Benjamin West's Hybrid Identity: the Construction and Reconstruction of an Anglo-American Artist

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BENJAMIN WEST’S HYBRID IDENTITY: THE CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF AN ANGLO-AMERICAN ARTIST

by

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How does one come to be known as the “father of American art,” especially after having never lived in an independent United States? The painter Benjamin West (1738-1820) is an enigma in the history of American art. Although he spent the majority of his life in London, where he worked to establish himself as the leader of the English school of painting, late in life he attempted to portray himself as a genuine American who played a major role in the development of American art. John Galt’s early biography of West, published in 1816, has proved to be instrumental in the promotion of West’s Americanness and served as the blueprint for understanding his legacy for over a century. In recent years scholars have begun to examine West’s identity more closely, discovering his essential slipperiness. This thesis analyzes how West crafted and inhabited a hybrid Anglo-American persona that was fluid and ambivalent. It considers his hybrid identity in personal, aesthetic, political, and historiographic contexts and concludes that West and his biographers manipulated his persona to benefit their professional positions and legacies. However, it also claims that West’s ambivalence was an all-too human emotional response to the disorienting and violent ruptures of the revolutionary era.
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INTRODUCTION

BENJAMIN WEST’S HYBRID IDENTITY

“‘Benjamin West’ was meant to be impenetrable at its core.”¹

At first glance Benjamin West’s The Artist and His Family (1772, fig. i.1) appears to be a quaint and modest portrayal of a family celebrating the birth of a child. It depicts the artist standing behind two Quaker men—his father, to the right, and brother—who wear stern expressions. The left side of the composition shows Elizabeth West, Benjamin’s wife, cradling her newborn son as the couple’s older son, Raphael, looks on intently. The mother and newborn child are illuminated by light from a nearby window, giving them an aura of sanctity. Elizabeth resembles a Madonna, just as she did in West’s earlier Portrait of Mrs. Elizabeth West and Her Son, Raphael (1770, fig. i.2, which references the Madonna della Sedia (1513-14), by their son’s namesake. When The Artist and His Family hung at the Royal Academy of London’s 1777 exhibition, a reviewer commented that it was a “neat little scene of domestic happiness.”² That, however, is only part of the story. Although West shows himself on the right side of the painting with the Quakers in his family, his appearance is anything but humble. He is dressed in a lavender gown and holds a palette and maulstick, markers of his high status and profession. In short, he acknowledges Quakerism but also portrays himself as having outgrown his roots: he is a London gentleman and courtly painter. With this painting

² Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser, April 25, 1777.
West attempts a construction of his personal, professional, and public personas—a lifelong endeavor.

Two decades later he painted *West Family in the Studio Garden* (1808, fig. i.3), which depicts the Wests at leisure in the green garden by their fine residence. By the time West had created this painting, he had come a long way from his humble beginnings in rural Pennsylvania. Gone was the rustic colonial painter known for his exotic American heritage; here instead is the ambitious and savvy man who had served as the official history painter to King George III and acquired fame and fortune. The family poses in front of the gallery where West hung his sketches, drawings, and small paintings, which leads to the studio where he painted and mentored the many colonial artists who traveled to London for his instruction. Here, then, is another family portrait in which West represents multiple identities. He is, again, a family man, a fine artist, and a British aristocrat, but he is also a democrat—a man who shared his privileges to mentor American artists before, during, and after the American Revolution. He was, therefore, an Anglo-American artist seeking an identity during a period of radical change. This thesis examines the personal, aesthetic, political, and historiographic manifestations of Benjamin West’s hybrid identities. It argues that West manipulated his Anglo-American identity in ways that proved beneficial to his professional status and legacy, but it also argues that West was caught up, like so many others, in the disorienting schisms and violent ruptures of the revolutionary era and that his legacy has been shaped and reshaped by biographers and art historians for their own purposes. This is a thesis about how artists, biographers, and scholars work together to make art history.
Benjamin West is an enigma in the history of American art: he has been called “incontrovertibly the father of American painting,” yet he departed the colonies for Europe in 1760 and never returned.³ Although he was proud to be called the “American Raphael” early in his career, for most of his life he labored to reassure his peers and patrons that he belonged in British society. These efforts proved especially difficult during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, when critics sought to expose West as loyal to his homeland. The relationship between his Anglo and American identities has been difficult to decipher. On the one hand, his openness to mentor so many American artists (even going as far as to post bail for the painter John Trumbull, who was arrested in London for suspected espionage) suggests he was proud of his colonial roots. On the other hand, his coziness with European royalty, especially King George III, and reluctance to speak out on behalf of the colonies reveals his willingness to put career before principles.

Although West strived to establish himself as the indisputable master of English painting, his reputation in British art history rests solely on his contributions to the development of history painting as the state’s official genre. Even though he was eager to take a place at the forefront of British culture, he later attempted to portray himself as a genuinely American painter associated with the development of American art. John Galt’s The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq. (1816, 1820) proved to be monumentally impactful on the rehabilitation of West’s Americanness. Through the use of anecdotes, many supplied by West, Galt crafted a clever narrative that positioned West as an archetypally American artist—one who possessed a rustic innocence, refreshing

primitiveness, and innate genius. William Dunlap’s influential *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834) corroborated the image of West as a natural American artist, and a century later he was still being referred to as the “father of American art.”

In recent years scholars have begun to examine the myths underlying nineteenth-century biographies of West. Art historian such as Ann Uhry Abrams, Sarah Monks, and Susan Rather have argued that West was essentially an amalgam, more an Anglo-American artist than a British or American one. This hybridity was central to his identity: he was dedicated equally, though at different moments, to promoting himself as an exotic colonial painter and as a painter to the king. His identities were fluid; they shifted depending on his personal and professional goals. Moreover, his identities were put to various uses by his biographers, further obscuring his true character and legacy. For Dunlap, West’s gracious and hospitable mentoring of colonial artists proved his essentially democratic ideals and principles. Contemporary scholars are more skeptical and suggest that West may not have had “essential ideals” at all.

Monks’s article “The Wolfe Man: Benjamin West’s Anglo-American Accent” proved especially useful to the development of this thesis. She claims that West’s strategic manipulations of his identity were symptomatic of an essential “slipperiness.” Monks establishes West as an Anglo-American hybrid by psychoanalyzing his letters and works, and while she occasionally proposes highly speculative interpretations of his mythological and religious paintings—suggesting, for instance, that his paintings of erotic subjects were allegories of the reconciliation he desired between Britain and

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4 Monks, 654.
America—she describes West’s crises of identity in compelling terms that account for their emotional and political complexity.

West’s ambiguity, heterogeneity, and duplicity allowed him to elude classification, thus guaranteeing that he could remain in a privileged position in British society. His ability to mediate professional expectations and colonial sympathies during the Revolutionary War was sometimes pragmatic, sometimes noble, and sometimes dishonorable. This thesis will investigate how he crafted and inhabited different personas throughout his career; most basically, it explains how it happened that King George’s history painter became the father of American art, and how writers of different generations have found new meanings in West’s story.

This thesis has five chapters. Chapter One, “West’s Early Career and Training in the Colonies,” examines the creation and establishment of West as an artist in the British North American colonies and surveys several characters who aided West in his early colonial career. Chapter Two, “West’s Grand Tour,” provides insight into West’s European travels and how this period of time greatly transformed his artistic style, the very style that would make him popular upon his arrival in England. Chapter Three, “Benjamin West’s Success and Anglo-American Identity” explores West’s growing success in England as he develops a hybrid Anglo-American identity in order to attain success in British society. Chapter Four, “Workshop and Students: West as Anglo-American Teacher,” offers insight into who West was as a pedagogue and how his teaching style greatly impacted the development of American art. An evaluation of several of his students provides a better understanding of how West was able to secure the title of “father of American art.” Chapter Five, “Writing West’s Life and Afterlife:
Biographies and Art History,” offers analyses of the biographies of West by Galt and Dunlap, and examines more recent art historical scholarship on his personal and professional identities. It is not a typical historiographical analysis but rather a reflection on what happened to West’s identity posthumously, which is why it closes rather than opens the thesis.
CHAPTER I

WEST’S EARLY CAREER AND TRAINING IN THE COLONIES

“My mother’s kiss made me a painter.”¹

Introduction

“The father of American painting” is how James Thomas Flexner described Benjamin West in *America’s Old Masters* (1939).² This bold statement follows the adverb “incontrovertibly,” demonstrating Flexner’s commitment to West’s “Americanness.” But as the art historian Susan Rather puts it, “the trajectory of West’s career has made his distinction as an American problematic.”³ Nevertheless, West’s childhood, training, and early career in Pennsylvania established him first and foremost as a colonial artist.

What little is known about West’s childhood is reported in John Galt’s *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West* (1816), and although the book contains as much myth as fact, it documents the events that would culminated in West’s crossing the Atlantic and settling in Europe. William Dunlap (1766-1839), a former pupil of West’s and widely regarded as the first historian of American art, dedicated a hefty portion of his *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834) to his mentor. Dunlap designates West as an “indigenous” artist whose “influence on the art he

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¹ West noted later in life that his mother’s early approval led to his career. This particular quote can be found in Richard W. Leeman, ed., *African-American Orators a Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).
professed will never cease.”⁴ Although he describes Galt’s biography as containing apocrypha that should be interpreted metaphorically, Dunlap’s own portrayal of West as the hero of the American art also raised eyebrows and should be taken with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, these two biographers cultivated a foundation upon which scholars are able to discern the facts of West’s early life and examine his role in the development of an American style in the early national period.

The Role of Quaker Pedagogy in West’s Development

Benjamin West was born on October 10, 1738 in Springfield, Pennsylvania to the Quakers John West and Sarah Pearson, who was later dismissed from the Society of Friends.⁵ Although Pearson’s family had been devoted followers of William Penn, Sarah was “read out of meeting” when she was twenty years old, supposedly for “fornication.” Quaker regulations allowed the young Pearson to plead her case in order to maintain her membership in the Society of Friends, but she never showed up to her scheduled meeting and “absconded.”⁶ Due to her expulsion from the meeting, her children were denied entrance to the Society. Although disowned by the community, Galt discusses West’s Quaker roots frequently in the early parts of his biography, even including details that would have been nearly impossible for the young West to have witnessed himself, which suggests that Galt was well acquainted with the religion and its principles. It is a reasonable assumption that Quakerism played a role in the shaping West’s pedagogy.

