

# Rhetoric, Ritual, and the Fashioning of Public Memory in Washington's America

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*As America entered a new and unshaped political existence after the ratification of the constitution by eleven of the thirteen states, the notion of a country had to be publicly ratified in the collective imagination. Visual culture provided a means of establishing a shared public memory in the minds of an informed public. George Washington's processions in such places as Gray's Ferry and Trenton prior to his inauguration as president were marked by ceremonies that deliberately made use of symbol and rhetoric as a means of resolving the tension between individualism and collectivism through the respected persona of the president-elect. The record of these events is perhaps most visibly represented in the *Columbian Magazine*, the American journal with the greatest circulation of the day.*

*Au moment où les États-Unis franchissaient le seuil d'une existence politique encore vierge, au sortir de la ratification de la Constitution par onze des treize États, la notion de pays devait être publiquement ratifiée dans l'imagination collective. La culture visuelle offrit le moyen de forger une mémoire publique commune dans l'esprit d'un public informé. Les défilés de George Washington en des lieux tels que Gray's Ferry et Trenton avant son inauguration comme président se déroulèrent à l'enseigne de cérémonies faisant appel aux symboles et à la rhétorique pour désamorcer les tensions entre l'individualisme et le collectivisme par l'intermédiaire de la figure respectée du président élu. C'est peut-être le *Columbian Magazine*, la revue américaine au plus grand tirage de l'époque, qui rend visiblement le mieux compte de ces événements.*

THIS STORY STARTS at high noon on April 20, 1789. The sun, creating a veritable halo around the head of our hero, attains its peak just when the general reaches the first triumphal arch at Gray's Ferry (Figure 1). But the brilliance of the day is secondary to the sublime experience of the collected citizenry. Acclamations of joy "ren[d] the air" at the moment that "a laurel

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crown descend[s] on his venerable head”'.<sup>1</sup> A litany of symbolic representations literally enshrines our illustrious hero: General George Washington. Emblemata of the successes of the Revolutionary Wars — signal flags, the liberty cap, and artillery — jostle for visibility with the signifiers of the new era. These latter include eleven colours (flags) arranged along the bridge alluding to those states that have ratified the constitution to date, a banner with the motto “MAY COMMERCE FLOURISH”, and another banner with the device of a sun and the motto “BEHOLD THE RISING EMPIRE”.

All these details were recorded by Charles Willson Peale and rendered in engraved form by James Trenchard for the *Columbian Magazine* issued in May 1789, immediately following Washington's inauguration in New York City as president of the United States on April 30, 1789.<sup>2</sup> The significance of this little drama, its emblemata, and the rhetoric of its realization can only be understood in the context of the visual culture that informed the record of the early years of Washington's presidency. This record is perhaps most visibly represented on the pages of the *Columbian Magazine*, the American journal with the greatest circulation of the day.

### Rhetoric and Visual Culture

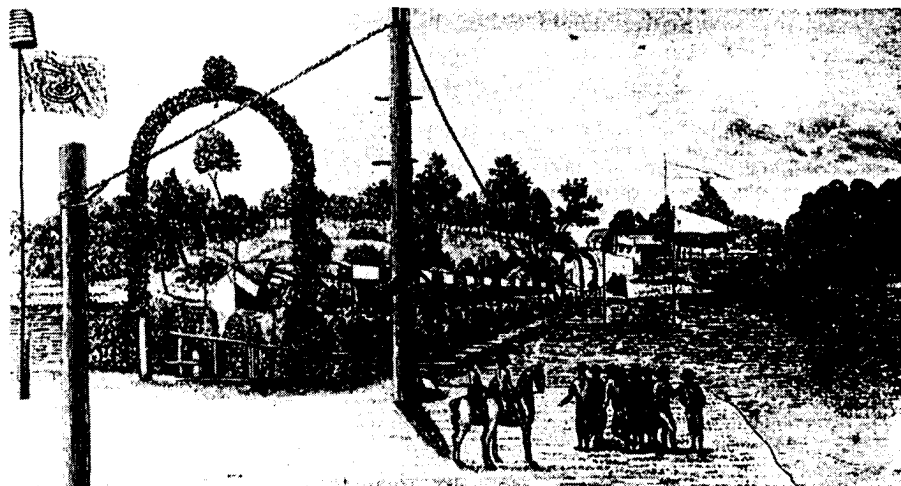
These extant records of visual culture during Washington's inaugural months, pertaining to a seemingly small and limited set of events, may provide answers to a larger question about the significance of eighteenth-century American visuality. Washington and his peers not only appear to have understood the importance of fashioning public memory, but they also understood public performance as a form of social oration, or as a kind of rhetoric of deed and word.<sup>3</sup> This is not “mere rhetoric” or posturing of insincerity as we understand the term today. When I refer to rhetoric, I am following its eighteenth-century usage, which, although diverse in form, was understood as a self-conscious strategy of representation, especially as it was deployed in law, politics, and religious discourse.

As America entered a new and unshaped political reality after the ratification of the constitution by eleven of the thirteen states, the notion of a country had to be publicly ratified in the collective imagination. Visual culture provided a means of establishing a shared, public memory of the past that still shapes and informs the present. The enactment of Washington's

1 *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789, p. 283.

2 James Trenchard, Peale's friend and one of the publishers of the *Columbian Magazine*, was usually responsible for producing the journal's engravings, including that of Gray's Ferry.

3 The following discussion of rhetoric draws upon some arguments that I began to formulate while writing a chapter on American group portraits, including one of the Washington family, for my dissertation, “Historical Relations: Representing Collective Identities. Small Group Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England, British India, and America” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester, 1994).



**Figure 1** “An East View of GRAY’S FERRY near Philadelphia; with the TRIUMPHAL ARCHES, &c erected for the Reception of General Washington, April 20th, 1789”. Engraving by J. Trenchard after a drawing by C. W. Peale, *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789.

inaugural procession functioned as a means of resolving the tension between individualism and collectivism through the respected body of the president-elect. Furthermore, this visual culture relied for its affect and effect on the contemporary forms of rhetoric, for rhetoric’s effect lies in the reception of its message by an informed audience. Where there were gaps in the knowledge of that audience, these were filled by the detailed reproduction of key moments in journals such as the *Columbian Magazine*, accompanied by extensive description of the actions and emblematics of the seminal figures and visual devices. Certainly the *Columbian Magazine* was particularly significant in the establishment of a visual vocabulary of Americana, as indicated by its initial statement, in which the editors promised that each issue would be “elegantly printed” and “adorned with two engravings on copper-plate, executed by an American artist”.<sup>4</sup>

In looking at the visual rhetoric of Washington’s public performances, I am trying to open up the hermeneutical resolution that seems to shape historical interpretations of Washington’s symbolic value. It has been suggested that Washington’s public persona can be understood either as an icon of national unity, a symbol of Republican ideals, or, indeed, an artifact of political manipulation. He has been portrayed by historians as an American

<sup>4</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 9, 1786. Cited in Wendy Wick, *George Washington, an American Icon: The Eighteenth-Century Graphic Portraits* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 94.

