



George Washington Carver by Betsy Graves Reyneau. Oil on canvas, 1942. Gift of the George Washington Carver Memorial Committee, 1944

Portraits of Character from the National Portrait Gallery

George Washington Carver: Scientist and “Miracle Worker”

Born into slavery at the end of the Civil War, George Washington Carver (1864–1943) overcame the dual obstacles of slender means and racial discrimination to become the director of agricultural teaching and research at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute. His laboratory investigations there led to the discovery of more than 450 new commercial products—ranging from margarine to library paste—that could be extracted from previously untapped sources such as the peanut, the sweet potato, and various other cultivated plants. In the process, Carver demonstrated for many southern farmers the wisdom of diversifying crops, instead of relying mainly on the soil-

exhausting crop of cotton. His work brought him international recognition, and Carver himself became known as the “miracle worker.”

Carver accepted a multitude of honors in the course of his career, but he had refused all requests for portrait sittings to commemorate his accomplishments until he saw an example of Betsy Graves Reyneau’s work. Reyneau, he concluded, painted “the souls of people,” and he consented to pose informally for her. Created just three months before the scientist’s death, Reyneau’s portrait is the only known likeness painted of Carver from life.

Taking a Closer Look

This portrait depicts George Washington Carver in an outdoor setting, wearing a laboratory apron and examining a red-and-white amaryllis, a hybrid that he developed as part of a lifelong hobby. Carver is depicted in a straightforward presentation that uses clear, seemingly uncomplicated colors—blue, bright and dark green, pinks, red, rich browns, and white—and a simple composition with a diagonal emphasis that recalls a snapshot. Do you think that Dr. Carver was pleased with this portrait? Why?

In 1944, the Harmon Foundation in New York City organized an exhibition, “Portraits of Outstanding Americans of Negro Origin,” that included this portrait of George Washington Carver. Learn more about the Harmon Foundation, George Washington Carver, and other notable African Americans included in this groundbreaking exhibition at the following Web site:

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/harmon/index.htm>
Breaking Racial Barriers: African Americans in the Harmon Foundation Collection