The basic tenets of colonial Quakerism did not stray much from the foundations that George Fox established in the seventeenth century. At the core of the theology is “faith in the inner voice of Christ, and the realization that no outward thing can help man achieve peace with God,” as well as the universal acknowledgement that all humans are spiritual beings of God and thus are equal. In service of these beliefs, Quakers preached non-violence and education. Their adherence to non-violence made them an easy target for condemnation during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, as the majority of Quakers remained neutral during the conflicts.

Education is a vital component of Quakerism and its “conception of the scope of education did not limit it to their own people alone, but extended it rather to all peoples, Negroes and Indians, the rich and poor.” Although West was not officially raised in the Society of Friends, he lived in an environment, at home where his father’s beliefs would have influenced his outlook as well as a Quaker colony, where such notions infused the community. Quakers found education to be a “religious and social duty” that is meant to be in “the first place of a governmental function,” which would explain why early Quaker settlers were so determined to establish school systems for young colonists. Initially, there was a robust emphasis placed on the importance of domestic education, whereby ministers and Elders would indoctrinate parents with the Quaker ideals to pass on their offspring. Around 1746 the emphasis shifted to the schoolmaster as the figure who would be most successful at teaching Quaker principles to children.

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8 Thomas Woody, Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania (New York City: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1920), 12.
9 Ibid., 32.
10 See Sydney V. James, “Quaker Meetings and Education in the Eighteenth Century.” Quaker History 51, no. 2 (1962): 89.
The schoolmaster was responsible for infusing Quaker youth with Scripture and common knowledge that would “endorse restraining them ‘from falling into Temptations,’” meaning anything that may contradict Quaker modes of thought or speech that would otherwise lead one to evil.\textsuperscript{11} Because of this, Quaker communities instituted a selective process to decide who would be qualified to undertake such an important task. According to one author, “in carrying out the most important part of his duty, the pedagogue had to ‘labor with the utmost Sincerity, Application, and Integrity, timely to implant in’ the young ‘the Maxims and Principles of the one true Christian Religion,’ and strive ‘to rivet the Precepts’ he gave by the life he led.”\textsuperscript{12} With such a great duty assigned to teachers in Quaker communities, the notion that teaching was a noble and honorable profession diffused throughout the culture.

Although at the height of his career long after West had departed the colonies, the Quaker Roberts Vaux, founder of Pennsylvania’s public-school system, spoke about the importance of dedicated instructors. He claimed that “the tasks of school teaching are only unpleasant when being performed merely for the sake of the wage obtained,” thus someone who wishes to teach must find the work rewarding and meaningful.\textsuperscript{13} Such principles were common among Quakers, who are dedicated to public service, and West surely understood the importance of compassionate pedagogy to Quakerism. His willingness to teach anyone who came into his London studio can be attributed to the cultural and spiritual importance that teachers had in his childhood environment. As we

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 91-2; See David Hall, \textit{An Epistle of Love and Caution to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings of Friends in Great-Britain, or Elsewhere}, 3rd ed. (London: Luke Hinde, 1750): 33-4.
\textsuperscript{13} Thomas Evans and William Evans, \textit{Friends' Library: Comprising Journals, Doctrinal Treatises and Other Writings of the Religious Society of Friends}, vol. 9 (Philadelphia, 1837), 221.
will see, West’s early career was full of good fortune as he encountered one mentor after the other, each more than willing to advise the young artist; perhaps the Londoner West instructed those who came to his doorstep to repay those who had cultivated him.

Regardless of the fact that he was not Quaker, West’s father rejoined the Society of Friends after his first wife’s death and even called for a Meeting of Friends when West was leaning towards a profession in the fine arts, “which resulted in a permission given contrary to the principles of the sect, for the youth [West] to pursue the bent of his inclination, and to administer to those vanities their religious tenets told them to eschew as the snares of the evil one.”14 Being an artist would have been contrary to the tenets of Quakerism as Friends were warned against indulging in earthly materials that would lead them astray from their spiritual identity.

The depth of West’s connection with the Society of Friends, as well as the fluidity of his identity, is evident in his family portrait The Artist and his Family (1772, fig. i.1), which reveals “a stake in the association.”15 Despite attending Anglican services later in his life, in the family portrait West affiliates with the side of the Quakers, placing himself behind his father and half-brother rather than on the other side of the canvas with his Anglican wife and children. The men sit and wear traditional Quaker clothing that shows material simplicity and a rejection of extravagance and ornament. Wearing plain, neutral-colored suits and the conventional broad-brimmed hat, they face Elizabeth West, who cradles her newborn son, while her other child leans comfortably on her chair. West, on the other hand, who stands behind his father and half-brother, wears a European banyan and clutches a palette; “his easy stance, embroidered vest and fashionably powdered wig

14 Dunlap, History, 41.
15 Rather, The American School, 121.
cast him as the Quakers’ antithesis.” West represents himself, therefore, in an ambivalent position with regards to his Quaker roots. While it functions as a testimony to his Quaker family, it also illustrates how he has risen above his humble past. The painting shows the hybrid character that West cultivated throughout his career. He straddled different identities—the rustic colonial and cosmopolitan gentleman, the humble Quaker and the noble Anglican—that he selectively employed for various reasons.

**West’s Early Life**

Galt’s saga begins with the famous anecdote about the young prodigy’s first encounter with art when he was a mere seven years old. West was charged with watching his baby niece when he looked upon the sleeping child and felt “a pleasure which he had never before experienced, and observing some paper on a table, together with pens and red and black ink, he seized them with agitation and endeavored to delineate a portrait.” Following that initial creation, West felt inspired to draw the flowers his mother had picked and his artistic genius had awakened and would never rest again. With this anecdote, Galt crafted a tale in which he alludes to how the young West awakened to become a creative child, while the flowers symbolized his talent blooming and coming to life.

Galt established the narrative that the young West learned art with only the rudimentary tools his wilderness environment provided. Local Native Americans are said to have visited Springfield, where, amused by West’s sketches, they taught him how to

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16 Ibid.
create yellow and red pigments from herbal roots. Galt also claims that West fashioned a paintbrush from the hair of a cat’s tail as he was only provided pen and ink for his art. Galt depicts West’s childhood in a manner that puts his rustic education on display in order to emphasize the young artist as an inventive pioneer who while initially shaped by the American wilderness would soon rise above it. This romanticization of otherwise unspectacular beginnings grounds West in his native homeland and emphasizes his extraordinary “native” aptitude. Galt writes, “Nature instructs them [men] to draw assistance immediately from herself, by endowing them with the faculty of perceiving a fitness and correspondence in things which no force of reasoning, founded on the experience of others, could enable them to discover. This aptness, perhaps, the surest indication of original talent.” West is portrayed as a product of nature, which included his Indian friends who would become important figures in his future paintings.

West continued to spend the early years of childhood creating drawings and paintings with what little tools he had or could find, until one day a distant relative by the name of Edward Pennington visited Springfield and was captivated by his talent. When Pennington returned to Philadelphia, he sent back “a box of paints and pencils from the big city,” as well as “several pieces of canvass prepared for the easel, and six engravings by Grevling.” (Galt meant the French engraver Hubert François Gravelot.) West was so infatuated by his new possessions that, according to Galt, he started to skip school so that he could stay home and paint all day. This detail was likely included to explain why West

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20 Ibid., 1:12.
21 Ibid., 1:12.
22 Ibid., 1:13.
struggled with grammar and spelling, for which he was ridiculed when president of the Royal Academy in London.

In Galt’s telling, however, West never lacked confidence and the extent to which Galt dramatized West’s biography is made evident by the following story. After his visit to Philadelphia, Galt writes, West and a schoolmate went on a horseback ride together, during which the friend insisted that West ride behind him on the saddle. However, West, “full of the dignity of the profession to which he felt himself destined, answered, that he never would ride behind any body.”23 The schoolmate yielded and allowed West to sit in front. During the ride, the boy shared that he wanted to become a tailor, which prompted West to reveal his desire to become a painter. Incredulous, the schoolmate exclaimed, “‘What sort of trade is a painter? I never heard such a thing.’ ‘A painter,’ said West, ‘is a companion for Kings and Emperors.’ ‘Surely you are mad,’ replied the boy, ‘for there are no such people in America.’ ‘Very true,’ answered Benjamin, ‘but there are in other parts of the world.’”24 After this declaration, the schoolmate reasserted his determination to become a tailor, to which West replied that he had no desire to be associated with a tailor.

What Galt, likely at West’s direction, hoped to achieve with these anecdotes was to apotheosize the artist at a time (1816) when his reputation was in flux. First, such stories establish the painter as being more dignified than a rural mechanic or artisan, such as a tailor. Indeed, “in the Anglophone world, until at least the mid-eighteenth century and longer in colonial America, painters held the status as artisans because they worked with their hands,” but some ambitious colonial artists disassociated themselves from the

23 Ibid., 1:29.
24 Ibid.
In his adult career, West perceived history painting to be a noble art as it was representative of a gentlemanly style, one that was not correlated with portrait painting. Second, such tales establish the innate nobility of the man who would not only become the future president of the Royal Academy but also the official painter to King George III. As a boy West read about the “great Masters of Painting,” that is Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and other renowned Renaissance artists, and sought to emulate their success, which he believed to result from their connections to the “Kings and Emperors” of their time. What is apparent from Galt’s biography is that by the time it was written, in 1816, West was ambivalent about his identity as an American artist. On the one hand, he was a native talent, learning from whatever rudimentary lessons the Pennsylvania backwoods could offer. On the other hand, he was too talented and ambitious for the colonies and instead was drawn to an Old-World nobility. West’s dueling identities emerged in childhood and remained with him for the rest of his life.

The Teachers of West’s Early Career

In addition to the individuals who mentored him, history and geography also proved indispensable to West’s artistic development. As Abrams puts it, the French and Indian War, “theatrical performances in Philadelphia, and classical education with religious overtones” all contributed to West’s visualization of the world he lived in. Though he would not refine his theories of the genre until after he had spent time in Europe, West’s colonial background provided the foundation necessary for him to

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26 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 43.
27 Ibid., 45.
become a history painter. A cast of characters would begin to appear in West’s life after his first art lesson in Philadelphia, each one contributing a piece to the puzzle that would transform him from a colonial painter to a transatlantic artist. Among them were William Williams, the young English artist who became captivated by West’s fresh artistic genius; the Moravian minister John Valentine Haidt, who taught him the principles of narrative; the gunsmith William Henry, who introduced West to the classics such as Greek mythology and classical stories; the impulsive Provost William Smith, who became the greatest benefactor of West’s early career; and the English artist John Wollaston, who brought the current London style to Philadelphia. All provided training and models of pedagogy that would accompany West for the remainder of his career.