Moses, Cincinnatus, Cato, and *Pater Patriae*, among others.<sup>5</sup> Despite the valid contributions of these ways of seeing Washington, his public persona and accompanying rituals of office were arguably more determined and more rhetorically complex than has previously been assumed in the Washington historiography. The very multiplicity of Washingtonian iconography argues for the presence of some informing rhetorical stance. We need to look for whom Washington is performing, and also when and where; Washington is not a singular type or symbol but a rhetor who uses contemporary rhetorical tropes and forms to present his public with a comprehensible and comprehensive representative of individual, local, and federal values, ideals, and desires. I argue that the local as well as the broader implications of his performance are informed by contemporary rhetoric — a rhetoric designed, in his words, to encourage an “enlightened and well-disposed” citizenry to enact morally defensible decisions (or to support those made on their behalf).<sup>6</sup> In using this phrase to describe his constituency, Washington reveals his understanding that there was an audience for purposeful rhetorical discourse. This persuasion was no longer aimed solely at the limited membership of a political elite, but at an informed public.<sup>7</sup> Although he directed his attentions to those “virtuous and enlightened men”<sup>8</sup> who vote, he argued that he would not want those men to be swayed by “influential example”.<sup>9</sup> His objection that men should act according to some inherent virtuosity without recourse to political suasion is itself rhetorical and called

5 See, amongst the numerous typological portrayals of the presidency, Robert P. Hay, “George Washington: American Moses”, *American Quarterly*, vol. 21 (1969), pp. 780–791; James Lindren, “*Pater Patriae*: George Washington as Symbol and Artifact”, *American Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1989), pp. 705–713; Paul Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Glen Phelps, “George Washington: Precedent Setter” in Thomas Cronin, ed., *Inventing the American Presidency* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1989); Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987); Wick, *George Washington*; Gary Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

6 Third Annual Address, 1791, reprinted in Fred L. Israel, ed., *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790–1966* (New York: Chelsea House, 1966), p. 9.

7 James Jasinski cites Gordon Wood on this issue of audience in his discussion of rhetoric and judgement in the constitutional debate. Jasinski argues that “by 1787 the political climate in America had changed: ‘the increasing emergence of a broader popular audience’ helped create a new form of ‘politics that would no longer permit the members of an elite to talk only to each other.’” Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 164, cited in James Jasinski, “Rhetoric and Judgement in the Constitutional Ratification Debate of 1787–1788: An Exploration in the Relationship Between Theory and Critical Practice”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 78 (May 1992), p. 199.

8 In response to John Adams’s comments on Washington’s annual message in 1796, in which he announced his pending retirement, Washington used the phrase “virtuous and enlightened men” to describe those men who would be in the position of choosing his successor: men who would require no influential example to ensure to the United States “an able, upright and energetic administration”. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 28, 1796, p. 2.

9 *Ibid.*

upon civic humanist discourse. It is sincere posturing, but posturing nonetheless, that poses as transparent and self-evident.

Those who would argue that Washington did not employ rhetoric or that rhetoric was the language of university-trained orators and neither accessible to nor expected in the daily deliberations of local citizenry might consider that the evidence suggests otherwise. Whether the ideal citizen would label it “rhetoric” is perhaps a moot point. It was the language of public engagement and it took several forms. When Washington penned his signature to the letter accompanying the submission of the Constitution to Congress, he signaled his acceptance of the letter’s form — described as “an artful combination of rhetoric and logic in a *style périodique* which arouses the emotions before introducing the logic”.<sup>10</sup> The *style périodique* with its “musical and oratorical manner of composing” is defined against the *style coupe* of short, simple phrasing, in Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783).<sup>11</sup> These stylistic variations were also commonly understood as the “belletristic” versus the “new” or “simple” forms of rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Blair was the Regius chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh. His lectures had wide circulation in America both before and after the revolution and were used as a textbook at Yale and Harvard. His American rival for rhetorical eminence was Rev. John Witherspoon, another Edinburgh graduate. Witherspoon emigrated to America in 1768 to take up the presidency of the College of New Jersey in Princeton. Although Witherspoon has been described as antithetical in outlook to Blair, especially in his emphasis on the political rather than the polite use of rhetoric,<sup>13</sup> they shared a view “in the Ciceronian tradition that saw rhetoric as a public moral force”.<sup>14</sup> Although there is no doubt that the two rhetoricians focused on different applications, they understood rhetoric as a persuasive moral strategy.

Washington’s understanding of the role of persuasion is perhaps more evident in his later writing. In his advice to Alexander Hamilton, who was helping him with a draft of the Farewell Address (undelivered, written in 1793), Washington insisted that the stress should be placed not on the

10 David Daiches, “Hugh Blair and the Rhetoric of American Independence” in Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 219.

11 Hugh Blair, cited in *ibid.*, p. 214.

12 For a detailed description of “new rhetoric”, see Wilbur S. Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), chap. 6, pp. 441–613.

13 Thomas Miller, “Witherspoon, Blair and the Rhetoric of Civic Humanism” in Sher and Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America*, pp. 100–114. Although Miller is concerned with the implications of their differences in regard to practice, he points out that “despite their public differences, the rhetorical theories of Witherspoon and Blair drew on the basic assumptions of classical civic rhetoric, particularly the classical ideal of the complete orator of public virtue and practical wisdom” (p. 105).

14 Daiches, “Hugh Blair”, p. 226, n. 13, and *passim*.

content of his speech but rather upon its style.<sup>15</sup> He specified to Hamilton, “even if you should think it best to throw the *whole* into a different form, let me request, notwithstanding ... that the whole may appear in plain stile [*sic*]; and be handed to the public in an honest; unaffected; simple garb.”<sup>16</sup> In favouring “plain stile” or new rhetoric, Washington was adopting that rhetoric that became peculiarly American in the new political field being established after the War of Independence and was often invoked in opposition to the belletristic rhetoric of British oration (belletristic rhetoric was the sublime form designed to impress through flourishes of speech, emphasis, and punctuation).<sup>17</sup> It is the tension between the “simple garb” of honesty and the spectacle of office which provides the terrain of my investigation. An awareness of contemporary rhetoric may reveal unconscious motives that may help explicate the simultaneous, often contradictory, multiple visual representations of the inaugural period of Washington’s presidency. Washington’s self-conscious fashioning is consistent with eighteenth-century norms of rhetorical oration — specifically that of the university-trained politicians, such as Hamilton and John Madison. It is, I believe, an oration that shapes and mediates the visual field as well as the verbal and that serves to define the public spectacles of the new nation.

