

Benjamin Franklin, 1862

At age fifty-three, Hiram Powers was the best-known sculptor in the United States when he contracted to produce this full-length, larger-than-life-size marble portrait of Benjamin Franklin for the U.S. Senate. As a young man, his naturalistic portrait bust of President Andrew Jackson (1835) had initiated a brilliant career. Largely self-taught, Powers was particularly noted for his ability to create the illusion of skin in marble; his nude female figure, the *Greek Slave* of 1843 — described by the artist as not flesh but “spirit that stands exposed” — was an international sensation that permitted his Victorian audience to be simultaneously uplifted and titillated. Powers was constantly looking for lucrative and prestigious venues for his works, and no client was more desirable than the U.S. government, which was in the process of embellishing the Capitol at mid-century. In 1858, the government offered Powers a commission of twenty thousand dollars to sculpt the Senate’s Benjamin Franklin and a full-length statue of Thomas Jefferson for the House.

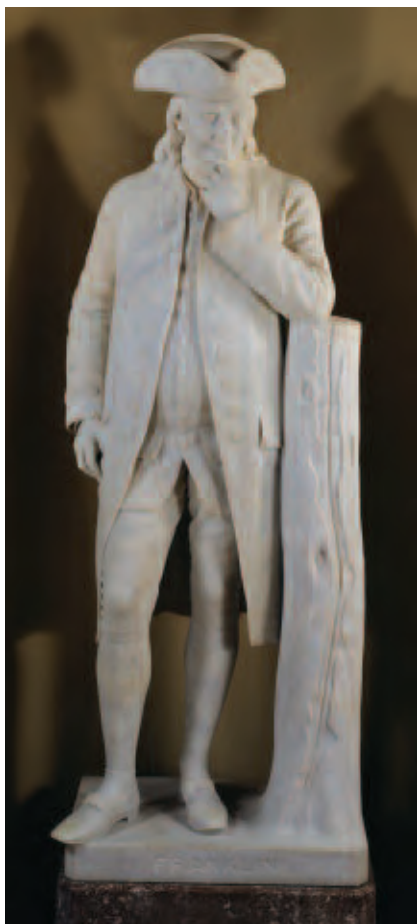
Powers conveniently had an almost-completed plaster model of Franklin in his workshop in Florence, Italy, which he had begun about a decade earlier with the hope of using it for a government commission. Like other first-generation American

sculptors such as Horatio Greenough and Thomas Crawford, Powers had paradoxically emigrated abroad in order to further his career at home. Powers could have shipped the fine Tuscan Severazza marble that he preferred (and from which this sculpture is carved) to America for the same price he paid to ship it to his Florentine studio. But Italy also supplied things readily and cheaply that America could not: experienced workshop assistants, free lectures on anatomy and dissection at the universities, and young females willing to pose in the nude. Furthermore, Italy abounded in great examples of the classical art that inspired Neoclassical sculptors such as Powers.

Many of Powers’s contemporaries, such as the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne who visited him in Florence, objected to portraying historical figures in contemporary dress (rather than classical robes), fearing that future generations might find such garments odd or quaint. Powers disagreed in the case of full-length portraits. Although he did employ classically inspired devices in this work (a tree as stabilizing prop, the philosophical pose of head resting on fist, and the bent and relaxed leg stance called *contrapposto*), Powers’s rendition of the most senior of the Founding Fathers is historically accurate in detail as well as highly naturalistic in style. The sculpture’s attire is based on actual items from Franklin’s mid-eighteenth-century wardrobe that the sculptor had imported from America. Powers captured the sense of weight and bulk of the heavy frock coat and the loose fit of the cotton hose, which crease around Franklin’s ankles. His tricorne hat, with its soft, smooth folds, contrasts with the intricate play of lines in Franklin’s middle-aged features.

The head, the sculpture’s most important aspect, was based on the famous portrait bust of Franklin by his eighteenth-century contemporary, the French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. Powers had made several earlier busts of Franklin based on Houdon’s rendition; however, for the full-length figure, he appears to have also been inspired by a painting of Franklin made by Scottish artist David Martin in about 1776, in which the American sage is depicted as a contemplative man of science, with elbow resting on his desk and thumb beneath his chin. Franklin was internationally known for his book *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* of 1751, and the sculptor acknowledges this by having the standing Franklin rest his elbow on a tree trunk scored by lightning. Powers ingeniously employed a record of the electric charge to give a sense of Franklin’s intellectual prowess. The slight curve of that vertical mark balances the figure’s relaxed outer leg, and allows the eye to travel up through the curve of Franklin’s right arm to his bowed, pensive expression.