West’s career began in earnest when he first visited Philadelphia, when he was nine years old. Galt describes how upon his visit, Pennington introduced West to Samuel Shoemaker, a colonial merchant and close friend of Pennington’s, who was so amazed by the young boy’s talents that he in turn introduced him to William Williams, who was so impressed by West that he immediately took on the role of a mentor and offered the young artist books by Jonathan Richardson (An Essay on the Theory of Painting, 1715) and Charles du Fresnoy (The Art of Painting, 1668), both seminal texts on the theory of eighteenth-century European painting.28 West was grateful for these texts, writing that they were “my companions by day, & under my pillow by night.”29 Art historian Ann Uhry Abrams remarks, “references to the writings of Richardson and Fresnoy … reveal more about the adult West than they do about the boy. The very suggestion that West had

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28 Galt, Life of West, 1:23.
studied these hallowed theorists at a very tender age gave him a stamp of legitimacy in Britain’s art community.”

West remarked about Williams, “Had it not been for him, I should have never been a painter.” Williams, although a British-born painter, ended up as a painter in the colonies in the hopes of improving his career prospects, as Philadelphia provided ample opportunities. He and West unknowingly shared a connection in the way both nurtured dual identities. Williams wanted to succeed as an artist, as a landscape and portrait painter, but had to work as an artisan, as a sign painter, to make ends meet. Similarly, West would become torn by his competing identities as a colonial painter and a painter to the British king. West claimed that he had always been impressed by the accuracy of Williams’s landscapes, which was made possible by using a camera obscura. This type of photographic tool was “relatively simple to make and popular with untrained artists, which Williams then was, because the user could easily reproduce a landscape by tracing its projected image.” Since Williams used it so avidly at the beginning of his career, it would explain why West did so as well, as seen in his earliest paintings. In his first landscape painting, titled *Landscape with Cow* (ca. 1748, fig. 1.1), which he described as comprising of “ships, cattle & other things I have been accustomed to see,” a panel is packed in an awkward manner with three castles, a waterfall, a sailing ship, a bridged path, a windmill, a wooden path, three figures, and a prominent white cow. While the composition looks like an illustration of a storybook dream, it is most likely that parts of

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31 Thomas Eagles, memorandum of a conversation with Benjamin West, July 10, 1805, William Williams Manuscripts, Manuscripts Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.
33 Dickason, “Benjamin West on William Williams,” 130.
it were made with the aid of a camera obscura. The very same castles, ships, and ornamental foliage appear in Williams’s *Imaginary Landscape* (1772, fig. 1.2), which would suggest that West completed the composition in the English artist’s studio.\(^{34}\)

The two encountered each other again when Williams returned to London around 1777. The fifty-year old artist and his former pupil were in regular contact over the next few years, during which West worked on *The Battle of La Hogue* (1778, fig. 1.3). West later divulged that he “introduced a likeness of Williams in one of the boats,” likely the figure on the far left wearing a feathered hat, who resembles Williams’s self-portrait.\(^{35}\)

Although West would abandon Williams’s style of panoramic landscape painting, an emphasis on vibrant colors and rich detail would remain a fundamental aspect of West’s visual vocabulary. Surprisingly, Williams is the only colonial artist mentioned in Galt’s account of West’s life. Perhaps this is due to a swell of memories of his first instructor after West encountered Williams’s novel written under the pseudonym “Mr. Penrose” in 1805.\(^{36}\)

Sometime around 1755, when he was sixteen or seventeen, West traveled to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which served as the site of “one of the most productive periods of his colonial career.”\(^{37}\) Here he established his reputation as a portrait painter, attracting notable patrons such as William Henry and Provost William Smith. West stayed at the home of Henry, a munitions manufacturer, and immediately heard stories about the violence afflicting nearby backcountry communities. The French and Indian War (1754-63) was underway when he arrived in Lancaster, which is 80 miles west of Philadelphia,

\(^{34}\) Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 49.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 86-7.
\(^{37}\) Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 49.
and Indian raids and military battles made an impression on West. Indeed, he depicted the war’s decisive battle in his most famous painting, The Death of General Wolfe (1770, fig. 1.4).

In Lancaster from 1755-56, West completed several portraits, a landscape painting, numerous tavern signs, and The Death of Socrates (1756, fig. 1.5). His works from this period differ strikingly in their color palettes from his previous works, which suggests that he had encountered a new style of painting from a new instructor. His works no longer contained “clear, opaque colors and decorative details”; in their place, Abrams observes, “we find a somber palette, more subtle shading, and a greater awareness of anatomical structure.”

Galt’s biography mentions no instructor at this stage in West’s development, but Abrams found the missing detail in the diary of Joseph Farington, who described a connection between the young West and a German artist named “Mr. Hide.” This is almost certainly a misspelling of John Valentine Haidt’s surname, an error likely made by West, a notoriously poor speller. Haidt (1700-80), who had studied painting in London, Paris, and Rome, came to America from Germany around 1754. A Moravian preacher, he was assigned to a church in Philadelphia at around the same time West was in Philadelphia. Around this time, Williams was too busy to teach as he was distracted by his own career. Haidt painted portraits, allegories, and religious subjects and little is known about his contact with West. Several assumptions can be made, however, the first, according to Abrams, being that “draftsmanship had been so fundamental to Haidt’s training as a metal engraver that he undoubtedly emphasized drawing and precise linear

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38 Ibid., 51.
39 Ibid., 52.
40 Rather, The American School, 54.
configurations when he instructed West.” The second is that West would incorporate certain elements inspired by Haidt into his own compositions, specifically the Indian figure. Haidt’s most well-known composition, *First Fruits* (ca. 1760, fig. 1.6), which represents Moravian converts, contains an American Indian clothed in a loincloth and modeled after the iconic Greek sculpture *Doryphoros* (fig. 1.7). West also included classicized Native American figures in *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, fig. 1.4) and *William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians* (1771-2, fig. 1.8), though Haidt’s influence is most apparent in West’s *The Death of Socrates* (1756, fig. 1.5).

William Henry commissioned *The Death of Socrates* from West as he thought it to afford “one of the best topics for illustrating the moral effect of the art of painting.” West had never heard the famous story, however, so Henry had to “read to him the account … of this affecting story.” After hearing the translation of Plutarch’s version of the story, West produced a drawing and showed it to Henry, who then requested a painting. When West required a model for the slave who presented the poison to Socrates, Henry sent for one of his workers, “whose arms and breast were naked,” which “instantaneously convinced the Artist that he had only to look in to nature for the models which would impart grace and energy to his delineations of forms.” Of all West’s colonial paintings, this composition contains the most evidence of Haidt’s influence, especially its style and iconography. Consisting of mostly warm tones, and the occasional pop of green and red, the painting features Socrates standing in the center,

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43 Ibid., 1:37.
44 Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 54.
holding the hemlock, flanked by soldiers and his distressed pupils who beg him to reconsider his fatal decision. The figure grouping—soldiers on the right and pupils on the left—demonstrates West’s familiarity with classical composition, which “often depict[s] figures at whose flanks gather two groups that symbolize alternatives.”

Interestingly, scholars have discovered that Galt’s version of the painting’s commission is incorrect. Both Abrams and Gordon agree that the most likely source for the painting was not Plutarch’s Lives but rather the fourth volume of Charles Rollin’s Ancient History (published in French in twelve volumes between 1730 and 1738, and translated into English in 1738), which was in Henry’s library and is still owned by his descendants. This particular volume includes engravings by J. P. Le Bas after illustrations by Hubert François Gravelot, and West borrowed some elements from the illustration of Socrates’s death. Not only did he copy the figure of Socrates (fig. 1.9), the weeping man to the far right, and the slave behind Socrates (the one whom he supposedly modeled after Henry’s worker), but he also included architectural aspects from Gravelot’s illustration into the background. Still, the figures’ facial expressions resemble those by Haidt (see fig. 1.6): in West’s composition, “the exaggerated facial expressions of the men around Socrates—their brows furrowed, their mouths turned downward—recall the intense emotion that distorts the faces of Haidt’s religious subjects.” In addition, just as Haidt relied on engravings of Roman sculpture for his work, so did West. In sum, by 1755, West had learned composition and developed a painting style from various

48 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 56.
influences, including William Williams, William Henry, and John Valentine Haidt, as well as books by Jonathan Richardson, Charles du Fresnoy, and Charles Rollins. West did not learn to paint through formal training in a designed curriculum but rather through the spontaneous goodwill and generosity of several individuals who had varying degrees of experience and owned some important texts. Later, West’s own pedagogy would feature some of this same extemporaneity.

According to the literary historian Scott Paul Gordon, what West accomplished with the Lancaster Death of Socrates was a “political commitment … an expression of ‘patriot art,’ an oath painting in the tradition of, or more accurately anticipating” John Trumbull’s Declaration of Independence, and the painting’s aura intensified when Henry dedicated his home as a patriotic center during the Revolutionary War and hung the painting for the benefit of passing revolutionaries. Although depicting a classical event, The Death of Socrates poses a political commentary on the circumstances of the frontier during the French and Indian War. When Henry commissioned the painting, many residents scorned Quaker-led assemblies for an inability to defend the frontier against Indian attacks. Lancaster inhabitants identified in The Death of Socrates “the needs of backcountry communities struggling to arm and defend themselves.” Socrates served as a symbol, much as he did twenty years later in Jacques-Louis David’s iconic neoclassical painting of the same title, for common citizens who had to “transform … into patriots themselves.” The painting raised questions about the meaning of colonial patriotism. During the war, colonists who considered themselves British were united by a common

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51 Ibid., 83.
52 Ibid., 93.
cause that was unique to North America. As Gordon concludes, West’s “first painting about the French and Indian War, and the only painting about the war produced by anyone during the war … register[s] the perspective of backcountry residents in their desperate need for defense … [and] celebrates patriotic devotion to a military ideal that the elected assembly had ceased to embody.”\textsuperscript{53} West’s \textit{The Death of Socrates} is an important example of early American art and synthesizes the many lessons he had learned in Pennsylvania.