Washington was a man who knew that appearances constructed realities. Consciously manipulating his public image, Washington fastidiously inscribed his family crest — three stars, three stripes — upon the visible surfaces of his person and his possessions in the sure knowledge that the details would be as remarked as his presence.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary accounts of his simple dress and accoutrements in triumphal processions, weekly levees, and public addresses reveal that Washington was not only participating, but had a vested interest, in the visual construction of the presidency. As he remarked to several advisors in the spring of 1789, “many things which appear of little importance in themselves at the beginning, may have great and durable consequences having been established at the commencement of a new general government.”<sup>19</sup> It is the rhetorical fashioning of these nascent rituals of the American presidential office that has been overlooked in the Washington historiography.

15 It is not clear if Hamilton was Washington’s “ghost writer” or if the draft was initially produced by Washington and revised by Hamilton. This collaboration was quite typical for Washington and his peers. On another occasion James Madison was called in to assist in the writing of a formal speech. Both men were university-trained in rhetoric.

16 John Clement Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publications, 1938), vol. 35, pp. 48–49.

17 Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric*, *passim*, for an exhaustive discussion of the various forms and sources of eighteenth-century rhetoric.

18 Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 2, pp. 370, 414, and 489 for references to Washington’s use of his insignia on livery buttons, bookplates, silverware, and other possessions.

19 Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 30, p. 321, cited in Phelps, “George Washington: Precedent Setter”, p. 260.

### Gray's Ferry

My first move is to return to Gray's Ferry and its triumphal arches. As the premier painter and manager of public spectacles for Philadelphia, Charles Willson Peale was the obvious choice as master of ceremonies for the Gray's Ferry proceedings. At the level of performance, he even involved his young daughter — thirteen-year-old Angelica was the "handsome boy, beautifully robed in white linen" who was said to have dropped the laurel wreath on Washington's head.<sup>20</sup> Although there may be doubt as to whether this complex manoeuvre could have been carried off by a child trying to place a wreath on the head of a man on horseback, there is little doubt that someone, probably Peale, orchestrated the complex visual scene.<sup>21</sup> According to the *Pennsylvania Packet*, the event was staged "in such stile [*sic*] as to display uncommon taste in these gentlemen" (Peale and his assistant, George Gray, the proprietor of Gray's Ferry) and to fill "the specator's soul with admiration and delight".<sup>22</sup>

Peale's history as the single-minded choreographer of revolutionary Philadelphia is replete with examples of grand spectacle. His effigy of Benedict Arnold (1780) incited great delight with its mechanical devices that caused the two-faced traitor's head to turn first one face to the crowd and then the other.<sup>23</sup> Transparencies marking the capture of Cornwallis (1781) were devised by Peale in quick response to the news.<sup>24</sup> A transparent triumphal arch to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin of France (1782) was ordered by Congress from Peale.<sup>25</sup> However, the precedent which undoubtedly established Peale as the master of triumphal ritual had to be the triumphal arch that he designed for the peace celebration marking the end of the Anglo-French conflict in 1784.<sup>26</sup> On December 2, 1783, the Pennsylvania Assembly had given its assent to a committee proposal for a triumphal arch, adorned with "illuminated Paintings with suitable inscriptions". "The ingenious Captain Peale" was to create an arch "exactly in the stile [*sic*] of the triumphal arches among the *Romans*".<sup>27</sup> Although the immense structure (40 feet high, 56 feet wide) was ill-fated in its first realization — a firework rocket misfired and set the fragile paper and canvas structure ablaze — the second version revealed a few months later reaffirmed Peale

20 Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 235. Sellers's account of Angelica's role does not vary in any substantial way from other versions, except that of the *Columbian Magazine*.

21 Two versions of the crowning have come to my attention, one in which the child successfully positioned the wreath, and the other which suggests that Washington pushed the wreath aside and then kissed the child. Sellers describes both possibilities; the newspapers preferred the former.

22 *Pennsylvania Packet*, April 22, 1789, cited in Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*.

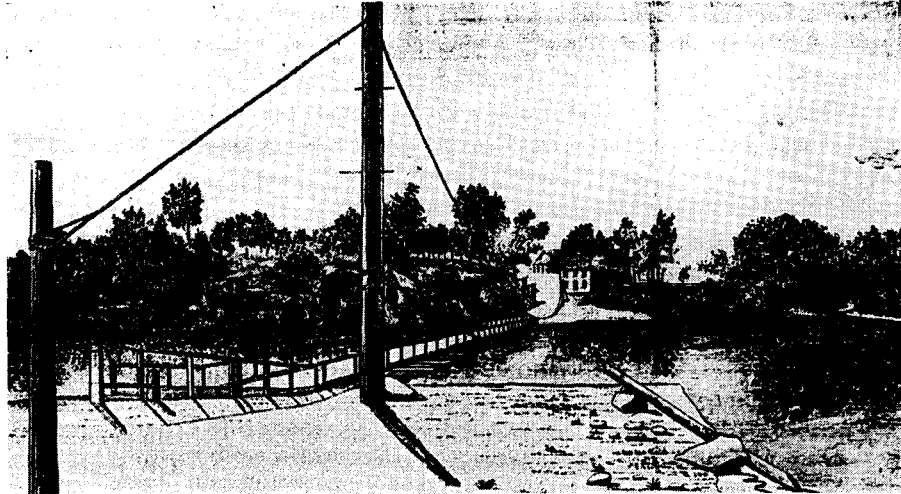
23 "The Arnold Parade" is illustrated in Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, fig. 44, p. 186.

24 Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, p. 188.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 194–201.

27 *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 30, 1783, cited in Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, p. 194.



