

Benjamin West  
*The Death of General Wolfe* (1776)

Essay for Docents  
by  
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## Benjamin West: *The Death of General Wolfe* (1776)

### Introduction

The early American painter Benjamin West commemorated the death of General Wolfe, a British commander of the expedition that took French Quebec in 1759, in a large-scale history painting. It captured the heroic General James Wolfe as he fell on the battlefield surrounded by admiring servants, soldiers, and a Native American, and it catapulted General Wolfe to fame when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, a pivotal moment in British history. The distribution of engravings made the image even more popular, and it came to define British national identity at a time of colonial tension and expansion. Although it was well-received, it originally created controversy because West employed Neoclassical style to depict a relatively current event, including characters in contemporary dress.



Figure 1. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1776.

### UMMA Exhibition

UMMA's 2012-2013 exhibition, *Benjamin West: General Wolfe and the Art of Empire*, centered on this particular canvas but also featured other works from American, Canadian, and British collections. The accompanying maps, drawings, and other media enhanced viewers' understanding of the Seven Years War, the political and military climate in Europe and the colonies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the artistic conventions of the Royal Academy. The exhibition ultimately questioned how an American painter came to define the British Empire.<sup>1</sup> It explored how West's canvas could be both controversial and influential—how it combined a defining contemporary event with traditional history painting thereby challenging the conventions of academic painting, and how it also arrived in Britain at a critical time in its formation of national identity.<sup>2</sup> In the years leading up to the American Revolution, West

constructed a narrative that celebrated the British military and sovereignty in the colonies. In the UMMA Books exhibition catalog, curator Carole McNamara explains the background of the exhibition as well as explores the social and cultural context of the painting.<sup>3</sup>

The original painting, purchased by Lord Grosvenor, hangs in the National Gallery of Canada, in Ontario. West subsequently painted three copies: one for King George III, now in Kensington Palace, another for the family of Officer Robert Monckton, now in the Sigmund Samuel Collection in Toronto, and a third for the Prince of Waldeck.<sup>4</sup> This painting belonged to the German prince until his family sold it in the 1920s. At this point, William Clements purchased it at an auction in New York and eventually became part of the collection of the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. It was loaned to UMMA for the exhibition (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. J.S.C. Schaak



Figure 3. Edward Penny

Other artists—Schaak (Fig. 2) and Penny (Fig. 3)—also created images of Wolfe and the Battle of Quebec, and all became popular in the wake of his death. England’s thriving art market drove the demand for additional copies of the fashionable paintings.<sup>6</sup> Collectors on the continent, in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy, also clamored to buy prints to commemorate the event. A famous engraving by William Woollett for Alderman Boydell made West’s painting extremely coveted and allowed the public to fulfill their curiosity about the exotic new world, imagine the romantic battle story, and participate in the ideal vision of the British Empire (Fig. 4). Curator Carole McNamara believes that West’s “iconic portrayal of Wolfe’s personal courage and sacrifice, witnessed by representatives of the far-flung lands of the empire, achieved in the public imagination what other depictions had not.”<sup>7</sup>



Figure 4. William Woollett, after Benjamin West, *Death of General Wolfe*, 1775

## Setting the Stage: The Seven Years War

The Seven Years War (1756-1763), also known as the French and Indian War in the Americas, was one of the first global conflicts. The war between European powers was fought in multiple theaters—Europe, India, and America—over concerns such as colonial expansion, trade rights, and imperial dynasties.<sup>8</sup> In America, the fighting occurred in the northeastern United States and Canada. Tensions between the British, French, and Native Americans had been growing since 1689 because of huge population growth, control of abundant raw materials, displacement of native people, and westward and southward colonial expansion along the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys. Because of this European interest in land expansion and the growing fur trade, Native Americans found it difficult to exist on their traditional lands. Five tribes united to form the Iroquois Confederation, a third contender in the conflicts. Interested in promoting its own agenda, the Confederation would often pit the British and French against each other or join a side depending on the possible benefits for their group. Conflict was initiated by the proposal of a French fort at the forks of the head of the Ohio River in 1754.<sup>9</sup> After a failed negotiation, the British, led by lieutenant colonel George Washington, attacked the French Fort Duquesne and sparked the ongoing war over control of American land and resources.<sup>10</sup>