Dr. William Smith, the Provost of the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania), became West’s greatest benefactor and funded the remainder of his education, including his Grand Tour. While West and Smith first encountered each other in Lancaster, the two remained in close contact and Smith sponsored West’s travel to Philadelphia. \textit{The Death of Socrates}, called the “most ambitious and interesting picture produced in colonial America,” had attracted a great deal of attention, including from Smith, who upon “seeing the result of the boy’s efforts, warmly interested himself in his welfare.” Smith “proposed to the elder West to send his son to the capital and offered to instruct him in English classical literature.”\textsuperscript{54} No records indicate that West paid tuition at the College of Philadelphia, but Smith mentored him, whether privately or as a guest in his courses, between 1756 and 1759. Smith was a classical scholar who introduced West to a variety of Greek and Roman literature, which inspired West’s choice of subject matter, drawn mostly from ancient history. He also introduced West to prominent figures such as Francis Hopkins, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; Thomas Godfrey, an elegant poet and promising playwright; Joseph Reid, who would become a leading

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{54} Dunlap, \textit{History}, 40.
physician in Philadelphia; and Jacob Duché, a local minister—all of whom became West’s college comrades. In Galt’s telling, West was fast becoming a refined member of the colonial elite.

_The American Magazine_, a journal published by College of Philadelphia students, featured poetry, reports on colonial affairs, and accounts of the frontier war. West was mentioned in two poems, one of which connected him to the English artist John Wollaston, active between 1742 and 1775:

“The pleasing paths your Wollaston has led
Let his just precepts all your works refine,
Copy each grace, and learn like him to shine.
So shall some future muse her sweeter lays,
Swell with your name, and give you all his praise.”

It can be assumed, therefore, that West studied with the English painter in Philadelphia. West’s surviving paintings from this period are portraits of young Philadelphians, all of which bear a striking resemblance to Wollaston’s style. Gone was West’s soft palette and grave mood; instead, his portraits possessed a brightness and luminosity typical of Wollaston, who “introduced contemporary London style to Americans over the course of the 1750s.” Wollaston’s _Mrs. Charles Carroll of Annapolis_ (1753-54, fig. 1.10), for example, is typical of his style at the time: the sitter appears stiff and porcelain but her rich silk and satin dress reflects the light in a vivid manner. In his portrait of Mary Bethel Boude (1755, fig. 1.11) West paints the figure with a similar stiffness and lack of modelling but represents bright highlights reflecting off her silky dress.

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55 See Abrams, _The Valiant Hero_, 62.
56 _American Magazine_, Sept. 1758, 607, quoted in ibid., 65.
57 Rather, _The American School_, 53.
In addition to painting portraits for wealthy and well-connected patrons, West produced historical subjects, several of which are now lost.60 Both Galt and Dunlap discuss his *Trial of Susannah* (1756), which featured “not fewer than forty figures” on a “canvas about the size of a half length portrait.”61 Though the painting has been lost its defining characteristics have not been forgotten, especially its theatricality. West rendered the figures as if they were actors on a stage and it is assumed that he gained this understanding by attending theatrical productions in Philadelphia. His college friends Godfrey and Duché had leading roles in an important colonial drama, Provost Smith’s production of *Alfred: A Masque*, which West likely attended.62 The drama tells the story of Alfred the Great and his efforts to restore liberty to Britannia after a Viking invasion and Smith’s production was intended to demonstrate Philadelphia’s cultural sophistication.

West’s colonial career came to an end in 1759-60, when the wealthy merchant and landowner William Allen agreed to finance his trip to Italy. Although West was grateful for the education in the classics that he received from Dr. Smith, “as his mind strengthened, and the powers of discrimination increased—as his eyes became open to the beauties of nature, and his power of imitating those beauties increased, the perception of his deficiencies likewise increased, with the ardent desire to examine the wonders of art which could at that time only be seen by visiting Italy.”63 Allen’s son John Allen and one of the merchant’s relatives, Joseph Shippen, accompanied West overseas. In exchange for funding his trip abroad, the older Allen expected West to copy great works

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60 Ibid., 461.
62 Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 68.
63 Dunlap, *History*, 43.
by the Old Masters and send them back to Philadelphia. To guarantee that West would have access to the distinguished art collections, Allen had written to associates, asking that they help the young painter in any way necessary, as he “has among us the Character of a very deserving young man.”

West’s education in the colonies was truly miscellaneous and quirky. He did not receive a formal education in any subject, much less fine art, and he learned about history and technique from an assortment of books and mentors. He had encountered different kinds of art and artistic expertise during his youth, and he would now have to reckon with how his colonial roots both advantaged and disadvantaged him. But West’s good fortune was evident. Dunlap praised him for how “he found friends eager to assist him at every step. Was it not because it was seen by all that every step was in the right path—that his mind was as deeply imbued with the love of virtue as with the love of his art? Such was the character of West through life; and through life his success was uniform.”

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65 Dunlap, History, 46.
CHAPTER II

WEST’S GRAND TOUR

“My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!”

Introduction

West’s legendary Grand Tour changed his life and the future of American art. When he arrived in Italy, in 1760, it was not uncommon for European artists to take a Grand Tour but no American had yet done so. The notion that “an American, and a Quaker, [had] come to study the fine arts” had “seemed so extraordinary, that it reached the ears of Mr. [Thomas] Robinson … who immediately found himself possessed by an irresistible desire to see him.”¹ As discussed in Chapter One, West had an ambivalent connection to the Society of Friends and so Galt’s reference to Quakerism serves to distance West from the realm of fine arts, which Quakers regarded with suspicion. This is yet another instance of how West, through Galt, worked to shape his identity, in this case to describe himself as a provincial colonial set loose in the Old World.

West’s course of study followed tradition, as he “visited major Italian artistic centers, especially Rome; immersed himself in study of the acknowledged high points in western art, notably of classical antiquity and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy; and painted copies of masterworks, a form of training that also benefited patrons at home, to whom he sent the pictures.”² Italy would prove to provide the tools that West would need to advance his career as he worked his way through Europe, eventually settling in London where he would remain for the rest of his life. At the time, West would not have

¹ Galt, *Life of West*, 1:101-03
² Rather, *The American School*, 89.
understood the implications of his American status, especially since at the time of his arrival in Italy the majority of Americans considered themselves to be Britons, and West was no exception. It would not be until over the course of the 1760s that the notion of an American identity began to develop and would take “firmer shape in Britain before it did in North America.”³ In sum, West’s Americanness heightened his exoticism and became a marker that he would learn how to manipulate in different contexts.

The Grand Tour

The Grand Tour was a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “rite of passage for the scions of the nobility and gentry” and “required young men to travel in particular to France and Italy to acquire the social and culture polish that would make them ‘complete gentlemen.’”⁴ It was designed to be a transformative experience during which its participants discarded their youthful provincialism for a cultured sophistication. For the British male a Grand Tour was designed to cultivate the manners of a polite gentleman who could “converse easily with men and women of all ranks, neither intimidated by kings nor insolent to underlings.”⁵ Travel was valued as a means of education and the sixteenth-century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne believed that students required “direct adventuring with the world, a steady and lively interplay with common folk, supplemented and fortified with trips abroad. Such contacts with mundane concerns serve not only to put an edge on the learner’s faculties: they will appraise him of other people’s humors, manner, customs, their politics, theology, and jurisprudence, their social

³ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
system, and their public works.” This sentiment, as well as Louis XIV’s call for good breeding among French artists, served as the basis for a trip that would provide direct exposure to classical antiquity and Renaissance culture.

Colonists rarely undertook formal Grand Tours as the “leisurely pursuits of connoisseurship and antiquarianism as well as the more frivolous recreations and amusements which constituted an important part of the Grand Tour were generally beyond their grasp both financially and practically.” In some cases colonial men crossed the Atlantic out of a sense of curiosity rather than a purposeful initiation into polite society. Since the New World was deemed an unexplored and unsophisticated frontier, “well-to-do colonial families wanted to send their most promising sons back to the ‘old home’ to which they were bound by invisible ties.” Colonial tourists would send portraits, letters, and relics of their discoveries in Europe back to their families as means of sharing the splendor that was in short supply in the New World. Though West undoubtedly experienced awe and inspiration in Italy, “by 1760 the tour had become so formulaic that there is skepticism about how much broadening of minds was taking place.” For British men anyway, Italy gradually transformed from “the focus of artistic, and more generally cultural, education” to a place where sensual joys and vices were sought out more so than the instruction tourists were meant to be receiving. In the nineteenth century, as English industrialism, cosmopolitanism, and colonization

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increased, the Grand Tour tradition faded among British men. Meanwhile, some American artists undertook formal tours and, ironically, others navigated not to Italy but to London to learn Grand Manner traditions from the great Benjamin West.

It is worthwhile to note here West’s later attitudes about the value of a Grand Tour for the developing artist. In 1787-88, almost thirty years after his trip, West drew up a detailed program for his German pupil Johann Heinrich Ramberg, who was embarking for Italy. None other than King George III had requested that West instruct Ramberg about how to undertake an artistic education abroad. In his instructions, West writes about the importance of studying the antique, specifically the works of Michelangelo and Raphael. He outlines his “syllabus” for Ramberg with an elaborate plan to follow, starting with visits to Rome before moving onto Florence and Bologna, studying the Flemish works of Rubens and Van Dyke, and concluding with a list of paintings that West recommends that Ramberg copy. His neoclassical program also required study of the five sources of artistic perfection: antique sculpture, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and Correggio. In sum, West instructed the young German artist to follow the same itinerary he had followed—and that he had read about even earlier in du Fresnoy’s treatise.

West’s First Stop: Italy

West arrived in Rome in 1760 and soon met the Englishman Thomas Robinson, who introduced him to Rome’s most prominent collector and connoisseur, Cardinal Alessandro Albani. The oft-told story of the meeting between West and Albani speaks

directly to West’s shifting, hybrid identity. According to Galt, the Cardinal, blind in his old age, was curious about West’s appearance and “fancying that the American must be an Indian, exclaimed, ‘Is he black or white?’” and, on being told that he was very fair, asked, ‘What as fair as I am?’” This amused witnesses, who found that the Cardinal’s complexion was “of the darkest Italian olive, and West’s was even of more than the usual degree of English fairness.”12 Once Albani was satisfied that West was at white as himself, he invited West to view the art in the Vatican’s Cortile del Belvedere as he was curious to witness the effect such fine works would have on the exotic American.