The statue of Franklin, probably crated in one of the sculptor’s personally designed cases in August of 1862, arrived at the Capitol that November, and was placed at the foot of the east staircase of the Senate wing, where it still stands.



4-B Hiram Powers (1805–1873), *Benjamin Franklin*, 1862. Marble, height 97½ in., width 34¾ in., depth 21½ in. (247.7 x 88.6 x 54.9 cm.). U.S. Senate Collection.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look carefully at Franklin's dress, pose, and face in this statue.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Have students stand like Franklin with their weight resting on one leg and with the other leg bent. Notice how this is more relaxed than stiffly standing on two feet. Explain that this is a classical *contrapposto* pose. Students might view ancient Greek and Roman sculptures in this pose such as the nude *Doryphoros* (Spear-Bearer) of Polykleitos.

E | M | S

Describe Franklin's hair, hat, vest, coat, and shoes.

His long hair hangs in waves to his shoulders. He wears a three-cornered or tricorne hat, knee-length buttoned coat, long buttoned vest, and buttoned shoes.

What is Franklin wearing on his legs? How can you tell?

Wrinkles at his ankles suggest cotton stockings.

Encourage students to imagine how warm the typical clothes worn in 1776 would feel in Philadelphia's winters and summers.

M | S

Even though Powers lived later than Franklin, he created a realistic portrait of him. Ask students how Powers learned about Franklin's clothes and face.

Powers studied pieces of Franklin's clothing imported from America, Houdon's bust of Franklin, and Martin's bust-length painting of Franklin. (Students may view Houdon's bust and Martin's portrait on the Internet.)

M | S

Have students compare Franklin's pose to that of Gilbert Stuart's George Washington in 3-B.

Washington stands squarely on two feet while Franklin rests most of his weight on one foot. Washington holds one arm out like a gesture in a speech while Franklin's arms are close to his body with his chin resting thoughtfully on his fist.

Why is Franklin dressed so casually? *Franklin is dressed like an everyday citizen, in his role as an inventor.*

Explain that both Washington and Franklin wanted others to think of them as ordinary American citizens. When Franklin was at the French court seeking aid for the American Revolution, he also dressed in plain clothing rather than the silks and brocades of French nobility.

M | S

Ask students why Powers included the tree stump in this statue.

The tree stump helps stabilize Franklin's body. Secondary students may know that classical Roman sculptures often had similar supports.

This classical art device suggests a classical sculpture. Also, the line in the center of the tree trunk shows that it was struck by lightning. Franklin was famous for his experiments with electricity, such as dangerously flying a kite in an electrical storm.

INTERPRET

M | S

Ask students why the United States government wanted a statue of Benjamin Franklin in the U.S. Capitol.

Franklin was a member of the convention that framed the U.S. Constitution, which created the Senate. Students may read Franklin's speech supporting the adoption of the Constitution on the Internet.

S

Nineteenth-century sculptors often depicted leaders in classical Greek or Roman robes, reminding viewers that American government had its roots in ancient Greece. Remind students of the Statue of Liberty's robes. Powers was criticized for showing Franklin in contemporary clothing. Ask students why Powers chose to show Franklin in mid-eighteenth-century clothing rather than a Roman toga.

He wanted viewers to see and understand Franklin as a real person and to know how he actually looked.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Pennsylvania history; history of American diplomacy; Age of Enlightenment

Historical Figures: Benjamin Franklin; Thomas Paine

Civics: Founding Fathers; Constitutional Conventions

Science: electricity; other experiments and inventions

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Benjamin Franklin*, Ingri D'Aulaire (elementary); *B. Franklin, Printer*, David A. Adler (elementary); *Autobiography of Ben Franklin* (also

known as *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*) (secondary); *Poor Richards Almanack*, Benjamin Franklin (elementary, middle)

Arts: Neoclassical sculpture; idealism