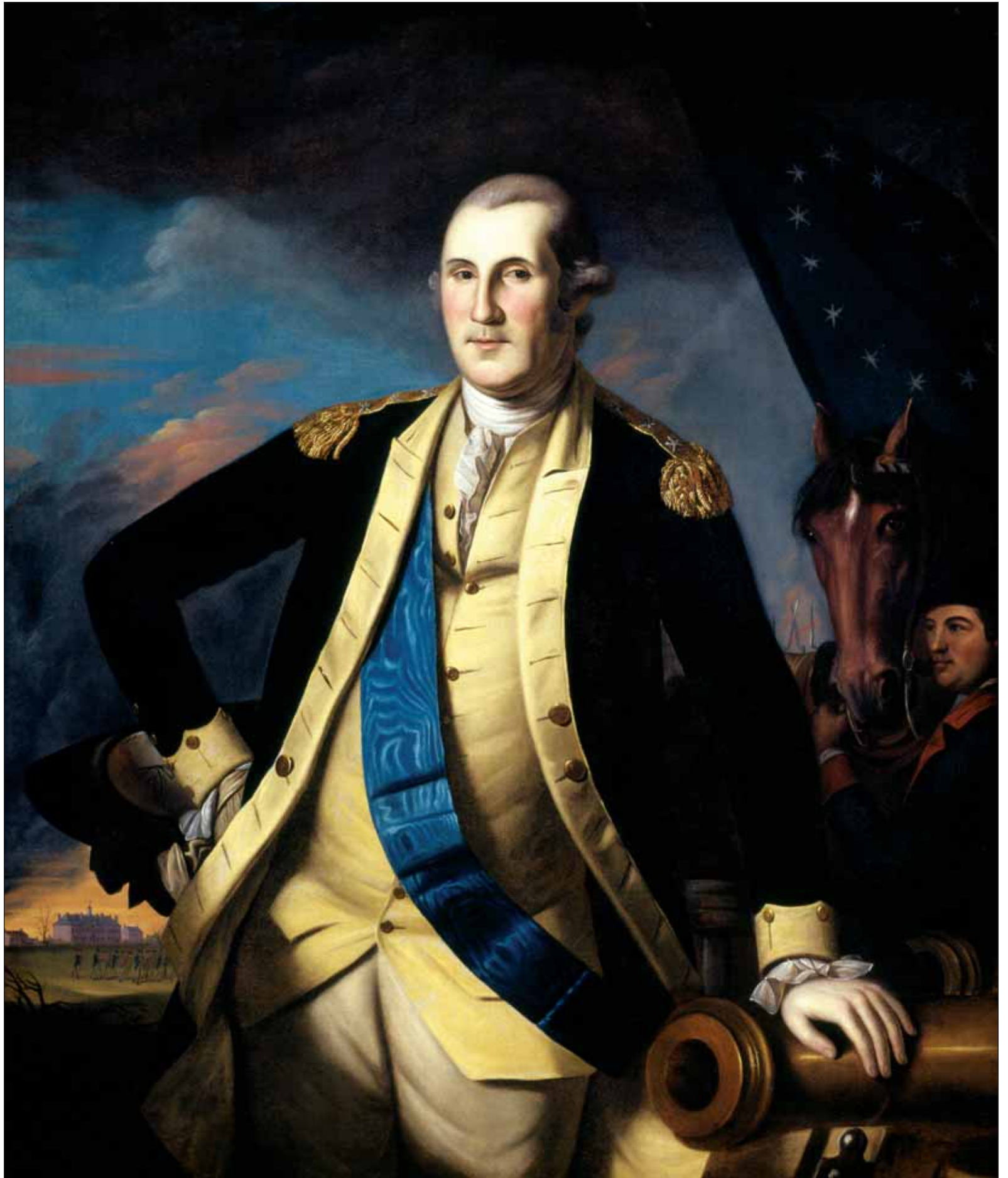
When people think of Mount Vernon, the image that usually comes to mind is of our first president's magnificent white home with its columnar east façade, distinctive red roof, and sweeping views of the Potomac River. But how many people are familiar with the high quality and diversity of Mount Vernon's collections? Numbering some 30,000 artifacts, Mount Vernon's holdings are the richest and most comprehensive collection of Washington-related artifacts in the world and range from fine paintings, sculpture, decorative arts and textiles, to prints, books, manuscripts, textiles, and, yes, those famous dentures. Few other eighteenth-century American households have been so carefully and lovingly preserved. Currently, we are able to display only about 2,000 to 2,500 pieces at any given time, but this will change dramatically when our new Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center opens to the public toward the end of 2006. In the meantime, Mount Vernon is honored to be the centerpiece exhibition at the 2006 Winter Antiques Show in New York City. The show provides an exceptional opportunity to feature some