In 1759, the Battle of Quebec was pivotal in changing the tide of the war. It began on September 13, 1759 and took place on a plateau, the Plains of Abraham (named for the farmer who owned the land), just outside the walls of Quebec City.<sup>11</sup> Although it involved fewer than 10,000 troops on both sides and lasted about fifteen minutes, it was the culmination of a three-month siege by the British and involved risky maneuvers and newer military tactics. British General James Wolfe and George Townshend decided on a deployment upstream at the bottom of the cliff and depended on secrecy and surprise to land at night, climb a tall cliff, seize a small road, overtake the French guard, and advance against the remaining French troops led by General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm.<sup>12</sup>

Both Montcalm and Wolfe received fatal wounds in combat.<sup>13</sup> The report read that Wolfe was shot in the belly and slowly died. After he heard that the French were on the run, his last words were, “Now, God be praised, I will die in peace.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Wolfe became a national hero celebrated in Britain with songs, verses, sermons, and visual renditions of the battle and his death. Although immortalized after death, Wolfe was not the most beloved general and may not have been surrounded by throngs of admirers as the painting depicts. Wolfe had struggled with poor health beginning in December 1758. His rheumatism probably made him irritable and difficult, which likely did not help his relationship with his subordinates. The fact that his brigadiers were aristocrats while Wolfe came from a comfortable but not titled family could have caused additional relational strain.<sup>15</sup>

Britain emerged from the Seven Years War as the greatest established colonial power, showing their forces in America, India, and the Caribbean. Although Britain technically won the French and Indian War, it was at a cost so staggering that the debt crushed the country and led to tensions leading up to the Revolutionary War.<sup>16</sup> Some factors that also contributed to the growing hostility between Great Britain and the colonies included: Britain’s export tax and rule that colonies could exclusively export to Great Britain; colonists’ request for help to defend themselves against the French, but George II would not spring for the extra coverage; and the British distrust of colonial volunteers while demanding use of their horses, barns, and food. The colonists were also offended when they offered to help and were turned away for their lack of training, and they soon lost respect for the British military.

### ***The Death of General Wolfe***

Wolfe’s death took place in this climate, as Britain was emerging as a world power and an heir to Rome. Their global ambitions coincided with the birth of a national school of art, culminating with the foundation of the Royal Academy in 1768. Combined with the magnitude of the recent events in Quebec, artists across Britain and America were codifying Wolfe as a hero and Britain as the head of an Empire.<sup>17</sup> West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* displays

Britain's military, moral, and cultural supremacy in a large (4'11" x 7'0") oil on canvas that was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771. A history painting, it fit the neoclassical style that was popular at the time—highly serious content and expressions, large-scale narratives of death and sacrifice drawn from well-known classical texts, visual quotations of classical figures and stances, and a call to moral or civic duty. West applied this list to *The Death of General Wolfe*, as other Enlightenment painters did such as David's *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784 (Fig. 5) or Angelica Kauffmann's *Venus Induced Helen to Fall in Love with Paris*, 1790 (Fig. 6).



Figure 5. David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784



Figure 6. Kauffmann, *Venus*, 1790

A dilemma West faced with history painting was how to go beyond the surface of beautiful representational painting and recording family and military history. How could he push for moral content and receive more public exposure? Exhibiting in London provided an alternative path—a blend of traditional history painting techniques and West's innovative style. Because there was no model for an “American style” of history painting, Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley, another early American painter, paved their own path and broke some of the academy's “rules.”<sup>18</sup> West's history painting featured a “history” that took place within that decade, not a thousand years earlier. In addition to glorifying a recent event, the figures wear contemporary clothing instead of classical garb. While this inclusion of contemporary dress ruffled some from the Royal Academy who would have preferred classical togas, West countered with: “The event took place on the thirteenth of September 1759, in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans, and at a time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costumes, any longer existed.”<sup>19</sup>

The composition, though, is conventional and divided into three figural groups (Fig. 1).<sup>20</sup> In order to communicate Wolfe's importance and sacrifice, West positioned him in the center draped in the posture of Christ's deposition from the cross (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Van Dyck, *Deposition*, 1634