**Figure 2** “An East View of GRAY’s FERRY, on the River Schuylkill”. Engraving by J. Trenchard after a drawing of C. W. Peale, *Columbian Magazine*, August 1787.

as the master of American visual politics. Within months, he had obtained three important public commissions for portraits of Washington.<sup>28</sup>

Peale’s ability to respond quickly to significant public moments is seen in the rapid publication of the Gray’s Ferry engraving. The triumphal scene was closely described in the May edition of the *Columbian Magazine* within weeks of the event. Rendered in engraved form by Trenchard, Peale’s drawing embellished the detailed verbal description provided by the journal. The speed of publication is in part attributed to the fact that an undecorated version of Gray’s Ferry had been published previously by the *Columbian Magazine* in 1787 (Figure 2). The convenience of an existing engraving plate no doubt facilitated its rapid re-issue as the decorated version of April 22, 1789. The problem with using the existing plate was that the eastern view employed in the original meant that the detail of the crowning with the laurel wreath could not be illustrated. Washington had approached the bridge from the west. Therefore, the illustrator filled the foreground with a few mounted troops awaiting the general’s arrival. Furthermore, he had to identify explicitly the visual points of interest. Small-case italic letters established the location of the crown of laurel (*a*) hanging in anticipation, the striped cap of liberty (*c*), and the large signal flag (*d*) which would alert the crowd of Washington’s approach.

The banner below the liberty cap was described as having the “device, a rattle-snake, with the motto, ‘DON’T TREAD ON ME’.” The snake was a well-established device of the revolutionary era in which the biblical connotation of the serpent as representing the devil was superseded by the

<sup>28</sup> Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, p. 201.

image of the snake, particularly a rattlesnake, as emblematic of the united colonies.<sup>29</sup> The rattlesnake imagery had fallen out of favour by 1780 or 1781, so its presence here seems to confirm its value as a symbolic marker for the revolution. This motif specifically recalls the revolution. Then, the rattlesnake, defended as a secular symbol, was often portrayed segmented and under the motto, "JOIN, OR DIE". The Continental Navy Jack, a revolutionary flag, depicted the rattlesnake on a field of thirteen red and white stripes with the admonition, "Don't Tread on Me". Portraits of Washington had appeared earlier in 1780 and 1781 and were decorated with the liberty cap, snake, and motto. The thirteen stripes again referred to the thirteen colonies, just as the eleven colours flanked by two other flags added up to thirteen.<sup>30</sup> A thirteen-year-old girl was chosen to place the wreath. While the symbolic connotations of the decorations may seem obvious, a concerted effort was evidently made to ensure a common understanding, among the readers and viewers, of the emblazoned surfaces of the flags, decorations, and procedures.

Repeated in Trenton and again on the Federal Building, which was the physical climax of the inaugural procession, the motif of the triumphal arch was not innocent of historical connotation. Well-versed in the epic drama of Virgil's ancient Rome, both at the popular and academic levels of consumption, the reception committee was literally re-enacting the ritual return of the hero of Republican Rome (the explicit intention of the Pennsylvania Assembly when it commissioned Peale's triumphal arch in 1783). When Octavius returned from Alexandria in 29 B.C., for example, there were three days of celebration, one for each triumph (for campaigns in Illyricum, victory at Actium, and the war of Alexandria). The triple arch of Augustus commemorated the surrender of the military standards and the Roman captives by the Parthians; it is perhaps not coincidental that Washington's triple victories at Boston, Trenton, and Princeton are echoed in Peale's use of a triple arch for the peace celebration in Philadelphia in 1784. When Constantine returned to Rome in 315 A.D. after the Miracle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D., a triumphal arch marked the culmination of his triumphal progress. Like the laurel arches at Gray's Ferry and Trenton, all Roman triumphal arches were propagandist in intention. Largely funded through trophies of war and voted for by the Senate, the arches marked the deeds

29 For an extensive discussion of the imagery depicting the colonies as a snake, see Lester C. Olson, *Emblems of American Community in the Revolutionary Era: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 21–56. The engraved portraits of Washington are illustrated in Wick, *George Washington*, fig. 16, p. 29; cat. 13, p. 87.

30 Gary Wills has observed the use of symbolic measurements in another procession, the Grand Procession in Philadelphia on June 30, 1788. He notes the use of 13 runs through all the displays. I will return to the larger significance of Wills's discussion of the procession below. Gary Wills, "Enacting the Constitution: Philadelphia's Grand Procession" in Thomas J. Barron, Owen Dudley Edwards, and Patricia J. Storey, eds., *Constitutions and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Quadrige, 1993), p. 36.

and achievements of individuals, usually the emperor.<sup>31</sup> They presented a version of events narrated from the safe confines of the winning side. More than honorific, the arches were meant to be perpetual reminders of the role of the state in the lives of the public. They kept the history of deeds conscious and visible. They functioned as a form of incontestable, virtually indestructible, visual rhetoric.<sup>32</sup>

As Philip Peirce has pointed out in his revisionary work on the Arch of Constantine, the construction of this visual propaganda was ideological, and it required a certain visual literacy on the part of Roman citizenry. The ability to read the story of an emperor as fit to rule presumed a citizenry who recognized the symbols, motifs, and spatial relations of the visual text.<sup>33</sup> It is similarly this fitting of known social codes to historically specific relations in visual rhetoric which I would suggest underlies the use of the arch at Gray's Ferry and at Trenton, and their reproduction in the *Columbian Magazine*. The tension between the generic significance of the symbol and its particular resonance in that place at that moment is what makes each of these events significant on its own as well as within the larger context. The symbolic value of the colours and other banners embodies not only the more literal emblematics of numerology and mottos but also serves to reveal local investment of meaning in these particular celebrations.

Details of the colours that were placed along the length of the bridge at Gray's Ferry dominated the report in the *Columbian Magazine* (May 1789). The eleven colours for the states that had ratified the constitution already were flanked by a flag described as "emblematic of a *new era* [original emphasis]", but no physical description made clear what marked it as such. Nor was the one known to represent Pennsylvania described in physical detail. It sufficed to point out that "it was the flag which Captain Bell carried to the East Indies, being the first ever hoisted there belonging to th[at] state." This suggests that the flags were well known and the motifs would not need to be described, just their presence. The presence of both the federal flags of the "new era" and the local flag of Bell suggests that the latter took legitimate place — physically and emotionally — in the expectations accompanying Washington's inauguration. The new-era flag was balanced by the history of place emblematically summarized by Bell's. It was represented as the actual flag carried by the local son to the East Indies, that is, the site of colonial expansion for the new republic as well as the former colonizer; only now the exchange was in goods, not people (Americans were forbidden to engage in international slavery). Thus the

31 I am indebted to Jonathan Edmonston for his comments regarding the funding of triumphal arches, which caused me to look further into this literature.