rarely displayed as well as recently acquired artifacts, many of which are slated to go on view in these new facilities.

Among the works on exhibit will be Charles Willson Peale's majestic, three-quarter-length portrait of General Washington after his critical defeat of the British at the Battle of Princeton in 1777 (Fig. 1). Peale first painted this image as a full-length portrait commissioned in 1779 by the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. Washington's many admirers ordered replicas for themselves and Peale made several copies in response. This particular portrait was painted for Elias Boudinot of New Jersey who served as a delegate to the Continental Congress. Peale, whose own regiment had fought at Princeton, depicts the Commander-in-Chief (his rank indicated by the blue sash) as a towering figure, his right hand resting on the barrel of a cannon. Nassau Hall, the last stand of the British in the Battle of Princeton, is depicted in the background.

In 1783 Washington resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and went back to his beloved Mount Vernon, which he had been expanding since he inherited it in 1761. He continued to









design various components of his home, including a cupola to crown the mansion, as seen in a rare early view of the west front of Mount Vernon attributed to the self-taught artist Edward Savage (Fig. 2). The five figures in the painting are believed to be George and Martha Washington, George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor Parke Custis (two of Martha's grandchildren whom they raised), and Major Pierre L'Enfant, selected by Washington to design the new Federal City (now Washington, D.C.).

The painting also shows, atop the cupola, a weathervane (Fig. 3) that Washington commissioned from Philadelphian Joseph Rakestraw (1734–1794) in 1787. Washington regarded himself as, first and foremost, a farmer and had a keen interest in the weather, noting it daily in his dairies. Telling, is the former general's choice of the weathervane's form: "I should like to have a bird...with an olive branch in its mouth..." he wrote.<sup>1</sup> Rakestraw crafted a dove—the well-known symbol of peace. The weathervane is one of the very few pieces that have remained at Mount Vernon since Washington's residency.

On his return home after the Revolutionary War, and again after his two terms as president (1789–1797), hundreds of guests descended on the estate to pay their respects to this great leader. In 1797 Washington wrote that if no one dropped by, he and Mrs. Washington would do something they had not done in 20 years—dine alone,<sup>2</sup> but this

respite was short lived for in 1798, the Washingtons welcomed 677 overnight guests! Washington's description of his home as a "well-resorted tavern"<sup>3</sup> was not hyperbole. Legendary for their gracious hospitality, the Washingtons acquired a variety of handsome silver, glass, and ceramic objects with which to entertain.

Today, the most sought-after of all of the Washingtons' porcelain services is that decorated with Society of Cincinnati motifs and blue "Fitzhugh" borders (Fig. 4). The renowned service is distinguished by the winged figure of Fame that holds the Society's insignia (designed by Pierre L'Enfant). Washington served as the first president-general of this organization founded in 1783 for American and French officers who had served in the Revolutionary War, and named after the Roman general Cincinnatus who, like Washington, resigned his commission and returned to the peace of his farm. Through fellow Virginian Henry ("Light-Horse Harry") Lee, Washington acquired 302 pieces of the "Cincinnati" Chinese export porcelain in 1786, eventually bequeathed by Martha Washington to her only grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, who built Arlington House, later the home of Custis's daughter and her husband Robert E. Lee. Since the Civil War, the set has been widely dispersed and is highly coveted by collectors. Mount Vernon has acquired 16 pieces from this service; the teapot is believed to be the only extant example of this form (Fig. 4).

