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An Icon's Secret

How John Trumbull's revered depiction of July 4, 1776, mixes fiction and fact.

By David McCullough

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'The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776,' by John Trumbull. [YALE UNIVERSITY](#)

No painting by an American artist has been so familiar to so many people for so very long as John Trumbull's "The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776." It is an American icon if ever there was one, as much nearly as the Declaration of Independence itself, and the original canvas, at the Yale University Art Gallery, is both a national treasure and the most important work of a long-acknowledged American master.

Trumbull's historic scene has been reproduced endlessly, in books, prints and on the back of the two-dollar bill, and from as long past as 1826, his enormous enlargement of the original, measuring 12 by 18 feet (not counting its tremendous gilded frame), has held a prominent place in the Rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, on view, year after year, for the Capitol's never-ending

flow of visitors. Present traffic through the Rotunda numbers somewhere between two million and three million people a year, and of the many works of art on display there, including statues of Lincoln, Eisenhower and Martin Luther King Jr., and three other historic scenes by Trumbull, “The Declaration of Independence” is far and away the popular favorite. It is what visitors want most to have their pictures taken in front of, the painting in which they express the most interest and about which they ask the most questions. “It is,” says Tom Stevens, director of Visitor Services, “the cornerstone of the Rotunda.”

The common understanding, of course, is that the painting portrays the birth of the nation at the Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall) in Philadelphia, on July 4, 1776. And certainly the official title would seem to confirm that. But the common understanding is wrong. The signing of the document (which was indeed dated July 4) did not begin until August 2, and even then not all delegates to the Continental Congress were present. Those who were absent did not sign until weeks, even months later. One man did not add his signature until 1777.

What the scene appears to depict is the moment on June 28 when a committee of five named to draw up a declaration of American independence—John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—presented Jefferson’s unedited first draft. But again no such ceremonial moment with all present took place. And besides, nearly everything about the setting is quite inaccurate.

The idea for the painting was hatched by Jefferson and Trumbull in Paris 10 years after the fact, in 1786, while Trumbull was a guest at Jefferson’s mansion on the Champs-Élysées. Trumbull, who was living in London at the time, had recently completed two remarkable historic paintings, “The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill” and “The Death of General Montgomery at the Attack on Quebec,” and was on fire to do more.

Subjects of “national history, of events of the Revolution,” he later wrote, had become “the great objects of my personal life.” In the course of a conversation in Jefferson’s library, Jefferson drew a floor plan of the Assembly Room of the Pennsylvania State House as he remembered it, and on the opposite side of the same sheet of paper Trumbull made a tiny rough sketch remarkably close to what would turn out to be the final composition. (This drawing, too, is at Yale.)

Returning to London, Trumbull went directly to work on a small (21-by-31-inch) canvas. But whether it was from Jefferson’s faulty recollections or

Trumbull's artistic liberties, or both, the resulting scene bears little resemblance to how it really was. The doors in the room are in the wrong place and the whole room has been made to look more elegant than it was. Heavy draperies hang at the windows instead of venetian blinds. The delegates sit in fine mahogany armchairs, not the plain Windsor chairs actually provided. Most notably, the display of military trophies that decorates the back wall was entirely Trumbull's own embellishment, as he himself said.

The delegates portrayed number 48, whereas 56 signed the Declaration. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, who was emphatically against declaring independence and to the end refused to sign, is included (fourth from the right) as Jefferson and John Adams told Trumbull he should be, given his unquestionable patriotism.

But what is accurate about the painting is of far greater interest, and it was this, to Trumbull, that mattered above all—the faces. He was determined that every one be a true-to-life likeness. He wanted to show them as the identifiable, accountable free men that they were, taking one of history's most courageous steps.

In London he painted John Adams from life directly on to the original small canvas, which he then carried across the Channel to Paris in order to do Jefferson. For years following, back in the U.S., he traveled up and down the Eastern seaboard sketching or painting as many of the signers as were still to be found. He had no desire to flatter his subjects, only to record them for all time, for history, “in my language,” as he said, and in this he succeeded brilliantly.

John Trumbull (1756-1843) was one of the most gifted and interesting Americans of his generation. The son of the governor of Connecticut, he attended Harvard, graduating in 1773 at age 17; later enlisted in the Continental Army, serving briefly as an aide to Washington; and later still sailed for London, having decided to become an artist, despite the fact that a childhood accident had destroyed his vision in one eye. Along with Gilbert Stuart he studied under the American master Benjamin West, who recognized Trumbull's exceptional ability from the start.

In the small “Declaration of Independence,” the Yale version, Trumbull was at his prime. The scene has life. The faces gleam with a jewel-like quality. Those of Adams and Jefferson are as good as any he ever did and among the best ever done of either man. By the time he undertook the large version, however, considerable time had passed, Trumbull was growing old, his vitality and talent in decline. Commissioned by Congress in 1817 to do four

commemorative scenes of the most important events of the Revolution, for \$8,000 each, Trumbull, by then 61, began first on “The Declaration of Independence,” worried he might not hold on long enough to do all four.

Working on so large a canvas, larger than any he had ever attempted, made his task still more daunting and particularly as the use of only one eye must have limited his depth perception. The painting has none of the spirit of the Yale version. The quality of the drawing, too, is below that of his earlier work.

At the time the painting was first installed at the Capitol, complaints were numerous. It was criticized for “violations of truth” and for the number of gentlemen’s legs on display. (Rep. John Randolph dismissed it as nothing but a “Shin-piece.”) It was noted, as it is still, that if one looked closely, Thomas Jefferson appeared to be standing on John Adams’s foot. Indeed, it is this that inspires most of the questions present-day visitors put to the Capitol guides. Is it true, they ask, that Jefferson bribed Trumbull to make it look that way, to show that he, Jefferson, outranked Adams? This, they say, is “the story” they’ve heard.

There is no truth to it. The misplaced foot is something of an optical illusion, due mainly to Trumbull’s less than masterful drawing.

That Trumbull felt deeply the symbolic importance of his subject there is no doubt, in both versions of the scene. Nor does he leave any question about the importance of both Jefferson and Adams in how he has placed them in the composition. Jefferson stands tallest, as he did in real life. His red vest further draws our attention, and it is he who holds the document in his hands. But it is Adams alone who is presented full-figure, and who has been placed at the exact center of the composition. (Lines drawn from opposite corners of the painting cross in the middle of Adams’s chest.) It was Jefferson’s declaration, Trumbull seems to be saying, but it was Adams who stood at the center of what happened, in that it was he who got the Congress to cast the all-important unanimous vote for the Declaration.

That Trumbull’s large rendition at the Capitol continues to draw such crowds would surely please Trumbull beyond measure. Yet it is the much smaller version, Trumbull’s gift to Yale along with an incomparable collection of his other history paintings, that is the masterpiece—and it, too, let us hope, will be the subject of increasing appreciation for a very long time to come.

David McCullough (1933-2022) was the author of over a dozen works of American history, two of which won the Pulitzer Prize. This essay originally appeared in the June 30, 2007, edition.