Traditional deposition paintings combined “intense grief and overwhelming joy,” as was the case when people heard the news of the British victory and Wolfe’s death.<sup>21</sup> In the typical fashion of a dying hero, his eyes gaze at the sky to follow his soul to heaven. Concerned and grieving officers form an arch above him, which traces the trajectory of his soul.<sup>22</sup>

On the left, Brigadier General Robert Monckton, in a sling from a combat wound, stands with a contemplative Native American and an American ranger scout bringing news of the French retreat. Art historian Vivien Fryd contends that the figure in the green jacket above the Native American is Sir William Johnson, the British landholder who became colonel of the Six Nations.<sup>23</sup> Because of Johnson’s relationship to the natives, the colonists, and the British military, his inclusion complicates West’s intent in connecting the three groups.<sup>24</sup> To the right stand a British grenadier officer and servant, looking on worriedly with clasped hands.<sup>25</sup> West conducted interviews with survivors of the battle to ensure the accuracy of clothing, uniforms, and weaponry.<sup>26</sup>

West conceded that although he intended to communicate the “truth” of the event, in order to elevate Wolfe to the highest idea of a Hero, he needed to tweak the “facts” a bit.<sup>27</sup> Soon after the initial exhibition, Lord Bromley noted that the figures in the painting appeared “so natural that no one would hardly expect them to be otherwise than they appear; and they come so near to the truth of history, that they are almost true, and yet not one of them is true in fact.”<sup>28</sup> Actually, none of the officers pictured were with Wolfe when he died. Perhaps the only one present was Lieutenant Henry Browne, carrying the flag above Wolfe’s head.<sup>29</sup> In life, Wolfe was not the most popular general. Other brigadiers, such as Townshend and Murray, documented their intense dislike of Wolfe in letters, and they are missing from the painting. Did West ask them, and did they refuse to be in the painting? What was the criteria West used to select this “rather ill-assorted” group?<sup>30</sup> Other historic letters hint that West may have charged an “admission fee” of 100 pounds that some refused to pay.<sup>31</sup>

### Native American

Perhaps the most contested presence is the Native American crouching pensively in the foreground. Much has been written about the prominence of the Indian’s placement and the visual and formal links between him and General Wolfe—the complimenting arch of the Indian’s back and Wolfe’s left arm, their corresponding position low to the ground, and linked gaze.<sup>32</sup> However, West “carefully constructed the two men as belonging to different cultures, the Old and New Worlds.” The Indian is naked, Wolfe is clothed; the native is decorated with abstract geometric designs, Wolfe wears a full British military uniform; the Indian is tanned and shaved, while Wolfe is pale and coiffed.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars also highlight the difference of opinion between West and Wolfe about Native Americans. Wolfe believed they were barbarians and killed them when presented with an opportunity.<sup>34</sup> West took the view that they represented the “noble savage,” and modeled the one here after classical statues that most educated Europeans would recognize, such as the Belvedere torso (Fig. 8).

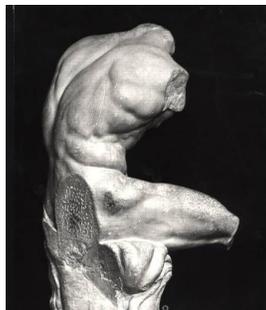


Figure 8. Belvedere Torso



Figure 9. Apollo Belvedere

While the figure's form was possibly derived from a classical source, the model for the American Indian's head may have come from an effigy pipe bowl, owned by Benjamin West (Fig. 10). The small pipe shares the same metal pendant earring and painted face. Tattoos of abstract geometric designs cover the Indian's face and limbs and a naturalistic snake creeps across his shoulder blade. While growing up, West most likely observed the Native American cultural practice of self-decoration, using temporary ochre clay or permanent carbonized materials.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 10. Effigy pipe bowl, owned by Benjamin West