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**Fig. 1:** *George Washington After the Battle of Princeton* by Charles Willson Peale (American, 1741–1827), 1780. Oil on canvas. 51 x 39 inches unframed. Bequest of Miss Jane Boudinot, 1916. Photography by Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

#### ABOVE:

**Fig. 2:** *The West Front of Mount Vernon* attributed to Edward Savage (1761–1817), ca. 1791. Oil on canvas. 39 x 25½ inches unframed. Bequest of Mrs. Albert W. Thompson, 1964. Photography by Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

**Fig. 3:** *Dove of Peace* weathervane made by Joseph Rakestraw (1734–1794) of Philadelphia, ca. 1787. Copper, lead, and wrought iron. L. 42 ¼ in.; gold ball 18 in. diam. Purchase, 1860. Photography by Gavin Ashworth.



Another rare survival is a recently acquired and previously unlocated Chinese export porcelain blue and white beaker vase (Fig. 5) from a set of five pieces of mantel garniture owned by the Washingtons and listed in the mansion's pantry in an inventory taken just after Martha Washington's death in 1802. The set was bequeathed to one of her granddaughters, Eleanor ("Nelly") Custis Lewis. Four pieces eventually made their way into the collection of the Smithsonian Institution, while the fifth piece remained among Lewis descendants until it was auctioned in 2004. With the generous support of an anonymous donor, Mount Vernon was able to purchase the fifth vase. With the lending of the Smithsonian's garnitures, all five pieces will be together for the first time in two hundred years and on view when our new museum opens in the fall of 2006.

During his presidency, Washington acquired another large porcelain service (Fig. 6), one that can be considered the first "presidential china" since he often used it to entertain at the executive residence. Always happy to find a bargain and especially one in the most fashionable taste, Washington bought a 309-piece service from Eléonor François Elie, Comte de Moustier (1751–1817), who served as French minister

to the United States from 1787 until 1789, the year Washington made his purchase. In addition to acquiring the former ambassador's elegant gold and white Sèvres, Nast, and Angoulême porcelain, Washington also chose de Moustier's former residence as the new and larger New York home of the president.

Washington's purchase of French goods, which were so popular among many of the Founding Fathers, included two large looking glasses, a dressing table where he washed and shaved each morning, and a lady's writing desk in the Louis XVI style that had belonged to the Comte's sister, the Marquise de Brehan, who had accompanied



**Fig. 4:** Chinese export teapot with insignia of the Society of the Cincinnati, ca. 1785–1786. Porcelain with polychrome enamels. H. 5 ½, L. 9 ½, D. 5 ½ in. Purchase, 1944. Photography by Will Brown.



him to America (Fig 7). Made by Victor-Jean-Gabriel Chavigneau (circa 1787–1789), Washington paid £18 for the desk from which Martha Washington managed the households in New York, Philadelphia, and, finally, at Mount Vernon, where it was placed in the Washingtons' bedchamber. After Washington's death in 1799, his devoted wife burned what she thought were all of their letters to one another, but two were discovered behind a drawer in this desk. One letter is at Mount Vernon, while the second is at Tudor Place in Washington, D.C., the home of one of Martha Washington's granddaughters, Martha Custis Peter.

