

— HISTORY —

# A figure of history paints his own history

Part four of four

It is not widely known that the most revered painting in American history, "The Declaration of Independence," was painted by John Trumbull (1755-1843), a son of Lebanon and the youngest child of Gov. Jonathan Trumbull's six children.

Furthermore, few realize that the great artist was blind in one eye. John Trumbull revealed an early talent for drawing, and he later claimed that as a very young boy he was inspired by the paintings of his older sister, the ill-fated Faith Trumbull Huntington.

John Trumbull visited the Boston studio of artist John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) on his way to Harvard in 1770, and this greatly influenced his decision to become a painter.

However, the political atmosphere of the times caused Trumbull to temporarily abandon his painting, and in 1775 he joined Connecticut's First Regiment. Trumbull's artistic abilities were exploited to pro-



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duce accurate maps as an aide to General George Washington. His brief service under Washington's command gave him a lifelong regard for the first president.

Trumbull would paint his portrait on 16 occasions.

Despite his father's disapproval, Trumbull painted extensively at his parents' Lebanon home in 1777-78, producing a number of historical subjects and family portraits. He became frustrated by America's provincialism regarding the arts, and in 1780, Trumbull journeyed to London to study with the American-born painter, Benjamin West (1738-1820).

Unfortunately, John Trumbull

spoke out in favor of the Revolution and was imprisoned for treason for eight months.

On his release John Trumbull returned to Lebanon, and worked with his brother David in provisioning the Continental Army. When the war was over, John persuaded his father to support him in his chosen career, and he returned to London in January 1784 to study at the Royal Academy drawing school. In 1786 he visited Thomas Jefferson in Paris, and from his advice he began to plan his most famous painting, "The Declaration of Independence."

Trumbull wrote to Thomas Jefferson upon his return to the United States that "the greatest motive I had or have for engaging in or for continuing my pursuit of painting has been the wish of commemorating the great events of our country's revolution."

Trumbull established a portrait studio in New York City from 1804 until 1808. In 1805, he became president of the newly formed New York Academy of Fine Arts and, in 1808, was elected vice-president of the American Academy of Fine Arts. In 1809,

he returned to London for treatment for eye problems, and remained there until 1815. In 1816 he was elected president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, a post he held until 1835.

In 1816 the U.S. Capitol was being rebuilt after its destruction by the British army in August, 1814. John Trumbull suggested that its new rotunda be decorated with scenes from the Revolutionary War, and in 1817 Congress commissioned Trumbull to paint four lifesize paintings, "The Declaration of Independence," "The Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga," "The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown," and "The Resignation of General Washington." They were installed in 1826.

Over the succeeding two decades, Trumbull continued his career as a portrait painter. In 1831, he sold his collection to Yale College, providing the nucleus of what became the Yale University Art Gallery. The last years of his artistic career were spent on the production of half lifesize replicas of "The Declaration of Independence,"



Self-portrait

"The Death of General Warren at Bunker's Hill," and the "Death of General Montgomery at Quebec," which, after his death, were acquired by Daniel Wadsworth for the Wadsworth Atheneum.

John Trumbull was also an architect, designing the First Congregational Church of Lebanon, built 1804-07, and the Yale Art Gallery in 1832 (now demolished).

Lebanon's John Trumbull died at his home in New York City in 1843 and, in accordance with his instructions, was buried below his portrait of George Washington in the Yale Art Gallery.

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