32 On triumphal arches and triumph literature in general, see David Castriota, ed., *Artistic Strategy and the Rhetoric of Power* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); M. James, "Ritual, Drama and the Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town", *Past and Present*, vol. 98 (1983), pp. 3–29.

33 Philip Peirce, *Art Bulletin*

local citizenry was reminded that in the midst of nationalist fervour the state was not to be subsumed into the generic melting pot, but retained its identity despite national pride. Here was permission for the “people” of Pennsylvania to welcome Washington as their representative — a permission which sought to overcome the resistance of many to the perceived federalist threat of *E Pluribus Unum*. Perhaps it is not coincidental that, in addition to the laurel, the ancient symbol of triumph, the arches were interwoven with boughs of pine, the ancient symbol of eternity. Permanent and lasting change signaled the future towards which the citizens could move after enjoying the first flush of victory.

In addition to the literally re-presented symbolism revealed through text and image was the undiscussed symbolic value of the arches, one at each end of the bridge. These, I would suggest, functioned metaphorically as the figurative exit and entry points to the new nation and as the literal gateposts to Philadelphia, the site of the Constitutional Convention where the nation was invented. It is not likely coincidental that the laurel wreath descended after Washington had passed the first arch — he was then in the space between the past and the future. In the act of crowning, the citizenry acclaimed its new president and rewarded its former hero. Once across the bridge, “his excellency was saluted on the common by a discharge from the artillery, and escorted into Philadelphia by a large body of troops.”<sup>34</sup> The president’s departure from this locale and his shift to the next was marked by his exit from the space delimited by the two arches and by the presence of the non-local contingent, the military troops who had accompanied him from Virginia.

### Trenton

In a similar public display, the famous welcome of the ladies of Trenton proffered a day later, on April 21, 1789, also doubly celebrated the local and the national. Located at the site of Washington’s heroic entry into New Jersey thirteen years earlier (and also the site of his “heroic” retreat somewhat earlier in the Revolutionary War), the triumphal arch signaled entry into the town (Figure 3). “This arch was erected in the center of the bridge which extends across Assanpinch Creek, at the entrance of Trenton — where our gallant general, at one time, made so noble a coup on the enemies of his country; and, at another, so important a stand, and a retreat worth more than a victory.”<sup>35</sup> It was festooned with banners recalling the specific acts of Washington and his troops, which, in public memory, had been reified as the decisive actions that prevented the spoliation of the wives and daughters of Trenton’s men at war. While the historical resonance of the mothers’ decorations of the arch have been pointed out by Barry Schwartz

34 *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789, p. 283.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 288–290.



**Figure 3** “View of the TRIUMPHAL ARCH and the manner of receiving General Washington at Trenton, on his Route to New-York. April 21, 1789”. Engraving anonymous (likely Trenchard), *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789.

and other historians of Washingtonia, the particular gendered nature of the event has been elided into the history of Washington’s progress without regard to its difference.<sup>36</sup>

This image of the “Triumphal Arch which was erected and decorated by the ladies of Trenton” is seemingly the only recorded representation of the hero’s welcome which details its orchestration as a specifically female act. Women’s involvement in the day’s event was not intended merely to recall the general rapacity of the British soldiers in the presence of their revolutionary hero, as Schwartz argues.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that the threat of the British had not been sexualized. This is clear in the placement on the front of the arch of a banner “inscribed in large golden letters, THE DEFENDER OF THE MOTHERS WILL ALSO PROTECT THE DAUGHTERS”.<sup>38</sup> However, the presence of the women should not be interpreted only as lauding the role of Washington as protector. Rather, the author of the text, “P.Q.,” is explicit about the different opportunity for expression offered by the women’s actions: “We see, that though the gentlemen may meet their beloved general with peals of thunder, and honour him with all the pompous parade of war, it yet remains for the ladies to meet their defender with sentiment, and touch

36 While Schwartz mentions the Trenton event, he does so only as one of a series of events in the crescendo of acclamations which culminate in the New York inauguration. I am drawing a distinction between the sites of these welcomes and the forms that those welcomes took. See Schwartz, *George Washington*, p. 49.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 217, n. 21.

38 *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789, p. 289.

the tender feelings of the HERO's heart.'" In this public forum, the last of the major celebratory sites visited before the inauguration in New York, the citizens of Trenton chose to be represented by their women. This gendered representation is, I believe, intimately connected to the specific nature of simple rhetoric and its oppositional stance to belletristic, lofty, or sublime rhetoric.

As the last visually represented site before that which would witness the moment of transition from general to president, Trenton occupies a near liminal space. The women provided the space in which the excess of emotional zeal that had escalated throughout the procession to New York could be siphoned off. The women were described as having "arranged themselves in the foot-way, on one side of the street, between the arch and the town, with their daughters in front, to a very considerable number, all dressed in white, and decorated with wreaths and chaplets of flowers." The girls sang a sonata composed for the occasion:

Welcome, mighty chief! once more  
Welcome to this grateful shore:  
Now no mercenary foe  
Aims again the hostile blow —

Virgins fair, and matrons grave,  
Those thy conqu'ring arms did save.  
They for thee triumphal bow'rs  
Build, and strew thy way with flow'rs  
Build for thee triumphal bowers,  
And strew their hero's way with flowers.

Certainly the lines focus on the history of their blessed escape from defilement, but it is the embedding of these lines in the whole performance that cannot be overlooked. Consider that the women were placed "between the arch and the town" and that the girls strewed flowers before the general, who was forced to halt in his progress. The women were assembled to make an emphatic point. Thirteen girls stood before the arch which rested on thirteen pillars.<sup>39</sup> Through the bodies of the mothers and the "innocent white-robed choir" of vestal daughters, the progress of Washington can be represented as a sublime moment, arising from the heart, without compromising the rhetorical "simplicity" and solemnity of the general and the upcoming inaugural event. This aspect of the performance is revealed in the publication of the address made by Washington in response to the women.

39 Jane Ewing noted "the Ladies was rang'd in a line from the arch along the Bridge and thirteen Girls dress't in white with Baskets of flowers" scattered flowers at Washington's feet, in a letter to James Hunter, Jr., June 23, 1789. Cited in Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series* (University Press of Virginia, 1987), p. 109.

