

## *The Depiction of the Human Form – A Comparative Study*

by Karen McCain



*Artist's Name: Jean-Antoine Houdon*  
*Title: George Washington*  
*Date: 1788-92*  
*Medium: Marble*  
*Dimensions: 6' 2" high*  
*Style Movement: Neoclassic*  
*Location: State Capitol, Richmond, Virginia*



*Artist's Name: Duane Hanson*  
*Title: Supermarket Shopper*  
*Date: 1970*  
*Medium: Mixed Media*  
*Dimensions: Life size*  
*Style Movement: Postmodernism*  
*Location: Suermondt Ludwig Museum, Aachen, Germany*

A realistic depiction of the human form in artwork is necessary for the viewer to relate to and be able to feel an emotional connection to it. This paper will evaluate the

importance of depicting the human form accurately, in a realistic way, and its emotional effect on the viewer by a comparative study of sculpture from the Neoclassic era and the Postmodern era. The Neoclassic sculpture is the extremely lifelike white marble statue *George Washington*, by Jean-Antoine Houdon. It measures 6' 2" and was finished about 1792. The Postmodern era sculpture, *Supermarket Shopper*, by Duane Hanson was created in 1970. The statue is of a woman pushing a shopping cart loaded with groceries. Each one is unique in a variety of ways and yet they are both true enough to the human form to evoke an emotional response from their viewers. This evaluation will focus on the elements in each sculpture that allow the viewer to feel connected to them even though they depict people from bygone eras. To emphasize this point I will also look at this stuff a contemporary bronze statue by Dave Poulin that failed to capture the likeness of its intended subject, the comedic actress, Lucille Ball, the complete emotional rejection of it by the public, and the statue that was created to replace it.

George Washington's likeness was captured in white marble during the Neoclassic period and exhibits elements of that style. He is shown in "a classical pose" (History of Art 591). This portrayal of one of the most famous Americans symbolizes a time of great historical significance in our country. It was following the Revolutionary war in which the American colonies won their freedom from Great Brittan. George Washington had served as the Commander of the Continental Army and had been instrumental in the formation of the new country as one of our Founding Fathers. He went on to serve as the first President of the

United States of America. The Virginia General Assembly felt that a statue of George Washington would be appropriate to honor the way he had represented Virginia and everything he had done for all the colonies. They commissioned this work to be done to stand in Virginia's state house. Even though he was a victorious military leader he is not shown in an idealized way, wearing the garments of a Roman or Greek Hero and portrayed with a heroic physique. He is shown wearing contemporary military attire with an average physique and his right hand resting on a gentleman's walking stick. His left arm is bent at the elbow resting upon a fasces, a bundle of rods that symbolize union (History of Art, 591). Behind him sits a plow that represents his profession as a farmer and landowner. His weight rests mostly on his right leg as his left foot is slightly forward. His face is turned a little to the left with a fatherly gaze (Zygmunt). The artist selected to capture the likeness of Washington was Jean-Antoine Houdon. He was from France and the most distinguished sculptor of portraiture in the Neoclassic Movement (History of Art 591).

The use of marble gives a feeling of unyielding strength, resolve, and power that was shown by Washington's actions and others who helped to found America. The white color of the marble can be a symbol of cleanliness, pure intentions, and timelessness. *George Washington's* likeness is familiar to people hundreds of years after he lived because it is constant from one piece of art to the next. His attire is always shown as Colonial American. If each artist chose to give him a different profile or physique, we wouldn't instantly recognize him each time we saw a painting or sculpture of him, and we wouldn't feel such a connected history with him as a fellow American. (Zygmunt)

If George Washington had been dressed in something other than his familiar colonial attire it would have been confusing to the viewer and he would not have been as recognizable. Dressed in his contemporary military uniform the viewer is reminded of Washington's role in the American revolution (Zygmunt). The culture of Colonial America embraced the Neoclassic style of art. Many artists depicted their contemporary subjects as if they were from ancient Greece or Rome. He didn't want to be depicted in the traditional Greek/Roman way, that would make him look like a god or a sage. He was not given a perfect physique like our modern-day action figures. He looks like a man who is aging and starting to carry a few extra pounds around his middle. Houdon's depiction of him makes him look like he could step down off the pedestal and have a conversation with you.

Less than two decades after a successful revolution that allowed America to declare its independence from Great Britain George Washington was still held up as a national hero. He was elected as the new country's first President and was inaugurated in 1789 (1789 Inauguration Eyewitness).

In the post revolution years of the American colonies there was a general attitude of independence. The colonists embodied a spirit of personal responsibility and worked hard to make their world the best that it could be for themselves and their fellow citizens. This was exhibited in the spirit of patriotism as people labored to build a new country. There was also a desire in the culture to retain their freedom from tyranny and to have public servants who only serve for a limited amount of time and then relinquished power.

