

TEACHER GUIDE

1800 DOC. #2: Portrait of John Adams

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

John Adams sat for this portrait by the artist John Trumbull while he was George Washington’s Vice President. Adams didn’t have much appreciation for the job, calling the vice presidency the “most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived” (Sauer 130).

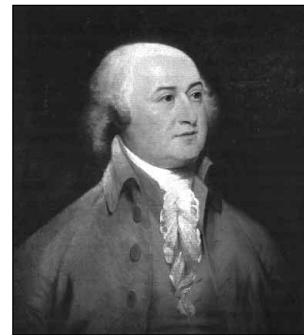
There were some at the time who felt that Adams was too fond of the British monarchy. While presiding over the Senate as Vice President, Adams often wore a powdered wig. He would sometimes strap a sword around his waist at formal ceremonies. George Washington himself criticized Adams in private for his “ostentatious imitations and mimicry of Royalty” (Genovese 38). Some of his harsher critics simply called the short and stocky Adams “His Rotundity.”

Because it was not sold as a separate print, it is likely that only a handful of people would have seen this portrait at the time of the 1800 election.

> **Project** the document.

QUESTION	How is this portrait painted to give a positive view of Adams?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	By only showing Adams’ head and shoulders, it draws attention to his face rather than to his weight and stature, characteristics that were subjects of ridicule by Adams’ critics.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The light focuses the viewer on Adams’ face, rather than on the background or his weight. Like Jefferson’s portrait, Adams’ suit coat and ascot, reflective gaze, and the style of the portrait suggest wealth, reflectiveness, and respectability.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He seems mentally alert and forward-looking with his eyes fully open, looking slightly up and into the far distance.

1800 DOC. #2



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Portrait of John Adams by John Trumbull

PowerPoint Slide

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Critics of Adams made fun of his weight. Does a candidate's physical form have any bearing on what kind of President he or she might make? Do size and weight play a role in contemporary campaigns for the presidency? Should they?

How are portraits different from photographs? What techniques might be used in each to emphasize specific personal characteristics or downplay others?

Why would the U.S. government maintain a National Portrait Gallery containing presidential portraits like this?

ADDITIONAL INFO

This portrait of John Adams is part of the collection of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. It was painted by the artist John Trumbull in 1793. Trumbull painted about 250 portraits of prominent Revolutionary War era figures from U.S. history, the largest collection of its kind. He was friendly with and painted many of the well-known figures of this period in a series of paintings that showed important events of the time. One of his best known works is called "The Declaration of Independence" in which Adams and Jefferson both appear.