Washington undoubtedly knew that Trenton's greeting would be framed in this way. His "card" of thanks (obviously, a written version of his address) clearly evoked the sublimity of his reaction; he knew that Trenton would be different from Gray's Ferry. In the card, he acknowledged "the exquisite sensation he experienced in that affecting moment. The astonishing contrast between his former and actual situation at the same spot, the elegant taste with which it was adorned ... have made such an impression on his remembrance as, he assures them, can never be effaced."<sup>40</sup> Drawing upon standard picturesque motifs of contrast, affect, and adornment, Washington's card of thanks clearly responded to the women of Trenton differently than to the assembled citizenry and militia present at Gray's Ferry. His belletristic rhetoric, suitable for the ladies, contrasted with the simple style of his acceptance of the congratulations of the various addresses received in Philadelphia.<sup>41</sup> Once the laurel crown descended at Gray's Ferry, Washington was saluted by a discharge from the artillery and was escorted into Philadelphia by a large body of troops, together with the president of that state. Ironically, the account of the feminized space of Trenton is preceded in the magazine by a detailed account of the "Art of Cookery" and instructions on how to pickle cucumbers. On the other hand, the *Columbian Magazine's* representation of the masculine space of the politicized entry of Gray's Ferry is perhaps not coincidentally followed in the journal by an account of the "General Duties of Man".

### Nascent Ritual and Representation

In detailing the specifics as well as the generic phenomena which constituted the inaugural tour, I have been attempting to open up the complexity of American visual culture to challenge a linear history which would present these events as mere chronology rather than strategic acts of re-presentation. These acts reveal the conscious and unconscious articulation of Washington as a public figure. Contemporary rhetoric had a role in the constitution of this public *figura* and discloses the unconscious motives which may explicate its simultaneous, often contradictory, multiple representations. How is it that Washington as father was compatible with Washington the general, the statesman, the fellow citizen farmer?

The two versions of Washington's triumphal procession that were reproduced in the *Columbian Magazine* and, later, his inauguration in New York were scenes that served to represent, in fact to re-present, significant differences in the conceptualization and reception of the presidency. This

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington*, pp. 80–150. Twohig reproduces the addresses and letters received by Washington and his responses. In no case is his language quite as effusive as in his letter to the ladies of Trenton. Furthermore, the presence of the militia is quite marked throughout his welcome to the Philadelphia area, from his reception at the Pennsylvania line by a delegation from Philadelphia composed of many veterans of the Revolution, to the contingents from the Philadelphia and Chester troop of horse which joined the presidential party at Gray's Ferry (p. 81).

careful balance of the local and the national, the heroic and the familiar, the masculine and the feminine is revealed by the brief examination of the triumphal procession and its role in the formative stage of American public ritual. The careful explication of symbolic meanings found in the magazine as well as in the presentation of visual images in public spaces shows a contemporary concern for establishing shared understandings. For example, when the Grand Procession of June 30, 1788, celebrating the ratification of the Constitution by ten states, reached its terminus at Bush hill, James Wilson's address included an explanation of the illustrated symbols and themes.<sup>42</sup> It is obvious that the "legibility" of the visual text was of concern. Equally, the unstated values and presumptions which informed that legibility need to be addressed by historians in the attempt to unpack the assumed transparency of the visual.<sup>43</sup>

It seems unlikely that the editor of the *Columbian Magazine* chose to "embellish", as he stated, the reports of Gray's Ferry and of Trenton with views of the triumphal arches merely by chance. Embellishment is perhaps more indicative of the relationship between the engraved image and the printed text than the term illustration would be. The print provides more than mere illustration: it delimits the imaginative potential for those who were not present. They could not mistake, minimize, or overlook the size, the elaboration, the participants, the importance of these events. Not only are there a limited number of engraved images in any volume of the *Columbian Magazine*, but the detailing of the differences and similarities seems too carefully considered to be haphazard, or to be functioning merely as informative but inessential illustration. It is improbable that many of the towns on this grand route to New York erected triumphal arches, although there were many welcoming processions. The question, then, is why were these particular welcome ceremonies engraved? And why only the last two major stops? Why publish one which focuses on the general as military hero and one which articulates his patriarchal role as defender? I would argue that the images and text represent the complex nature of the presidency. That mixture, like the mixed government Washington espoused and the mixed rhetorical forms he employed, demonstrated his ability to balance the desires of a diverse citizenry while still responding to their specific needs.

The historically rooted, local authenticity of each welcome helps to demonstrate that the Washington celebrations were not following the formulaic rituals of the British monarch. In royal processions, the British crowd

42 In his discussion of the Grand Procession of June 30, 1788, that celebrated the ratification of the Constitution, Garry Wills points out that James Wilson gave "the sole address of the day, to explain again all the explanatory slogans and signs". Wilson was the leader of the ratification debate in Pennsylvania and one of the most influential members of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Wills, "Enacting the Constitution", p. 40.

43 The gap between the explained and the unexplained aspects of visual culture and the ways in which the visual is decoded in contemporary practice is the subject of an article that I am currently researching.

was formally separated, one class from another, according to rigid hierarchies and stood at specified distances from the king. Even in civic ceremonies marking the coronation day, the ranking of citizenry enacted an elite hegemony of local relations.<sup>44</sup> The mixing of the American crowd and their universal huzzas explicitly contradicted the stratification of the populace in attendance at a royal inauguration with its graded tiers of peers and peeresses inside Westminster, lesser nobility on the approach scaffolding, and commoners on the street. Equally, the integration of the military into the American ceremonies countered their presence at such royal celebrations as the inauguration of George III, where the troops were employed as police and placed on guard against ‘riots, tumults, etc.’<sup>45</sup>

As the Americans were actively disengaging themselves from many British customs and procedures, ranging from the very idea of monarchy to the specific recasting of the rights of citizens, it is perhaps not surprising that they would adopt a patently un-British mode of ceremonial expression. Perhaps the impetus lay in self-conscious attention to seemingly democratic forms of public interaction, rather than specifically anti-British sentiments, but it is hard not to notice the deliberately non-hierarchical arrangement of groups and the blatant absence of aristocratic figures who had punctuated earlier revolutionary parades. Given the presence of French nobility in America during the revolution, another source of triumphal ritual might lie in the French traditions of royal entries or coronations. However, Louis XVI was still king, and in the standing ritual of royal entry the ceremony was explicitly dynastic in function and clearly articulated the separation of the ruler from the ruled.<sup>46</sup> A notable exception to French royal ceremonial tradition occurred only months after Washington’s inaugural procession. After the intense days of July 14–18, 1789, when the king’s symbolic relationship to the Assembly was massively reworked, Louis XVI enacted a

44 The literature on coronation day celebrations is voluminous. Of those cited here, George Tressider’s article helps to establish the specificity of the civic ceremony and confirms the continuing separation according to class over time: ‘civic ceremony in celebration of the coronation in the 1685 to 1821 period was a stage on which perceptions and expectations of social hierarchy, order and community were enacted.’ George Tressider, ‘Coronation Day Celebrations in English Towns, 1685–1821: Elite Hegemony and Local Relations on a Ceremonial Occasion’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 1, no. 15 (1992), p. 11. See also Peter Borsay, ‘“All the town’s a stage”: Urban Ritual and Ceremony, 1660–1800’ in Peter Clark, ed., *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600–1800* (London: Hutchinson, 1984); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

45 The examples of the deployment of the light-horse to patrol the streets were taken from reports about the coronation of George III, for example: ‘light-horse ... patrolled the streets all day to prevent riots, tumults, &c.’, *London Chronicle*, September 22–24, 1761; ‘light-horse ... ready to assist the Police Officers in case of any Exigency’, *The London Evening Post*, September 19–22, 1761.