What happened next only intensified the mixing of regional and racial identities that characterized West’s time in Italy. Albani and a group of his Italian friends joined West on the tour of the Vatican, where “it was agreed that the Apollo [Belvedere] should be first submitted to his view, because it was the most perfect work among all the ornaments of Rome, and, consequently, the best calculated to produce that effect which the company were anxious to witness.”13 When West laid his eyes on the sculpture “the Artist felt himself surprised with a sudden recollection altogether different from the gratification which he had expected; and without being aware of the force of what he said, exclaimed, ‘My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!’”14 The Italians asked Robinson to translate and were horrified to hear the Apollo Belvedere compared to what they deemed a savage. West explained how the Mohawks were adept at archery and known for their agility and bravery, to which the Italians responded that “a better criticism had rarely been pronounced on the merits of the statue.”15

12 Galt, Life of West, 1: 103.
13 Ibid., 1: 105.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 1: 106.
This remarkable episode actually played out twice in West’s life, and each time it shaped his identity as an exotic artist—a primitive from the backwoods of America with a genuinely unique talent. First, as someone who had much to gain from the European ignorance of the New World, West, as the art historian Susan Rather puts it, “demonstrated his appreciation for pure form, apart from color or ornament,” as without hesitation he compared the brilliant white statue to that of a bronzed Mohawk warrior. In doing so he created a distinct identity that proved to be beneficial in the moment, as it expedited his entrance into a sphere of artists, collectors, and connoisseurs who were fascinated by the American who had lived among Mohawk Indians and viewed antiquity through innocent eyes. Second, when Galt told the story years later, in his 1815 biography, it helped to affirm West’s Americanness at a time that he deemed it advantageous to do so. Equally fascinating is that during the years between his remark and Galt’s biography, West was constantly negotiating his Anglo and American identities for various purposes.

Interestingly, the cohort of artists West engaged with in Italy were from various nations and included the German painter Anton Raphael Mengs, the Scottish painter Gavin Hamilton, and the Swiss painter Angelica Kauffman. Mengs, whose patron was Cardinal Albani, was an exemplar for West. He fashioned his figures after antique sculptures and focused on Grand Manner subjects and allegories. His mythological fresco *Parnassus* (1761, fig. 2.1), part of a larger project for Albani’s villa, demonstrates all of these qualities and is likely a painting that West encountered during his stay in Italy. The fresco is far more ambitious than anything West encountered in the colonies.

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17 Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 75.
and modelled the sort of grandeur he admired. The central figure of Apollo is modelled after direct study of the *Apollo Belvedere* (fig. 2.2) and the entire design is modelled after Raphael’s *School of Athens* (1509-11). West studied Mengs’s work and learned from him “how to make skin textures resemble the marble of statues and to structure his compositions on a shallow horizontal and vertical grid.”18 This sort of hands-on teaching and learning would become common in West’s London workshop.

West’s art also matured under the instruction of Hamilton, who possessed a collection of classical artifacts that he used as models for figures in paintings. Inspired by Hamilton’s advanced understanding of classical form and dramatic compositions, West refined the theatrical style he had started to develop in Philadelphia just prior to his departing. Galt tells a story about a café singer named Homer, who after being introduced to West by Hamilton, sings them a song about an American artist coming to Italy to attain a finer sense of the fine arts.19 Whether apocryphal or not, it does seem too coincidental that Hamilton executed two neoclassical paintings inspired by Homer’s *Iliad, Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus* (ca. 1761) and *Andromache Bewailing the Death of Hector* (ca. 1761), just when West was in Italy. The paintings inspired West and along with works by Mengs certainly influenced West’s decision to take up history painting and largely abandon portraiture. Both Mengs and Hamilton combined classical subjects and form with a dramatic romanticism, which would become West’s hallmark. One wonders whether at this time West had already decided against returning to the colonies, where he would have been compelled to paint portraits for the most part.

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18 Ibid. 75.
The impact of these influences as well as the exposure to classical works can be best observed in West’s 1761 painting *The Savage Chief (The Indian Family)* (fig. 2.3), which served as the source for an engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi (fig. 2.4) that was the frontispiece for Italian translation of an account detailing European settlement of North America. The painted version was created for a specific purpose, as West’s traveling escort Joseph Shippen writes in a letter that the British minister of Venice, John Murray, desired a painted version of “an Indian Warrior in his proper dress & accoutrements” escorted by an Indian woman. West received specific instructions calling for the figures to be at least eighteen-inches tall so that “the particulars of dress may be plainly distinguished,” and the central Mohawk warrior had to carry “his gun, Tomhawk and Spear,” his “face should be painted,” and he needed to wear a “Feather in his Head.” West followed the specifications down to the last detail: the Indian warrior’s face is painted and he holds a gun and tomahawk while standing beside a woman embracing a baby, all set within a New World wilderness.

The painting is one of West’s earliest depictions of Indians as well as “one of the first paintings of them in their native costumes and environment by any artist.” It synthesizes the classicism that West observed in Italy and his memories of the Indians he encountered in Lancaster during the French and Indian War. Compared to his former portrait style, which was stiff and lacked subtle modelling, *The Indian Family* reveals a development in technical skill as “he had learned to use oil paint with some fluency, to render chiaroscuro effectively and to give his figures substance and flexibility” after less

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20 Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 77.
21 Joseph Shippen to Benjamin West, 17 September 1760, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 50, frames 770-78.
than a year in Europe.\textsuperscript{23} The composition also demonstrates West’s increasing familiarity with classical forms. The woman, “dressed in a pastiche of a Greek peplum and a patterned woven skirt,” resembles a Venus, especially the tilt of her head, while the Indian brave stands in the same \textit{contrapposto} position as the \textit{Apollo Belvedere}.\textsuperscript{24} West was far from the first artist to draw inspiration from the \textit{Apollo} (he had just seen Mengs’s \textit{Paranassus}) but his provincial heritage “conditioned [him] to interpret classical sculpture more pragmatically than were more urbane European painters.”\textsuperscript{25} In essence, he uses the sculpture’s form as a template upon which to drape the proper dress and customs of American Indians. As a result, West transformed the \textit{Apollo} into the very Mohawk warrior he had envisioned upon laying eyes on the icon. As the art historian Sarah Monks puts it, “In the first decade of his European career, West sought to situate himself as one who moved between different cultures, his works and his public identity enabling his triangulation as a British subject capable of producing paintings redolent of the Italianate tradition alongside those depicting openly American motifs.”\textsuperscript{26}

The extent of West’s progress in Italy is evident in a self-portrait he produced around 1762 or 1763 (fig. 2.5). An earlier 1758 miniature self-portrait he made in Pennsylvania is generic and unremarkable, but the Italian portrait reveals quite a bit about West’s evolving artistic identity. The young artist orients himself slightly left of the center of the page with his face and right shoulder turned toward the viewer as if he were looking at a mirror as he sketched himself, which was a common practice for portraitists.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 731.
\textsuperscript{24} Abrams, \textit{The Valiant Hero}, 80.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Sarah Monks, “The Wolfe Man: Benjamin West’s Anglo-American Accent,” \textit{Art History} 34, no. 4 (September 2011): 654.
His gesturing arm guides the viewer toward the right side of the page, where a sculpted bust and cluster of objects lay on a table. The rough charcoal lines are rather clumsily sketched around West’s face, which can only be deciphered by the highlight and brightness offset by his square collar. The densest area is of his torso, which is draped by a thick garment that mostly obscures his outstretched hand.

The bust on the table, with a distinctive top knot, is the *Apollo Belvedere*. West’s incorporation of the sculpture, whether Galt’s account is more fiction than fact, confirms that it “played a formative role in the way West defined himself and wished to be seen. The *Apollo Belvedere* links him to the apogee of ancient art for eighteenth-century viewers and to history, a type of subject matter West had been thinking about for a number of years, at least since the *Death of Socrates*.”27 His attire, however, is a decidedly contemporary style of “Vandyke” dress, which was widely familiar from the Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck’s portraits.28 West was aware that such dress not only connected him to the master van Dyck but also to the latest British fashion. In the context of his Italian surroundings, Rather explains, “the outfit constituted a clear marker of British identity, as also employed by Anton Mengs and by leading Roman portraitist Pompeo Batoni, who catered to British Grand Tourists.”29

So even as West identifies with classical history (the *Apollo Belvedere*) he simultaneously sheds his colonial persona (embodied in his various references to Mohawk Indians) for the Vandyke fashion of a contemporary Englishman. It was clear that West chose this type of attire as the ideal representation of his new identity as the

28 Ibid., 96.
29 Ibid., 96-7.
Vandyke style can also be seen in a 1762-63 portrait of West rendered by Angelica Kauffman, a Swiss painter with whom West became very close during his time in Italy (fig. 2.6). The presence of the Vandyke fashion in both his self-portrait and Kauffman’s drawing indicates that “West, nearing the end of his time in Italy, was mulling over options and experimenting in ways that would, in short order, lead to his emergence as a new kind of British artist.”

Kauffman’s decision to depict West as an English gentlemen reflects his deliberate choice to appear as a European artist rather than a colonial portraitist thus marking an intentional crafting of his own outward image to the world, one that rejects his provincialism and embraces instead a more fashionable style.

When a serious leg infection called for a major surgery in the winter of 1761-62, West left Rome for medical treatment and convalescence in Florence. Although the infirmity was painful and frustrating, Florence offered new opportunities, such as the ability to copy masterpieces in the Uffizi and Pitti collections. West returned to Rome in early 1763 where he was inspired to create his own set of narrative paintings based on literary sources: Cymon and Iphigenia from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Angelica and Medoro from the epic poem *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto. *Angelica and Medoro* (1763-64, fig. 2.7) represents the two lovers as they loll in a wooded landscape. Some have speculated that the painting may serve as a tribute to the meeting between West and Kauffman, as in Ariosto’s poem Angelica and Medoro meet one another after he has been injured. Therefore, it is plausible that West was alluding to his encounter with Kauffman at a time when he was suffering from his leg infection.

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30 Ibid., 102.
31 Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 80.
More broadly, the painting serves as the epitome of all that West had learned during his time in Italy as it features aspects from classical tradition, the Old Masters, and contemporary culture. The composition as a whole is an excellent reflection of not only the subject matter that West had begun to grow an interest in but the enhancement of techniques and a greater deftness with compositional devices that would not have been available had he remained in the colonies. It is also important to note how the subject of romantic partners, represented in the stories of Angelica and Medoro and Cymon and Iphigenia, dramatizes West’s personal experience of coupling his colonial roots with antiquity, Renaissance culture, and contemporary British fashion. Monks writes of West’s time in Italy that he seemed to have “situated himself between different genres, positions, manners and selves, on the verge, and in the vicinity, of statements with which he cannot decisively be attributed.”32 In sum, by the time West left Italy he had embarked on what would prove to be a lifelong project of artistic self-fashioning and shapeshifting.

