

Gainsborough's Forest



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In 1799, a print of Thomas Gainsborough's most celebrated early landscape, then known as *Gainsborough's Forest*, hung in a modest bedchamber of a stately home in Virginia. Perhaps an unremarkable fact, except the home was that of George Washington, first President of the United States. Washington's voluminous writings are largely silent on the merits of the artists of the day, but *Gainsborough's Forest* was arguably his favorite Gainsborough. Why? Did it bring back latent memories of his family's English roots? Did it relieve the burdened statesman's mind to visually wander through its depths? To be candid, we must admit it was his only Gainsborough. Yet its presence at Mount Vernon highlights one thing Gainsborough and Washington

*Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88),
GAINSBOROUGH'S FOREST
(LATER KNOWN AS CORNARD
WOOD, NEAR SUDBURY,
SUFFOLK),
© National Gallery, London*



shared: a love of country life, the land, and a beautiful stand of trees.

Washington (1732–99) was a contemporary of Gainsborough, and while he led a dramatically different life than the painter, he also delighted in composing landscapes. He enveloped his home in an English landscape garden complete with wildernesses, shrubberies, serpentine walks, and groves. A pleasing variety of American trees, personally selected by Washington from the forests surrounding Mount Vernon – Tulip Poplars, Dogwood, and Maples among others – mixed with specimen plants sent from abroad such as Lombardy Poplar, Catalpa, and Pride of China. In the “rural amusements” of running his farms, Washington found great contentment.

At Mount Vernon,

Washington brought the outdoors in with paintings and prints that offered an idealized view of country life and extended the vistas beyond what could be immediately seen out the windows.

During his presidency, he commissioned the first large-scale paintings of the American landscape, and upon his retirement, he installed these impressive works in a grand, salon-like space known simply as the “New Room.” Throughout the rest of the house, classicizing landscapes, including many after Claude Lorraine, established the pastoral, that remembrance of a bucolic golden age, as a recurring theme. In the Blue Room, a bedchamber for guests, Gainsborough’s Forest paired with *Hobima’s Village*.

Was Gainsborough’s Forest part of a naïve nostalgia, an escape from a



conflicted reality? Perhaps. Whether painted or real, landscapes were studies in contrasts. Even moreso than Gainsborough’s England, Washington’s country was fraught with the struggle over possession and dispossession of peoples and the cultivation and exploitation of natural resources. As a surveyor and as a soldier operating in Virginia’s backcountry, he was one of the last generations to admire the old-growth forests of the continent, and yet, he in turn participated in their gradual destruction. For all its pleasing views, the diversified landscape Washington designed at

Mount Vernon grew out of the exploitation of hundreds of enslaved men, women, and children.

Washington’s writings also suggest that his appreciation of the land and the landscape developed into a forward-looking perspective, born out of the pain of the past. “How much more delightful... is the task of making improvements on the earth; than all the vain glory which can be acquired from ravaging it, by the most uninterrupted career of conquests,” Washington, the retired general, reflected in a letter to Arthur Young, the English agricultural

reformer. By the end of his life, Washington sought peace and healing for himself and the country by encouraging progressive, sustainable agriculture and promoting America as a haven for “the needy & the oppressed of the Earth.” *Gainsborough’s Forest*, with its sympathetic view of hardworking but contented commoners dependent on the land, thus fit within a larger historical narrative stretching from the Golden Age of the classical past to a future promised land ultimately situated in the American landscape. It was a noble, but still elusive vision.

A print of *Gainsborough’s Forest* originally hung in the Blue Room at George Washington’s Mount Vernon. While the original print remains unlocated, a high-quality reproduction represents the work in the restored space today.

LEFT: Maria Catherina Prestel after Thomas Gainsborough, GAINSBOROUGH’S FOREST, 1790 © Trustees of the British Museum

ABOVE: GEORGE WASHINGTON’S BEDROOM AT MOUNT VERNON
Courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association.
Photograph by Gavin Ashworth.