46 Lawrence Bryant, *The King and the City in the Parisian Royal Entry Ceremony: Politics, Ritual, and Art in the Renaissance* (Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1986). Bryant shows how the entry ceremony changed from one which emphasized cooperation between the medieval king and his subjects to one in which the king was defined as separate from those subjects due to divine will and dynastic inevitability.

similar popular drama.<sup>47</sup> When the king entered Paris on July 17, 1789, it was reported that “the rich greeted the poor with kindness, the ranks no longer existed, all were equal.”<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary British and French practice notwithstanding, the ancient triumphal model does seem to underlie the use of the symbols, if not the meaning, of the American entries. Michael McCormick has argued that the tradition of victory celebrations favoured by the Roman Republic had evolved over the succeeding centuries as a public ritual not necessarily dependent on the achievement of military victory.<sup>49</sup> Thus the triumphal arch motif could serve not only to commemorate Washington’s actual military success and that of the citizenry at large, but also to mark the commercial, ethical, and individual successes that constituted the nation.<sup>50</sup>

The rhetorical structuring of those approaches to New York can also be seen to underlie the details of the events surrounding the day of inauguration itself. On April 30, 1789, Washington fulfilled the requirements of Article II, Sec. 1 of the newly ratified Constitution of the United States when he pronounced the 35 words of the Oath of Office. The circumstances surrounding that pronouncement have been variably decried as the excessive indulgence of the president who would be king, or as a restrained performance barely meeting the demands of the Congress.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps it makes more sense to position the speech within the framing rhetoric of the day, as in the published rhetorical essays of Alexander Hamilton, author of many of the *Federalist Papers* in which the formalities of the Constitution were debated, or through the contribution of James Madison to Washington’s inaugural address.

Stephen Lucas has argued that the inaugural speech reveals generic as well as historically specific rhetorical forms. He maintains that the rhetorical genres of office-taking, of monarchical accession, and of royal governors’ inaugural speeches each offer generic constraints which Washington blended with personal considerations and the demands of the situation to arrive at

47 Bryant details the implications of the symbolic actions of the king during the stand-off between the monarchy and the National Assembly during the months of June and July 1789 in “Royal Ceremony and the Revolutionary Strategies of the Third Estate”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 413–450.

48 *Révolutions de Paris*, 6<sup>e</sup> édition, augmentée, July 17, 1789, pp. 29–30. Cited in Bryant, “Royal Ceremony”, p. 413.

49 Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

50 It is noteworthy, although impossible to align in any direct sense, that the *akathistos* hymn (part of the triumphal ceremonies of the eighth- and ninth-century Christian rulers) functioned similarly to the girls’ hymn sung at Trenton. The hymn reminds the participant that the celebration is not merely to recognize the individual, but to acclaim a collective, spiritual renaissance.

51 See the various authors cited above on George Washington, most of whom describe the inauguration and its attendant festivities. On the inaugural speech as a formative model for presidential rhetoric, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

his final speech.<sup>52</sup> While Lucas seems to place more weight on the significance of the royal governors' model, especially in relation to the accompanying ceremonials being realized as "heartfelt expressions", I would like to pay more attention to the ritual of office-taking. As Lucas points out, the expression of humility was one of several traits of office-taking speeches. A highly ritualized discursive form in the eighteenth century, office-taking speeches acknowledged those responsible for granting the position, noted the significance of the responsibilities of the office, expressed humility about personal abilities, and promised diligence. Washington had virtually enshrined himself as the model of *humilitas* throughout his public career: "Heaven alone can foretell whether any, or what, advantages are to be derived by my countrymen from my holding the Office [of President], which they have done me the Honor of Conferring upon me; not only without my Solicitations, but even Contrary to my inclinations."<sup>53</sup> His letter of acceptance of the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Army, his published resignation of that position, and his reluctant acceptance of the presidency all established him as the humble servant of the people.<sup>54</sup> This position served to protect him from the possibility of failure, but it also worked to confirm him as an ordinary citizen. Who better to represent the people than an ordinary farmer who had already been called from the plough to serve his country? (The metaphor of Cincinnatus was quite commonly employed in the revolutionary representations of Washington.) Washington personified the individual's specific obligation to the nation and had visibly demonstrated the ability to achieve it. It is this combination of personal energy and commitment that Washington was able to bring to the presidency, and his humility made the idea of a federation operating under an executive palatable exactly because the citizen could imagine such representation as representative of his particular needs. Washington actualized and made visible, in a seemingly transparent fashion, the ways in which the Republic could represent every citizen.

The inauguration was thus a well-constructed rhetorical flourish designed to mark the end of an era and to ensure that the liminal space of Trenton was crossed emphatically, with "energy" and direction. "Energy" is used here in recognition of the language of Hamilton's rhetoric. Hamilton's frequent emphasis on "energy", most particularly in the *Federalist*, number 70, as a criterion of an effective executive has been recognized as an on-

52 Stephen Lucas, "Genre Criticism and Historical Context: The Case of George Washington's First Inaugural Address", *The Southern Speech Communication Journal*, vol. 51 (Summer 1986), pp. 354–370.

53 Letter, April 20, 1789, to the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati in Twohig, *The Papers of George Washington*, series C, vol. 2, p. 80.