West’s Final Stop: England

West departed Rome in the early months of 1763 with the intention of making brief stops in France and England before his return home to America. He headed to Paris in the summer of 1763, visiting northern Italian cities along the way. There is little known about his visit to the French capital, although Galt discusses West’s unfavorable opinion of the state of the fine arts in France. West believed, according to Galt, that “In the opinion of a Frenchman, there is a quality of excellence in every thing belonging to France, merely because it is French, which gives at all times a certain degree of

superiority to the actions and productions of his countrymen; and this delusive notion has infested … the principles of Art, to such a deep and inveterate extent, that the morality of painting is not yet either felt or understood in that country.”

This concern about the lack of morality necessary for proper history painting may explain why West felt compelled to exclude any details about the artworks he saw in the royal collections and private palaces of Paris. We can surmise however that West was disenchanted by the Rococo paintings of François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard that Denis Diderot critiqued in his famous “Salon of 1763.” West surely agreed with Diderot’s call for a less erotic and more sober mode of painting that emphasized virtue and truth rather than decadent luxury.

West arrived in London in the summer of 1763 with a plan to study as much as he could about British art and society before returning to America. Dunlap states in his history of American art that “wherever West went, circumstance combined for his advantage,” and so it was that he was met in London by his colonial benefactors William Allen and William Smith, who were “ready to introduce him to the best and most powerful of the land of his fathers.” Dunlap presumes that West was “trying to establish himself as an historical painter in the metropolis of England,” but there is no evidence that West had planned to remain in England. In fact, he had a fiancé waiting for him in Philadelphia. After arriving he traveled to private estates and royal collections in southern England to study the paintings and drawings of the very same masters whose works he had seen in Italy. West visited Hampton Court, Oxford, Blenheim, Bath, and stopped in Stourhead, where he stayed at the estate of Henry Hoare, a wealthy English banker. There

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34 Dunlap, *History*, 56.
West saw classical gardens full of temples, pantheons, and Venetian bridges, all of which he observed in paintings by Nicolas Poussin, the French Baroque master he revered.\textsuperscript{35}

The leading figure in the English art community was William Hogarth, a painter, printmaker, and satirist who worked to disassociate the artistic professions from artisanal labor. He established the St. Martin’s Lane Academy in 1735 to introduce the Rococo style to British artists and designers and raise the profile of British art more generally. When West attended the academy in the fall of 1763 it was quite small and casual, a place for artists to gather and share ideas and discuss business matters.\textsuperscript{36} Though Hogarth strived to create an atmosphere of prestige for artists, his peers believed that “England had nothing to celebrate in Hogarth and that English traditions offered little use or value to professional artists.”\textsuperscript{37} West’s arrival in England, therefore, coincided with a major shift in the British artworld. As one contemporary observer remarked, when English artists returned to London from Rome they were likely to “quit their works of genius, and be totally absorbed in portrait-painting, the stumbling-block upon which all the English painters fall.”\textsuperscript{38} But beginning in the 1760s, with the ascension of Sir Joshua Reynolds to positions of influence, British artists sought more eminent status and aligned more deliberately with Grand Manner traditions. The Society of Artists of Great Britain was established in 1761, West arrived in London in 1763, and the Royal Academy of Arts was founded in 1768. Before the end of 1763, West had contacted two of the most well-

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[35]{Galt, \textit{Life of West}, 2:5.}
\footnotetext[36]{Abrams, \textit{The Valiant Hero}, 92.}
\footnotetext[37]{Rather, \textit{The American School}, 105.}
\footnotetext[38]{Samuel Sharp, letter dated April 14, 1766, in \textit{Letters from Italy, describing the Customs and Manners of that Country, in the Years 1765 and 1766} (London: Henry and Cave, 1766), 218.}
\end{footnotes}
known British artists, Reynolds and Richard Wilson, both of whom would take him under their wing and aid in his transformation from a colonial artist to a transatlantic master.

West was inspired by Reynolds’s success and determined to achieve the same level of fame, a dream that came true far more quickly than anyone could have imagined. Soon after meeting Reynolds, he was a guest at palaces and working for prestigious patrons. Upon Reynolds’s death in 1792, West was appointed the second president of the Royal Academy. It is worth pointing out that although Reynolds played a key role in West’s life, he never provided him any sort of instruction, and though Wilson, a painter of Italianate landscapes, permitted West to work in his studio, he seems to have had little effect on West’s style or technique. Both men, however, presented West to London’s artistic society. Sharing the experience of the Grand Tour with these artists granted West easy access to their circles.

West’s reputation was established in 1764, when he contributed three paintings to the Society of Artists’ exhibition at Spring Gardens. Two of the works were made in Italy the year prior (Cymon and Iphigenia and Angelica and Medoro) and the third was a full-length military portrait of General Robert Monckton, an English officer and American hero (Monckton was second in command to General James Wolfe on the day Wolfe died in Quebec). The positive reviews West received likely influenced his decision to remain in England and cancel his return to Pennsylvania. His reputation as a talented artist spread quickly after a successful exhibition in April 1764 encouraged his critics to describe him as the “American Raphael,” a title that was a “key descriptor…for West, who wrapped himself in Britain’s flag and in the rusticity of the provinces.”39 The term

“American” had a relatively negative connotation as it was associated with the indigenous peoples of North America and had an air of exoticism and remoteness that served as a severance between Britons and that of their colonist counterparts. Despite such notions identified with Americanness, West perceived the title to be quite an accomplishment. In fact, he thought it was “a straight-faced comparison to the painter who was widely acknowledged to be the greatest modern master.” Here was a man whose “self-conscious exoticism made his achievements appear all the more astonishing.” West was suddenly thrust into celebrityhood as he was seen to be a “a paradox—a prodigy and a curiosity, a rustic and a gentleman, a provincial and citizen of the world.” West was now in the midst of his dueling identities.

West had come a long way but was clearly conflicted about his national, artistic, and personal identities. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in 1764, at a critical crossroads in his life, he painted The Choice of Hercules between Virtue and Pleasure (fig. 2.8). The painting evinces many influences, including Roman marbles such as the Vatican Meleager and versions by Baroque masters such as Sebastiano Ricci and Nicolas Poussin. The composition portrays Hercules positioned between two women, one symbolizing virtue and the other vice. The young demigod grimaces from mental anguish as he contemplates his choice. Virtue dons a white tunic and dark blue robe; she points heavenward to guide him. Vice lazes seductively in a pink gown that falls down her shoulders, exposing her breasts. The painting is devoid of any symbols or unnecessary objects that would detract from the tension. West understood that “antiquity provided

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40 Ibid., 91.
standards of reason, intellect, morality, and dignity” which “embraced the concept of sacrifice as the loftiest expression of moral worth.” For West *The Choice of Hercules* was an aesthetic and allegorical dramatization of his own choice, whether to remain in England and pursue history painting or return to America and labor as a portrait painter. The moral purpose of the composition is stressed in the individuals acting out the larger allegory—human action and decision-making is at the forefront. West made his decision after deliberating with his Pennsylvania mentors, Provost Smith and William Allen, who both urged him to remain in England. They also arranged for his beloved, Betsy Shewell, her cousin Matthew Pratt (who would become West’s first student), and his father to travel to London. After their wedding in 1764, Benjamin and Betsy settled in a home in Leicester Fields, in London’s West End, where, two years later, they welcomed their first son, whom they named Raphael.

West had departed America with the intention of returning to work as a painter to colonial elites. His trip created an “effect produced by the works of art in pictures or statues, by the palaces and churches, by the splendor of social intercourse or of religious ceremonies, upon a youth from our country at that time” that could “hardly be conceived by us at this time.” A New World painter in the Old World was bound to be enchanted by all that opportunity for growth. Just as he encountered good fortune in Philadelphia, so did he find it in Europe. Cardinal Albani may have been rapt by his American primitivism, but Mengs, Hamilton, and Kauffman, pushed him toward history painting and the British tourists he met showed him the airs of English gentility. Once in London,

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42 Ibid., 35.
in a short time he had become the American Raphael and was fast becoming the most respected in painter in England. Then, not long after his decision to remain in London, he opened the doors to his London studio to fellow American artists in the hopes of teaching them all he had learned. And so it was that yet again he found himself at a crossroads: official painter to the king of Britain and democratic mentor to young Americans.
CHAPTER III

BENJAMIN WEST’S SUCCESS AND ANGLO-AMERICAN IDENTITY

“Here is a painter who promises to rival Nicolas Poussin”

West’s First Student: Matthew Pratt and The American School

When Matthew Pratt (1734-1805) arrived in London in 1764 with his cousin Elizabeth Shewell and West’s father, he was no stranger to the art of painting. At the age of fifteen he had apprenticed to his uncle, who taught him how to paint portraits. While an advertisement in the Pennsylvania Gazette from March 5, 1756 promotes his “Painting, Gilding, Glazing, and Varnishing” talents, Pratt did not begin to paint portraits until two years later, after a trip to Jamaica.¹ There are only two surviving portraits by Pratt from between 1758 and 1764, one of Benjamin Franklin and the other of Elizabeth Moore Pratt, his wife. The latter of the two demonstrates Wollaston’s influence on colonial artists as it features the almond-shaped eyes that he introduced to the colonies.²

When Pratt learned that his cousin Elizabeth was traveling to England to marry the American Raphael, he seized the opportunity to join her. After the wedding, Pratt moved into the town house that West had purchased on Castle Street, in close proximity to Sir Joshua Reynolds’s home. Perhaps out of gratitude or as a gift to the newlyweds, Pratt made portraits of Benjamin and Elizabeth “in which he shed some of the tentativeness of his earlier Philadelphia work.”³ Feeling fortunate to live with West, Pratt

¹ Pennsylvania Gazette (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), no. 1419, March 5, 1756: [6]. Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers; Dunlap, History, 111.
took advantage of the situation, and although it was an unofficial arrangement he became West’s first student. Pratt did not perceive the relationship as that of a master and apprentice but more as an intellectual exchange rooted in familial ties. He wrote that West “rendered me every good & kind office … as if I was his Father, friend, and brother.”

He immediately took advantage of the professional opportunities in London and submitted a painting titled *Fruit Piece* (now lost) to the 1765 exhibition hosted by the Society of Artists. That year he also painted his most renowned work, *The American School*, which he exhibited in 1766.