These attitudes are represented in Houdon's sculpture in a few ways. When looking at the statue *George Washington* the

viewer can see a country farmer who nobly and selflessly left behind his personal pursuits to make the world around him better. His plow that stands behind him represents his vocation as a farmer. He selflessly put farming behind him to help unify the colonies in the Revolutionary War as symbolized by the fasces and the wearing of his military uniform as well as his weapons that hang on the fasces. The plow was also a symbol that George Washington's farming days were something he would return to when he relinquished his power (Zygmunt).

The young country wanted to show the world its power and stability. Marble is a heavy, durable stone. Sculpting the likeness of the father of the country in a heavy, durable stone sends the message that this new country, America, is here to stay. These messages and symbols can engender ennobling aspirations in the viewer (Zygmunt).

George Washington possessed great character traits. He was trusted to be the representative for Virginia to the Continental Congress and then to be the leader of the Continental Army in the war against Great Britain that won their independence. He left his home and his wife for years at a time to selflessly serve his country (Palmer 76). He was of strong moral character and unwavering in doing what was right for his fellow men. A statue of him carved in stone and with a classical stance reminds the viewer of his great actions and attributes that are so worthy of emulation. He was one of the first American heroes. Seeing such a lifelike portrayal of him reminds us of his humanity and makes him relatable, not a god-like figure of mythology or antiquity. Americans can be inspired to show their national pride by emulating his love of country.

Unlike the marble statue of George Washington, the *Supermarket Shopper* by Duane Hanson was created with a variety of materials. The artist used live models to cast molds that were strengthened with fiber glass and vinyl. It was created during the Postmodern Period and is an example of superrealism.

She has a realistic, natural skin tone. There are curlers in her hair and a red, green, and gold stiped scarf that mostly covers them. A black patent leather handbag hangs from her wrist, and she wears light blue ballet flats on her feet. These do not match her royal blue short skirt or the bubble gum pink short sleeved cardigan she wears. The woman depicted is in her thirties or forties who is slightly overweight, whose clothes are tidy but don't match, and are a bit too small for her large frame. She is pushing a shopping cart loaded top to bottom with goods from the grocery store. The rounded shapes of some of the larger bags echo the rounded edges of the woman's body.

She is dressed femininely but looks as though she has put her need aside to make sure that her family's needs are met. This is shown by her hair being in curlers. She didn't spend enough time on herself to finish fixing her hair before she went out to get groceries. This portrayal perpetuates the idea in our culture that it's a woman's job to nurture/nourish her family and that they come first over her wants and needs.

This woman looks like someone you would pass in the aisle of the grocery store. Her clothing is more timeless than trendy. She is very realistic and recognizable as a character in our society. Her skin is not perfect. It is painted to have blemishes and imperfections (Duane Hanson (1925-96)). All of these things make her look like someone we know.

*The Supermarket Shopper* doesn't depict a famous figure from American history, rather, it depicts an average, middleclass, nameless American woman. She symbolizes all Americans of the Consumer Era with mundane daily tasks. The Consumer Era covered the 1940's to the 1970's, except for World War II that ended in 1945 was a time of relative peace. This led to new innovations and prosperity as well as independence. With new products that were more conveniently at hand, higher family incomes and the invention of consumer credit an attitude of "buy, buy, buy" permeated American society. *The Supermarket Shopper* represents an average American citizen employed in a task that has become a universally shared experience, grocery shopping. The prosperity of the Era is shown in the nice clothes of a middle-class citizen and in the full cart that symbolizes the ease with which the average American can acquire large amounts of food. Even with all the social changes of the 1960's it is still largely the woman's role to take care of domestic duties, one of which is grocery shopping. (Consumer Era)

The statue of the *Supermarket Shopper* can show the viewer a perspective of themselves as if from the outside looking in. It may show them that they are not so different from their peers or it may foster feelings of being just average and encourage them to be more.

The viewer can emotionally connect with both works of art because their subjects are recognizable and familiar. Both are free standing statues of live sized height and proportion. Neither one is an idealized or stylized rendition of the human form.

Both incorporate the element of contrapposto which is an implied "shifting of weight" by the subject. This is shown by the subject resting more weight on one leg with the other leg in a position out in front,

to the side, or to the back indicating that the person is about to take a step or just stepped into this current position. It gives a feeling of movement to an inanimate object and feels more lifelike than if the subject's feet are both planted firmly on the ground and the weight is evenly distributed. (Person, Burgess1432).

*The Supermarket Shopper* doesn't instill the same sense of national pride as Houdon's work, but it does allow us to look at ourselves as middle-class American citizens. It causes us to ask questions about our roles in society.

Each of these works of art depict an aspect of American life. Houdon's *George Washington* is a reminder of the greatness of our country's beginning and our founding fathers. Hanson's *Supermarket Shopper* reminds us that our individual lives are not so different from one another. What makes them effective in conveying their messages is that they are both recognizable as someone who looks like us or someone we know.

