

SENTINEL

10 November 1998

Mr. Fred Bancroft
Solander - O'Reilly Galleries
20 East 79th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

Dear Sir:

Thank you for talking to me this morning about the Houdon mask of George Washington that I recently acquired and which I believe is an important piece of Washington memorabilia. Although I am not interested in selling the mask, I am hoping that you might be able to give me your opinion as to its possible value. I am planning to have the mask exhibited in 1999, the bicentennial year of Washington's death, and I need to have a reasonable estimate of the mask's value for insurance purposes. I will pay you for your services.

To refresh your memory of what I said to you, here are the following facts: I purchased the mask last January at the Sotheby's sale of the Stanley Paul Sax collection of "Important Americana." Our mask is a second generation copy of one of Jean Antoine Houdon's famous masks of Washington made at Mount Vernon in October 1785 from his terra-cotta bust of the General that is still there today, a copy of which you currently have for sale in your gallery. Although it is, as I have said, a second generation mask made in the early 1850's, it has an outstanding and impeccable provenance directly connected to the Washington family.

I have since restored the mask to its original gilding by removing a coating of acrylic fake bronze applied in 1992 as well as the badly designed plaster hair that was added when the mask was cast in the 1850's. The mask that has emerged from my restoration, as you can see from the photos in the notebook, retains most of Houdon's original power and is almost certainly a important addition to the small group of existing early Houdon masks directly connected to George Washington and his immediate family.

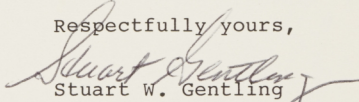
Though our mask is not in the same league as the bust that you possess, it not just any copy. It was made directly from an Houdon mask owned by immediate members of George and Martha Washingtons' family, and infact an intimate part of the Mount Vernon household - Lawrence Lewis (Washington's nephew) and his wife Nellie Custis Lewis (Martha Washington's granddaughter from her first marriage). The Lewises were married at Mount Vernon in 1799. Nellie actually witnessed Houdon and his three assistants making their casts of the General's face and the bust from which your sculpture was cast from molds brought back to France in 1736.

The mask from which our copy was made is still in the possession of Washington's descendants (the Lewises) and has, quite frankly, the best claim of all existing masks to have

originated at Mount Vernon. I might add that our mask was made under the auspices and probable supervision of Dr. John Redman Coxe whose daughter had married the son of Lawrence and Nellie Lewis. Coxe, a Philadelphian, was quite an important man in his own right, a publisher of one of the first scientific journals in America, a professor of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania, an intimate of the famous Peale family of artists, and one of the founding directors of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. One source states that Dr. Coxe was personally given the mask by Lawrence Lewis himself. In the early 1850's Coxe commissioned a Philadelphia craftsman-gilder named Earle to add plaster hair to the gift mask and then to have the whole gilded. While this was being done a man named A. B. Campbell requested permission from Dr. Coxe to have a copy made for himself. Permission was granted, and four copies in all were made from the Lewis-Coxe mask. The copy given to A.B. Campbell is the mask that I now own.

In the accompanying notebook I have written an account of the circumstances of my purchase and my thoughts about what may have happened at Mount Vernon in October of 1785 and how Houdon and his assistants created the originals from which both your bust and my mask were cast. I know that it is difficult to appraise a work like my mask - which is not an original but nevertheless has direct and important associations with Houdon and the Washington family and is of substantial antiquity as well. I would appreciate any help that you could give me in this regard. If for some reason you may not feel comfortable making an official appraisal, I would very much appreciate it if you could give me the name of somebody who might perform this service. Thank you very much for your time.

Respectfully yours,


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