*The American School* (1765, fig. 3.1) is “widely understood to celebrate the coming of age of American art and owes its canonical status to the association with West,” pictured on the far left. The painting envisions a respected and prominent role for colonial artists in the Anglo-American artworld and, as Rather claims, while Pratt likely intended it as “a conventional conversation piece, in the end, he produced an artistic manifesto.” The painting features five male figures engaged in various artmaking activities in an intimate studio space, likely in West’s home. On the far side of the table the youngest shuffles sheets of a paper from a portfolio; to this figure’s right, another young pupil, wearing a blue coat, pauses momentarily from drawing a bust that rests on the table. The bust could serve as a reference to the classical past, but Rather suggests that “here antiquity seems to be looking to the modern age, since the bust is positioned so that it seems to observe the lesson.” The young boy has turned from the bust to watch

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5 Rather, “A Painter’s Progress,” 169.
6 Ibid., 171.
7 Rather, *The American School*, 111.
and listen to the studio critique taking place to his right. The topic of discussion is a
drawing on blue paper held by the man in the tawny colored suit. The critic, presumably
West, stands behind this man and leans against his chair as he gestures at the drawing.
Pratt sits before an easel on the far right, observing the master’s instructional critique.
Like West, he holds a palette, brushes, and a mahlstick. Rather maintains that Pratt “does
not attempt to hide the labor of the hand that the art of painting involves” but instead
“invests that labor with dignity by emphasizing qualities of mind.” 8 She observes that the
“serpentine line, [which] extend[s] from the bust on the table to the standing man … knits
together these figures, collectively absorbed and engaged in art by touch, sight, and
sound.” 9 Each participant has a part to play and is contemplative and engaged. The scene
affirms Jonathan Richardson’s theory that “intellect drives the painter’s skill.” 10

Interestingly, the painting has four protagonists—Pratt, West, the studio, and its
provocative title—and since its creation they have competed for attention. On one level
the composition can be read as an exploration of the academic tradition as carried out
among Americans in late-eighteenth century London. Pratt certainly could not have
trained this way in the colonies, where he had “hungered for the dignity and authority that
such artists as Reynolds and West ascribed to the painter…” 11 It is also apparent,
however, that the center of attention is Pratt himself, who sits, illuminated, comfortably at
his easel. Seen in this way, the painting is a biographical allegory of his artistic journey:
from a young boy shuffling papers he has passed through stages of development and
matured into a professional artist. The American School forecasts Pratt’s future as West’s

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8 Rather, “A Painter’s Progress,” 172.
9 Rather, The American School, 112.
equal, an expert at his own practice who no longer requires a teacher. However, in the years after the painting was made West’s achievements and fame only increased and soon the so-called “father of American art,” eager to teach all who came to his studio, would be seen as the painting’s true hero. The painting’s title—The American School—only adds more layers to its significance.

There are several nineteenth-century references to the painting that call it by different titles, including School of West.\textsuperscript{12} However, records of the 1766 Society of Artists exhibition in London, the first exhibition at which the painting was displayed, indicate that Pratt identified it as the The American School, perhaps to distinguish the American school in which he learned from the studio of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Although Reynolds was England’s most respected artist, he was notorious for his coldness as a teacher. Known for being “secretive,” he “did not readily give constructive advice on students’ works, even when asked,” as he “regarded his students as studio assistants.”\textsuperscript{13} By contrast, James Northcote, who worked with Reynolds from 1771 to 1776, described West as “the best possible teacher, because he could tell why and wherefore everything was to be done.”\textsuperscript{14} His assessment of West is rooted in the testimonies of pupils who commonly referred to West as a friend or family member more than a teacher. In The American School West acts as the gracious mentor that Northcote describes, his superiority indicated by the fact that he is the only one wearing a hat, which “marks West and the American school over which he and Pratt preside as fundamentally non-

\textsuperscript{12} The painting was titled “School of West” at its second recorded exhibition in Philadelphia in 1811; “The London School of Artists” in Dunlap, History, 114; and “West’s School of Painters in London” in Loan Exhibition of Historical Portraits (Philadelphia: PAFA, 1887), 105.
deferential, consistent with the general impression created by Pratt’s painting of good-natured and open pedagogical exchange.”15 Not only does this painting provide insight into the nature of West’s pedagogy, but it is one of few contemporary representations of West’s studio and reflects the “methodology of artistic education that emphasized drawing from prints and casts, prevalent in artists’ studios of the period.”16

The decision for Pratt to incorporate the word “American” in his title affirms “North America’s expanding economic role in the British empire and of attendant prophecies … of American cultural greatness.”17 In the latter half of the 1760s, America was evolving and developing its own identity, obviously setting the colonists apart from Britain. Just as the colonies were forging a school of political thought, so too might they form a school of art. But where was West’s place in these emerging schools? According to one London critic writing in the Public Advertiser in 1767, “nature and the antique … flow through his paintings,” an allusion to how West had stitched together his raw colonialism and academic training.18 So as Pratt was living at his house and working in his studio, West was walking the line between Anglo and American—between nature and history—to form a hybrid identity constructed from the best of both worlds. On the one hand Pratt identifies the “American School” with West, a fellow Pennsylvanian in London; on the other hand, he casts West in shadow, in relative obscurity compared to himself. Pratt represents himself bathed in light whereas he shows West as something of an enigma.

15 Rather, The American School, 121.
17 Rather, The American School, 127.
18 “To the Printer of the Public Advertiser” [on the exhibition at Spring Garden], Public Advertiser, May 1, 1767.
The historian Jane Kamensky identifies yet another layer in this multidimensional painting, writing that because of “its vaunting ambitions to the highest reaches of art, the ‘American school’ could not possibly exist in Britain’s America, nor even, years later, in the young United States. In many ways, in the 1760s, London was the American school….” Such a paradox was possible because of West’s continued ascent, which contrasted sharply with Pratt’s career. Pratt spent two and a half years as West’s assistant before settling in Bristol for eighteen months to refine his craft and returning to the colonies, where he painted portraits of wealthy families. He never earned enough to support his family, however, and the Revolution created a depression during which, as his son recollected, “the Fine arts, were very poorly encouraged.” Pratt eventually turned to painting shop signs that incorporated stripped down versions of the history paintings that West had taught him in London.

West’s Fame and Royal Patronage

West’s submission of the Monckton portrait, Angelica and Medoro, and Cymon and Iphigenia to the 1764 Spring Gardens catapulted his career as a number of well-established artists, such as George Romney, Richard Wilson, Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Joseph Wright of Derby, attended the exhibition to view the works. The attention must have been both exciting and overwhelming for West; even before the exhibition opened he received excessive praise in the popular newspapers. In London’s Public Advertiser a verse was dedicated to “Mr. West, a celebrated painter …

19 Kamensky, A Revolution in Color, 92.
20 Sawitzky, Matthew Pratt, 23.
21 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 96.
known in Italy by the name of the American Raphael.” Art critics were more cautious to praise him, yet they could not deny his raw talent. Though initially ambivalent about whether he should remain in London or return to Pennsylvania, after deliberating with his Philadelphia mentors, Provost Smith and William Allen, he decided to remain and pursue his childhood dream of becoming a famous history painter. By this point he certainly knew that his success would in part be linked to his reputation as an American colonial with Old World airs. West’s early success was noted by William Allen in a 1764 letter:

My Lady Juliana Penn called upon us to go and see our Country man Wests painting. he [sic] is really a wonder of a man and has so far out-stripped all the painters of his time as to get into high esteem at once, whereas the famous Reynolds was five years at work before he got into Vogue, as has been the case with all the others who generally drudged a longer time before they had any thing of a name.  

After a mere five months he was outperforming his peers, which West scholar Ann Uhry Abrams attributes to an “unusual blending of colonial innocence with his facility for the new classical style.” Equally important, however, was West’s ability to connect with affluent and influential patrons.

Provost Smith likely played a part in some of West’s first commissions, which included history paintings for Anglican bishops, but West developed a reputation for being highly discriminating in his choice of patrons. For example, Galt describes how in 1764 the Marquess of Rockingham, Charles Watson-Wentworth, “offered Mr. West a regular, permanent engagement of £700 per annum to paint historical subjects for his mansion in Yorkshire: but the Artist on consulting his friends found them unanimously of

22 Quoted in ibid., 97.
24 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 108.
opinion … he should not confine himself to the service of one patron, but trust to the public.”

Rockingham was at the time leader of an opposition faction within the government and West was counseled that such a partnership had the potential to jeopardize his career. Interestingly, Rockingham, who would serve two short terms as Prime Minister (from 1765 to 1766 and again in 1782) was sympathetic to the constitutional rights of the American colonies and opposed the Stamp Act in 1765. On the one hand it seems that West rejected an opportunity to formally associate with a progressive politician who defended colonial rights; on the other hand, Galt notes that “Lord Rockingham … [was] among the most strenuous of Mr. West’s friends.”

These were heady days for West, who in addition to settling in London, making a home with his new wife, starting a career, and working with Pratt, had to negotiate Anglo-American politics. West avoided becoming involved in another controversy at this time as well. When Benjamin Franklin arrived in London in 1765, he called on West and his wife to campaign against Provost Smith and Thomas Penn, both of whom were friends with West, who remained neutral. Franklin, Smith, and Penn had been engaged in conflict for several years as the latter two wished to maintain the proprietorship that Penn’s father had established in Pennsylvania, while Franklin advocated for the end of a proprietary government. Nevertheless, West and Franklin maintained a close friendship. Franklin frequented the West household and often invited the Wests to dine with him and

26 Ibid., 2:21.
accompany him on outings to the countryside. Franklin was even the godfather to West’s second son, Benjamin, who was named after his father and Franklin.27

As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, West’s popularity as a teacher and mentor can be ascribed in part to his growing fame as an artist. Matthew Pratt was the first of many who flocked to his studio in the hopes of improving their craft while also having the opportunity to study works of art that were not accessible elsewhere. Established museums did not exist at this point, so “one of the ways the public got to see paintings, in addition to the annual Academy shows, was at the artist’s studio.”28 West’s studio featured a collection of paintings, sculptures, and sketches of masterworks, in addition to his own works, that were readily available for students to copy. Known for his generosity and amicability, West fascinated his students with his jolly willingness to deliver concise and constructive criticism. Visitors to his studio often recollected his unselfish and civil demeanor. One observer noted, “Never did I hear him Speak evil, or judge uncharitably. You perceive in Him nothing proud, conceited, puffed up or envious.”29 West’s belief that history painting was the noblest of arts “provided inspiration to idealistic young artists determined to avoid the drudgeries of portraiture.”30 For American students, it was a new kind of art that the young United States did not have and therefore its novelty could be provide more success than portraiture; for English students, it was a style of art that was growing increasingly popular. Neoclassical history painting of the era was also essentially democratic and often promoted the cherished

29 H. Sulger to Mrs. B. West, 15 August 1774, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
ideals of the Enlightenment era: the natural rights of man, liberty, equality, and virtuous citizenship. It is no surprise, therefore, that one of the best history painters of the era would visualize these concepts and take an egalitarian approach to teaching. But as is so often the case with West, there was another side to his career: he aspired to be a king’s painter.

