



Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture*
National Portrait Gallery

FUN FACTS ABOUT THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

- The building that houses the National Portrait Gallery, formerly the Patent Office, served as a makeshift hospital in 1862 and 1863 during the Civil War. Among those who brought comfort to the wounded soldiers lying on cots between rows of display cases was poet Walt Whitman, who served as a nurse and described the building in later writings.
- Opened to the public in 1968, the National Portrait Gallery was mandated by Congress to feature Americans who have made significant contributions to the history, development, and culture of the United States. Traditionally, portraits were not admitted until the subject had been dead for 10 years (except for the nation's presidents). But this rule has now been abolished, and living Americans can join the collection.
- The National Portrait Gallery is home to the famous photograph of Abraham Lincoln, taken just two months before his assassination in 1865. The glass plate for the photograph cracked, producing an ominous crack along the top of Lincoln's head.
- "Major Jones," a creation of humorist William T. Thompson, gave an account of the Patent Office Building, home of the National Portrait Gallery, around 1846. Dubbing it "Uncle Sam's Curiosity Shop," he discovered "more'n five hundred thousand [patent] models, all piled up in great big glass cases...rangin' from steam saw mills down to mousetraps." In another room he found an "everlasting lot of shells, and stones, and ores, and fish," and in still another "the relics of the revolution"—including the original Declaration of Independence.
- The third-oldest building in Washington, DC, the Patent Office Building is located exactly midway between the White House and the Capitol on the site originally designated by Pierre Charles L'Enfant for a pantheon to honor the nation's immortals.
- Among the tiniest portraits at the National Portrait Gallery are two engravings of George Washington from 1798 that are about the size of a fingernail, and which were intended to be set in rings.
- Founder of the American Red Cross Clara Barton worked in the building as a civil servant in the 1850s. She was the first female civil servant to receive pay equal to that of the male clerks.
- Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural ball, attended by 4,000 guests, was held in 1865 on the third floor of the Portrait Gallery's Patent Office Building. There wasn't enough food to go around, and fights erupted over what little there was. In less than an hour, "the table was a wreck," recorded the *New York Times*. "As much was wasted as was eaten.... The supper was a disaster."
- In the current large-scale renovation of the Patent Office Building—which after its July 2006 reopening will house the National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Archives of American Art—graffiti was discovered on some walls dating back to the nineteenth century. NPG staffers have been regaled with security guards' vivid descriptions of ghosts in the museum during the evening hours.

- Singer Ethel Merman was a dinner guest at the National Portrait Gallery's 1971 exhibition opening for "Portraits of the American Stage." To an appreciative audience of showbiz folk she got up spontaneously and sang, "There's No Business Like Show Business."
- The centerpiece of the National Portrait Gallery's collection is the magnificent "Lansdowne" full-length portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart. It was commissioned in 1796 for the English aristocrat William Petty, Lord Shelburne, first Marquis of Lansdowne. The Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, as a gift to the nation, made possible the Gallery's recent acquisition of this national icon.
- The death of Princess Grace of Monaco was mourned by Americans, who remembered her as Hollywood film star Grace Kelly. In 1986 Prince Rainier donated her bust portrait by Korstiann Verkade to the National Portrait Gallery at a gala event, which he attended with his two daughters.
- The National Portrait Gallery has been visited over the years by numerous heads of state. Another interesting visitor was a tiger cub from the National Zoo, who was named after then Gallery Director Marvin Sadik and came to call on him in the early 1970s.

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