West, then, faced the challenge of melding pagan antiquity with the new world. How could American artists inscribe Enlightenment characteristics such as “noble simplicity and calm grandeur” on supposedly wild and foreign cultures? West attempted to blend these systems by retaining the detailed tattoos—abstract markings on his limbs and a serpent on his shoulder blade—and incorporating heroic semi-nudity. His stance “associates him with antique sculpture while his anthropologically correct accouterments signal his status as an indigenous American. More than any other figure in the painting, this contemplative Indian conveys an understanding of the enormity of the event.”<sup>36</sup> While West exploited the European curiosity for the exotic by highlighting the native's tattoos, wampum, and shaved head, he constructed the Native American “on ancient prototypes and appropriate[ed] a classically idealized body,” and thereby placed him in a timeless allegorical category.<sup>37</sup> He stands for all Native Americans—one with nature, an innocent and noble savage.

His pose, resting his elbow on his knee and his chin on his fist, can be found in many other classical, Renaissance, and American works. Art historian Vivien Fryd links this posture to its meaning in preceding art works and concludes that West's Indian could be contemplating the loss of his land. She questions whether he is considering the tragedy of Wolfe's death or his own mortality and the loss of America.<sup>38</sup>

### **Benjamin West Biography**

Benjamin West was the tenth child of a Pennsylvania innkeeper.<sup>39</sup> Despite his humble upbringing, his ego was large; he announced that his talent would make him the “companion of kings and emperors.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, he would go on to become the President of the Royal Academy and a companion of King George III. His journey to that point was very “American.” West was self-taught. He received instructions from Native Americans about how to collect pigment, and without formal academic training, he was painting portraits by age 18. William Smith, the provost of the College of Philadelphia, noticed his work and instructed him in classic literature,

which served as a source for history paintings. Because of this educational opportunity, West moved to Philadelphia and met other artists, such as John Wollaston, who modeled artistic skills but painted in an early American folk style. West wanted to create grand history paintings in the style of the Old Masters, so he traveled to Rome at age 22.<sup>41</sup>

In Italy, the story goes that the Pope expected West to be an American Indian. When the Pope showed him the Apollo Belvedere (Fig. 9, a classical sculpture discovered in the Renaissance and believed to be a pinnacle of physical and artistic perfection), he awaited West's response, which was: "It looks like a young Mohawk warrior!"<sup>42</sup> At first this offended the clergy but then West clarified that he was referring to the similarity in grace and stature between Indians and Apollo after discharging an arrow. Having come from America, he was comparing the Indian's skill with the classical embodiment of balance and beauty.<sup>43</sup>

In 1763, West settled in London and exhibited at the Royal Academy, the institution led by Sir Joshua Reynolds that gave professional status to the visual arts. Because of this prestigious connection, West was commissioned to do more Neoclassical history painting.<sup>44</sup> One painting that attracted attention and led to more commissions was *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768 (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768

It depicts a narrative about a widow bringing her husband's ashes back to Rome in defiance of the emperor Tiberius.<sup>45</sup> In addition to using a well-known classical subject, his European training again surfaced as he borrowed figures from the Ara Pacis, the Augustan altar with famous relief sculptures carved around the entire exterior.<sup>46</sup>

At the peak of West's career, he painted more than sixty paintings for George III and succeeded Sir Joshua Reynolds as President of the Royal Academy in 1792.<sup>47</sup> When King George lost interest in West's style, his career took a downturn. Because of his subject matter and alliance to the monarchy, he was not very popular with American patriots; however, he quickly adapted and turned to large-scale religious works that were purchased by British and American institutions.

## Questions

- As a history painting, *The Death of General Wolfe* strives to present a version of "real" history, to depict a specific event that actually occurred. Is this possible? With any image? What devices (such as weather or color) do artists use to convey a mood that can affect the reception of the painting?