54 These letters and hundreds of others addressed to Washington's individual, corporate, and government correspondents reveal a continuing emphasis on Washington's lack of worthiness for the designated honours — a humility verging on the pathological. See Twohig, *The Papers of George Washington*, especially the *Revolutionary Series* and the *Presidential Series*.

going theme in the early years of the presidency.<sup>55</sup> However, this is not a concept generalizable to our colloquial notion of energy as force or vigour. What is apparent in Hamilton's usage is his understanding of energy as the rhetorical form of *energeia* or vivacity — the liveliness of style which makes the scenes described by the orator appear to be actual. *Energeia* is that force which enlivens allegory to make truth visible (as, for example, in Aristotle, Quintillian, or George Campbell's eighteenth-century *Philosophy of Rhetoric*). It is often confused with *enargeia*, usually translated as "vigour" or "clearness", meaning the act or actualization of a potency or habit.<sup>56</sup> In eliding the idea of action with its performance Hamilton is following Quintillian's lack of discrimination between the two terms. When we look at Hamilton's use of "energy" in the *Federalist*, number 70, his seemingly peculiar definition of the term begins to make sense within a rhetorical framing. For him, "the ingredients which constitute energy in the executive are unity, duration, support, and competent powers".<sup>57</sup> By this he meant unity as opposed to plurality, a unity which is responsible because it is of limited duration, requires the support of a council, and is achieved through judicious use of power (especially the veto).

Constantly employing Roman, particularly Republican, tropes to illustrate his argument, Hamilton used numbers 70 through 73 (1788) to develop the idea of executive power. To work, this "energy" has to be made visible; it has to be seen to be working. Thus we return to Washington's remarks about the importance of small things, "many things which appear of little importance in themselves at the beginning, may have great and durable consequences having been established at the commencement of a new general government."<sup>58</sup> The allegorical value of the triumphal arches enacted, in all the details, the balance that Washington was striking between his singular presence and the needs of the people to be conceived as united under federal law, not under a single individual. Unity needed to be seen. His "energy" was enacted both literally, through the restrained presentation of his physical self to each state in his famous "tours" (including the inaugural procession), and metaphorically, through the re-presentation of symbolic codes which confirmed the local and national self-interest of the people, whether the ladies of Trenton or the gentlemen of Gray's Ferry. It was the means through which those individual citizens were permitted to imagine themselves as truly represented by the president. The rituals of the executive office were, according to Washington, designed to "establish a precedent" that was "fixed on true principles".<sup>59</sup>

55 Phelps, "George Washington: Precedent Setter".

56 Teresa Kelly, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 33, no. 2 (19), p. 91.

57 Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist Papers*, no. 70.

58 Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 30, p. 321, cited in Phelps, "George Washington: Precedent Setter", p. 260.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

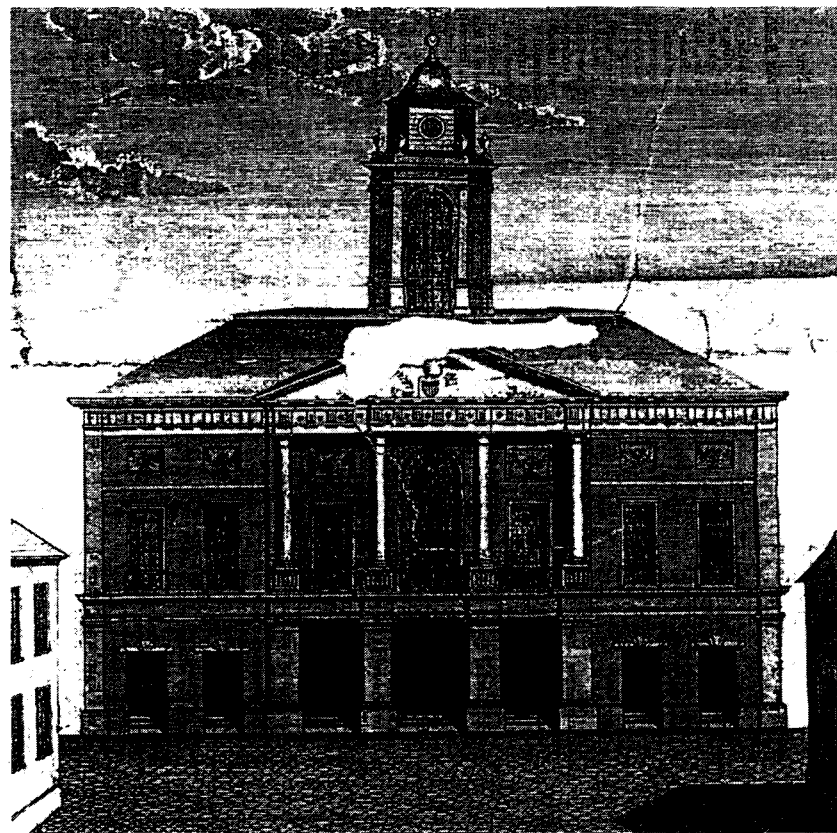


Figure 4 "View of the FEDERAL EDIFICE in New York". Engraving anonymous, *Columbian Magazine*, May 1789.

It seems fitting to close with another glance at the scene of the inauguration as represented by the *Columbian Magazine* in May 1789. While reports of the ceremonies, which had preoccupied the newspapers, began to diminish, the magazine ensured the visual codification of the significance of the event in its publication of a plate of the Federal Building in New York (Figure 4). Extensively renovated by Major Charles de L'Enfant, the architect who would later design the first layout of Washington, D.C., the building served to reify the rhetorical images of the presidency. The *energeia* of the executive, its vivacity of style, was signified in the *enargeia* of visual performance, its vigorous actualization, which the building performed daily. The Tuscan and Doric orders of the façade literally root the new era in ancient Rome, evoking the Etruscan and Republican foundations of liberty. The frieze, with its thirteen stars, literally supports insignia of the Federal Union — emblemata which perhaps not coincidentally were designed to echo Washington's own family crest, in stars, stripes, and eagle.

The efficacy of this design and its sustained power to manifest visually the “energy” of the presidency is perhaps signaled best in a poem that appeared two years later in the *American Museum*, which I first read as an allegory of nationhood. Only after seeing the plate of the Federal Building did I realize that the poem could also describe the edifice. Entitled “The American Union Completed”, the poem celebrates unity and nationhood:

’Tis done! ’tis finished! guardian union binds,  
In voluntary bands, a nations minds:  
Behold the dome complete, the pillars rise —  
Earth for the basis, for the arch the skies!

The triumphal arches of Gray’s Ferry and Trenton metaphorically presaged the realization of their structures — the pillars, arch, and dome — through the bodies and minds of a people, united in voluntary union under blessed skies. The ability of Washington to represent those people is inscribed in the contemporary print which places Washington in the centre of those pillars, visibly enacting his commitment to each and every one of those “minds” united in “voluntary bands” under the arch of the skies.