Among furnishings associated with the presidency is a Philadelphia

Chippendale side chair (ca. 1775–1785) made by an unidentified craftsman (Fig. 8). When Washington was elected the new nation's first president in 1789 and headed to New York, Congress purchased a large quantity of furniture for the first executive residence. Among the purchases were sixty-eight Chippendale chairs made circa 1775–1785, including this one that eventually moved with the Washingtons to the new capital of Philadelphia. The unostentatious style of the chairs accords with Washington's often-stated preference for furnishings that were "neat and plain." Washington's successor, John Adams, sold a number of the presidential furnishing, including the Chippendale pieces no longer in fashion. The chair seen in figure 8 went to a gen-

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:**

**Fig. 5:** Chinese export mantel garniture (beaker vase/bough pot), 1775–1790. Porcelain with underglaze blue and gilding H. 10 in. Purchased with funds from an anonymous donor, 2004. Photography by Gavin Ashworth. **Fig. 6:** Scalloped service dish, manufactured by Leduc D'Angoulême of Paris, France, ca. 1785. Porcelain with gilding. Diam. 9½ in. Purchased with funds donated by The Friends of the Collection, 2004. Photography by Robert C. Lautman. **Fig. 7:** Writing desk, made by Victor-Jean-Gabriel Chavigneau of Paris, France, ca. 1775–1785. Mahogany veneers with brass-banded marbled top. H. 41½, W. 28¼, D. (closed) 19 in. Purchase, 1939. Photography by Harry Connolly.



**Fig. 9:** Argand lamp, France, ca. 1790. Silver plated. H. 6 in. (without glass). Purchase, 1949. Photography by Edward Owen.



tleman in Philadelphia named Peter Hinckle — as did two identical chairs now in the White House collection — and was purchased by Mount Vernon in 1999.<sup>4</sup>

Washington's friend the diplomat Gouverneur Morris counseled him from Paris in 1790: "I think it of very great Importance to fix the Taste of our Country properly, and I think your Example will go very far in that Respect. It is therefore my Wish that every Thing about you should be substantially good and majestically plain; made to endure."<sup>5</sup> Morris served as Washington's agent abroad, acquiring on his behalf for the executive residence a mirrored silver plateaux, Sevres bisque table decorations, silver-plated wine coolers, and at least a dozen so-called "patent lamps." Washington reported that the lamps, recently invented by Ami Argand, burned their own smoke, provided more light than candles, and were less expensive to use. This combination of fashion and frugality was a winning combination for our first president. Washington acquired both wall and table lamps. The urn-shaped lamp (Fig. 9) reflects the neoclassical style coming into vogue in the late eighteenth century.

Washington and Custis silver continue to be extremely attractive to collectors, and Mount Vernon is fortunate to have a number of stellar examples in its collection. Figure 10 is part of a large silver service with the Custis coat of arms and crest, likely ordered around the time of the 1774 marriage of Martha Washington's son, John Parke ("Jacky") Custis, to Eleanor Calvert. The silver service, created by a number of talented silversmiths, reflects the "antique" style so fashionable in the Federal period after the Revolution.

With a new museum, education center, and orientation center on the way, Mount Vernon looks forward to sharing more of its treasures with the public. We hope that the Winter Antiques Show exhibition will encourage more visitors to visit Mount Vernon and enjoy its historic collections. @

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1 George Washington to Joseph Rakestraw, 20 January 1787, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series 5 (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1997): 286–287.

2 Washington to Tobias Lear, 31 July 1797. Private collection.

3 Washington to Mary Ball Washington, 15 February 1787, in *The Papers of George Washington* (1992–1997): 35.

4 Carol Borchert, "Plain for its Situation: A Chippendale Side Chair from the First Executive Mansion," in *Annual Report 1999* (Mount Vernon, Virginia: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2000):38–43.

5 Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, 24 January 1790, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series 5 (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1966): 48–49.



**Fig. 8:** Chippendale side chair, maker unknown, Philadelphia, ca. 1775–1785. Mahogany. H. 35, W. 23, D. 25 in. Purchase and gift of several friends of Mount Vernon, 1999. Photography by Gavin Ashworth.



**Fig. 10:** One of a set of four candlesticks, ca. 1774. Silver plated. Made by John Winter (d. 1792), Sheffield, England, and sold by John Carter of London. H. 11¾, D. 5½. Gift of Mrs. Mary Walker Lee Bowman and Mr. Robert E. Lee IV, 1981. Photography by Harry Connolly.