Lucile Ball was a beloved television and movie star in Hollywood starting in the 1950s. Her comedy was brilliant, and she paved the way for other comics that followed after her. In 2009 a couple commissioned a bronze statue to be created of the Hollywood icon, Lucile Ball. They donated it to the Lucile Ball memorial park in her hometown of Celeron, NY (Stack). The artist, Dave Poulin, was never satisfied with it and wanted for several years afterward to redo it. It lacked Ball's feminine figure and facial features, lovely cheek bones, dainty mouth and chin, and bright eyes. Instead, Poulin's *Lucy* has been described as "a grimacing, glaring, hulk that would not be recognizable were it not for the bottle of Vitameatavegamin in her hand." (Stack). After pictures of Poulin's statue, nicknamed "Scary Lucy", went viral in 2015

the town decided it needed to be replaced. Citizens of the town mocked “Scary Lucy” because they loved Lucile Ball and were upset that a statue that was meant to honor her did not look like her but made her look monstrous.

In 2016 a replacement was installed in the park. It was created by Carolyn Palmer and people loved it! She is dressed in an iconic 1950s polka dot house dress, high heels and carrying a small handbag on her wrist. Her hair is pulled back in a low bun with her familiar curls on the top of her head. Her facial features are recognizably hers! At the unveiling Mrs. Palmer said “Lucy fans are all hugging me and saying thank you. They’re all very passionate about Lucy. They feel somehow that she was desecrated before. They see her as a Hollywood icon, a god. I was glad they felt she had been honored.” (Stack). The town’s mayor, Scott Schrecengost, said that there wasn’t anyone complaining about the new statue. He went on to say, “You can stand at any angle and look and say that’s Lucy.” (Stack).

Depicting George Washington accurately assures that viewers of Houdon’s sculpture will be reminded that he was a real person, that he did great things, and they can too. This helps them feel connected to him hundreds of years later. Hanson’s efforts to create a sculpture that is extremely lifelike helps viewers to relate to it and this time period it represents, to have a better sense of ourselves, and to see that we are more alike than different.

This same accuracy and attention to detail in depicting the human forms is needed and appreciated today. Palmer’s sculpture of Lucy incorporated the element of contrapposto just as is seen in Houdon’s and Hanson’s sculptures. And it gives her the feeling of movement and liveliness. When the citizens of Lucille Ball’s

hometown saw the statue that was meant to honor her, but nothing like her they were upset and mocked it. They did not accept it as a true representation of their beloved Lucy. Palmer’s creation that is a much more accurate representation of her made people of the town happy and excited to display it in the local memorial park. When the human form is accurately depicted in artwork the viewers are much more likely to be emotionally drawn to it. For millennia artists have been refining their craft and perfecting their skills in sculpting beautiful representations of the human body. These master sculptors have helped us develop high expectations for portraiture sculpture. When we can see that we have more advanced technology and easier materials to work with we expect sculptors to be able to give us better and more accurate representations of the human form.

Neither Houdon’s nor Hanson’s sculptures have idealized forms but are very realistic, therefore, the viewer today is able to recognize the subjects and more easily relate to them even though they represent people that lived hundreds of years apart. They each are a representation of contemporary life during their respective eras. Even though one statue is of a famous person in American history and the other statue shows an average American citizen the viewer can recognize something of themselves in each work. Accurately depicting the human form is still important in contemporary art. When it isn’t recognizable to the viewer it doesn’t evoke positive emotions like admiration, respect, fondness, etc. instead it evokes feelings of confusion, disconnectedness, and apathy. Sadly, this was the case with the original statue created to honor Lucille Ball, her life, and work.

If people blindly accept their cultural, social, and historical identities they

may be accepting a history that is deeply flawed or false. Shifting our paradigms can allow us to see the flaws and how to correct them. The Humanities record human history and different way than do the history books. Through creative works we can see human injustices and how to avoid them in the future. Photography of events in World War II presented to the world and recorded for history the horrendous mistreatment and attempted annihilation of the Jewish people. Challenging the perceived notion that one group of people is better than another and, therefore, deserves certain privileges while some ethnicities are less than human and don't deserve to live is vital to human civilization. In the early 1930s the Nazis used propaganda in a variety of media to spread the message that the Jews were "cultural parasites" and "subhuman". This

message was enhanced by drawings for posters and political cartoons that depicted Jewish people with exaggerated and grotesque features (Communicating the Nazi Message). We can look at the attitude and behavior of the Nazis and see what it led to. Being aware of these events in history can help us to avoid such human injustices being repeated.

The human form is beautiful. Human life is beautiful. When that is understood human life is valued, human behavior changes. There is more respect for our fellow man. Through their creative works artists have the power to affect ideas and perceptions of their viewers. Art is powerful. When artists create identifiable, relatable, and realistic depictions of the human form they give their viewers images that are ennobling and inspiring.

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