

# Michael Joseph Mansfield

(1903–2001)

Michael Joseph Mansfield, a U.S. senator from Montana and U.S. ambassador to Japan, was born in New York City and moved as a child to Montana. He left school during World War I to join the navy and later served in the army and the Marine Corps. He then returned to Montana to work in the copper mines. After he completed his education, Mansfield taught Latin American and Asian history at Montana State University, his alma mater, and then, in 1942, won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. After a decade in the House, he was elected as a Democrat to the U.S. Senate, where he served until his retirement in 1977. Mansfield became Democratic whip in 1957 and majority leader in 1961; he holds the record as the longest-serving floor leader, having served 16 years. During his tenure as majority leader, Mansfield played a key role in the passage of major civil rights and voting rights legislation and in enacting Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. He also became a critic of the war in Vietnam and an architect of the special Senate committee that investigated the Watergate scandal.

After he retired from the Senate, Mansfield served as ambassador to Japan under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, becoming the longest-serving ambassador in that post. He retired in 1988, and later became an advisor on the Far East until his death in 2001.



**Study sketch for the Senate's painting of Mike Mansfield by Aaron Shikler.**

(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

**T**his striking painting of Mike Mansfield is unusual in the context of Senate portraiture. It owes its idiosyncratic appearance to the nature of its commission and execution, which was initiated not by the Senate but by The Charles Engelhard Foundation. The foundation hoped that the completed portrait would be accepted by the Senate and hung in the *Mike Mansfield Room* (S–207), which had been named in Mansfield's honor by Senate resolution in September 1976. When Mansfield was asked to have his portrait painted before his retirement from the Senate, he declined, stating: “When I’m gone, I want to be forgotten.”<sup>1</sup> Aware of the senator's widely known dislike of sitting for his portrait, Jane Engelhard reasoned that he might be persuaded to do so in a more relaxed setting. Engelhard thereupon invited both Mansfield and Aaron Shikler to her Florida home for the 1977 Christmas holiday, where the senator was told that Shikler had come to paint his hostess's portrait. Feigning illness, Engelhard asked Mansfield to sit for the artist in her stead, since Shikler had come to Florida expecting to work. The plan succeeded, and Mansfield's evident comfort is reflected in the casual nature of the portrait, which was completed in 1978. The painting was loaned to the Senate for the *Mansfield Room* immediately after its completion, and it was formally donated in 1996.

The commanding three-quarter-length pose, with the face near profile, is immediately softened by the naturalness of the folded arms, the familiar note of pipe in hand, and the genial facial expression. Likewise, the formality of a dark blue suit and tie is countered by the high-toned background. This light foil—a complex mélange of blue, gray, and white over a pinkish underpaint—creates almost the effect of a silhouette. Shikler takes full advantage of the contrast by painting the contour of Mansfield's clothes with a fluid, loose touch that is especially interesting on the back of the coat, where the wrinkles resulting from the folded arms create a rippling, energetic passage that engages the eye. Likewise, the artist noticed the distention of the knees of the trousers and included it as an effective accent to close the bottom of the portrait less abruptly. The strong shape of the skillfully painted hand and pipe does much to stabilize the somewhat over-life-size figure against the large, bright background.

A leading contemporary American portrait artist, Shikler has painted the official White House portraits of President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy and Nancy Reagan, as well as numerous other commissions. His works are included in many public collections.

*Mike Mansfield*

**Aaron Shikler (born 1922)**

Oil on canvas, 1978

79<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 47<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (201.6 x 120.3 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right corner): AARON ANNIE SHIKLER '78

Gift of The Charles Engelhard Foundation, 1996

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1996

Cat. no. 32.00029