- Simon Schama, a historian, reconstructed the death of General Wolfe in a novel/narrative entitled *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*. By writing in a fictional style, he asserts that history is compound, personal, and ambiguous. Rather than writing a truly “historical fiction” novel, he attempts a plausible narrative based on personal and historical documents. How does this structure shift the traditional view of history? How is it similar to what West does in his reconstruction of the event?
- Historian C.P. Stacey asks why *The Death of General Wolfe* was so influential, controversial, and popular—especially in light of its historical inaccuracies and unoriginal composition. He suggests that the large size and brilliant color make it visually pleasing, while the romantic narrative and circulation of the copied engraving account for its fame. Essentially, he believes it was popular because it was familiar. Does the painting warrant any other praise or criticism? How did the mass popularity of one image affect the British agenda in the New World?
- West replaced togas and temples with modern subjects, settings, and dress. Other neoclassical painters followed suit, for example David’s *Oath of the Tennis Court* (Fig. 12) and John Trumbull’s *Declaration of Independence* (Fig. 13). How did his choices in *The Death of General Wolfe* alter the idea of what history painting could do? How did it shift the decorum of heroic commemoration?



Figure 12. David, *Oath of the Tennis Court*      Figure 13. Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence*

### Figures

1. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1776.
2. J.S.C. Schaak, *The Death of General Wolfe*
3. Edward Penny, *The Death of General Wolfe*
4. William Woollett, after Benjamin West, *Death of General Wolfe*, 1775, engraving, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan. Carole’s PowerPoint slide identifying people
5. Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*
6. Angelica Kauffman, *Venus Induced Helen to Fall in Love with Paris*
7. Van Dyck, *Deposition*, 1634 at Munich
8. Belvedere torso, fragment, Vatican
9. Apollo Belvedere, Roman sculpture
10. Effigy pipe bowl, owned by Benjamin West
11. Benjamin West, *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768
12. Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Tennis Court*
13. John Trumbull, *Declaration of Independence*, 1818

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<sup>1</sup> UMMA website. [www.umma.umich.edu](http://www.umma.umich.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Carole McNamara, "Benjamin West: General Wolfe and the Art of Empire. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2012. See this resource for more information about the disbursement of objects related to the painting and how the painting encouraged the fame and cult-like status of General Wolfe, in England and in the American colonies.

<sup>3</sup> Carole McNamara, Benjamin West: General Wolfe and the Art of Empire. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> C.P. Stacey, "Benjamin West and 'The Death of Wolfe,'" *National Gallery of Canada Bulletin 4* (1966): 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> Discussion with Clayton Lewis, curator of Graphic Prints at the Clements Library. Also see his essay in the UMMA Books exhibition catalog, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> McNamara, "Benjamin West."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Seven Years War." Wikipedia, accessed August 11, 2014.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_Years%27\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Years%27_War)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> William Ayers, ed. *Picturing History: American Painting 1770-1930*. New York: Rizzoli, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> The French and Indian War. US History.org, accessed August 11, 2014.

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<sup>13</sup> Stacey, "Benjamin West," 2.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Hughes. "The Republic of Virtue," In *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Knopf, 1999: 74.

<sup>15</sup> McNamara, "Benjamin West."

<sup>16</sup> US History.org

<sup>17</sup> McNamara, "Benjamin West."

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 69.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Catalogue of the pictures at the Grosvenor house, London. Anti-Room No. 4.

<sup>21</sup> McNamara, "Benjamin West."

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 74.

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- <sup>23</sup> Vivien Green Fryd. "Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's 'Death of General Wolfe,'" *American Art* vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 75.
- <sup>24</sup> Fryd, "Rereading the Indian," 77.
- <sup>25</sup> Catalogue of the pictures at the Grosvenor house, London. Anti-room No 4
- <sup>26</sup> Stacey, "Benjamin West," 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 76.
- <sup>28</sup> Robert A. Bromley, *A Philosophical and Critical History of the Fine Arts*, 1793. Reprint: New York: Garland Publishing, 1971: 58.
- <sup>29</sup> Stacey, "Benjamin West," 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Fryd, "Rereading the Indian," 74.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Angela Miller. *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. New York: Pearson, 2007: 125.
- <sup>35</sup> Miller, *American Encounters*, 39.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 126.
- <sup>37</sup> Fryd, "Rereading the Indian," 80.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 82.
- <sup>39</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 70. For biographical information on Benjamin West, see Hughes 70-77.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, 70.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 70-71.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, 71.
- <sup>43</sup> McNamara, "Benjamin West."
- <sup>44</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 73.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 76.
- <sup>46</sup> Miller, *American Encounters*, 125.
- <sup>47</sup> Hughes, "The Republic of Virtue," 77.