West’s first major painting, *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768), successfully combined dramatic and emotional classicism with virtuous morality. Painted for his first principal patron, Robert Hay Drummond, Archbishop of York, it depicts the widow Agrippina disembarking from her ship at the Roman port carrying an urn holding the ashes of her martyred husband Germanicus. The story of the Roman general Germanicus, told in Tacitus’s *Annals* and made popular by Poussin in *The Death of Germanicus* (1627), is about the tyrannical persecution (by an envious Emperor Tiberius) of a beloved public servant. The moral message in West’s painting, therefore, preludes those in the iconic Enlightenment-era paintings of the French neoclassicist Jacques-Louis David, who so strongly elucidated that the most moral must make sacrifices in opposition to tyranny. The painting’s emotional power derives from how its stylistic restraint and conformity to classical traditions barely constrains the emotional trauma on display—that of Agrippina and her two children, but also of the crowds of Roman citizens gathered to mourn Germanicus and acknowledge the family’s pain.

It is interesting to note that for all of the emotion on display in the painting that West hides Germanicus’s death and body. The death has already happened, as has the cremation of the beloved general’s corpse. According to the art historian Alexander
Nemerov this serves to obscure the intensity of the moment behind “euphemism.”\textsuperscript{31} We can surmise that the ever-strategic West made this choice intentionally, so as to avoid the political implications of the story. Is this an allegory about the king and the colonies, about maintaining a principled dignity in the face of tyranny? Or is it a representation of the sacrifices made by British heroes on behalf of a trans-Atlantic empire? Abrams claims the painting “suggests a highly controversial contemporary issue in the didactic of disguise of a Roman history painting” and proclaims Archbishop Drummond’s loyalty to the crown amidst infighting in the government.\textsuperscript{32} In his first monumental history painting West was compelled to disguise his own convictions so as not to run afoul of his patron, his king, and his homeland.

Drummond was pleased by the painting and “invited the most distinguished artists and amateurs to give him their opinion of the work; and satisfied by the approbation which they all expressed,” chose to inform King George of the painting’s virtues.\textsuperscript{33} Drummond must have done an excellent job of expressing West’s talents as “the curiosity of the King was roused, and he told the Archbishop that we would certainly send for the Artist and the picture.” In Galt’s colorful telling, the initial meeting between King George III and West was a splendid success. After studying the painting, the King invited the Queen to meet West and see the painting for herself. The royal couple then deliberated in front of the canvas before the king remarked, “‘There is another Roman subject which corresponds to this one, and I believe it also has never been well painted; I mean the final

\textsuperscript{32} Abrams, \textit{The Valiant Hero}, 142.
\textsuperscript{33} Galt, \textit{Life of West}, 2:21.
departure of Regulus from Rome. Don’t you think it would make a fine picture?” West agreed and George III instructed him to paint the scene for him.

West began work straight away on The Departure of Regulus from Rome (1769, fig. 3.2), the largest and most complex project he had taken on to date. It illustrates a scene from the life of the Roman consul and hero of the First Punic War Marcus Atrilius Regulus, who had been captured and imprisoned by the Carthaginians. After five years in custody, Regulus was permitted to return home on the condition that he would discuss a peace treaty and arrange an exchange of prisoners. However, remaining loyal to Rome, Regulus advised the Senate to reject the conditions, a decision that ensured his death.

Promising to return to Carthage, Regulus departed Rome to face his execution. As the first painting for the king, The Departure of Regulus from Rome was a critical commission for West that required “careful planning and scrupulous consideration of his didactic responsibilities. Not only was it expected to be highly moral in tone, but it was actively to promote public virtue in a strong, positive, and unambiguous manner.” West cleverly wove together ancient history, contemporary events, and universal values into a single narrative and secured himself forty years of royal patronage. Henry Angelo, a fencing master and member of London’s high society, recounted in his memoirs that the painter Francesco Zuccarelli, a member of the Royal Academy, got into a dispute with Johan Zoffany, also a painter and academy member, about the merits of West’s Departure of Regulus. Zoffany was unimpressed, but Zuccarelli exclaimed, “Here is a

34 Ibid., 2: 25.
35 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 149.
painter who promises to rival Nicolas Poussin.” The painting certainly impressed George III, who paid 420 pounds for it and frequently invited West to Buckingham House and St. James Palace and even granted the artist a residence in Windsor Castle.

West secured his reputation as Britain’s most distinguished history painter with his most famous work, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770, fig. 1.4). The painting commemorated the death of General James Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1758 by portraying the moment of his demise against a backdrop featuring the critical battle of the French and Indian War. In his death General Wolfe became a British hero who symbolized the Empire’s victory in the colonies. What made this painting so revolutionary was West’s decision to dress the figures in contemporary garb, thus representing a heroic sacrifice, familiar from antiquity and countless neoclassical paintings, in a startlingly modern context. Rather than present the figures as classical heroes as Reynolds had recommended (he argued that West “should depict classical rather than contemporary dress in the composition to universalize the theme of heroic self-sacrifice for one’s country”), West desired to reach a point of historical accuracy that could only be achieved if the figures were dressed in modern day clothing. The decision proved to be a controversial one at first, as West was obliged to defend his use of the modern costume to his critics, saying that the arts were the means of “perpetuating all public fame, all private honor and all valuable instruction… Is the artist indeed not the

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36 Henry Angelo, *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo, with Memoirs of His Late Father and Friends, Including Numerous Original Anecdotes and Curious Traits of the Most Celebrated Characters That Have Flourished during the Last Eighty Years* (London: H. Colburn, 1828), 360-61.

watchman who observes the great incidents of his time, and rescues them from oblivion.”

Despite West’s claim, he took some liberties with the historical record. While the figures in the painting are indeed the actual soldiers and surgeon they are supposed to represent, these men were not actually present at the moment of Wolfe’s death. In fact, Wolfe died in isolation, far away from the battle raging in the background. West’s purpose was to set the scene against a scene of continuous battle. By employing compositional devices and dramatic atmospheric effects, West guides the viewer from the British ships to the battle’s climax in Wolfe’s death. In doing so, he enhances the drama of the event because he believed that dying heroes must evoke feelings of awe and admiration. In an 1807 letter to the painter Joseph Farington, West wrote, “Wolfe must not die like a common soldier under a Bush… To move the mind there should be a spectacle presented to raise & warm the mind, & all sh[oul]d be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the Hero.”

Although designed (and traditionally taught) to be a British artwork that celebrates the Empire’s valiant superiority in the face of enemies, The Death of General Wolfe divulges a great deal about West’s degree of provincialism. As Sarah Monk argues:

Its subject matter … offered West an unparalleled opportunity to incorporate his American-ness within a scene of lasting positive significance for British audiences, by including figures such as the American Indian warrior and the green-clad Rogers’ Ranger. Furthermore, West may also have found this an opportunity subtly to highlight his specifically colonial identity, with the portrayal of Captain Isaac Barré who had gone on to become an outspoken champion of the American colonies’ rights to legal and fiscal self-determination and who here

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supports the head of the dying British hero. Altogether, these figures emphasize the event’s relevance to the American colonies (securing them from French incursion), and the relevance in turn of the American colonies to Britain (their contribution to imperial prowess), within an image which gives emblematic form to the concept of mutual interest promoted by colonists in their struggles with George III’s ministers.41

The principal symbol of Americanness in the painting is the Indigenous warrior in the left foreground. The Native American’s left hand touches Wolfe’s boots and his knees point toward the general’s face, connecting them both physically and visually. West certainly understood that Native American figures were typically viewed as personifications of the America colonies and he had featured them before in paintings (Savage Warrior Taking Leave of His Family was made a decade prior). He also understood that he was a curiosity in the eyes of some British critics: a colonial-born Quaker first schooled in art by Indigenous neighbors. It is possible that West included the Native American to “not only specify the setting as the New World but also exploit it and himself as exotic and unique, suggesting that as a native-born American, he had the authority to record the New World’s history.”42 Such a gambit could only be attempted, let alone achieved, by a man like West, the American Raphael, who spent a lifetime straddling different worlds and inhabiting different identities.

The Death of General Wolfe commanded George III’s attention. At first the king was skeptical, due to the contemporary costumes, but once he learned of its popularity he commissioned a copy and in 1772 bestowed upon West the title of “Historical Painter to the King.” West would paint portraits of King George, Queen Charlotte, and their many offspring for the Royal Collection as well as epic historical pieces for the royal chambers.

He enjoyed almost three decades of steady service to the king until porphyria drove George III to madness, cutting him off from court affairs.

West and the Royal Academy

The Royal Academy of Arts was established in 1768 after a long examination of the inadequate resources for artists who desired to expand their craft beyond portraiture. There had been previous attempts to establish art academies for this purpose but all had proved unsuccessful. The formation of the Royal Academy, with the esteemed Sir Joshua Reynolds as its first president, “was a major step toward the development of a national school of painting … [and] institutionalized art to a degree hitherto unknown.”43 Upon Reynold’s death in 1792, West’s privileged position as the king’s history painter put him ahead of his competitors and he was elected the second president of the Academy. West’s friend (and later foe) John Singleton Copley had nominated himself for the position, much to the dismay of British newspapers. The *Argus of the Constitution*, for example, remarked, “Mr. COPLEY has laid siege to the President’s Chair of the Royal Academy,” but West received all but one of the thirty votes cast and Copley received none—not even his own.44

Although the Royal Academy opened its doors to students in 1770, it was typical for students to get formal instruction as they received hands-on training in a master’s studio. West’s studio, therefore, served as an extension of the Academy and he “encouraged his students to explore their own interests, thus developing individual

talents. Unlike traditional master/apprentice relationships, this open and flexible approach led to a casual pedagogical arrangement in which students were allowed to stop by as they wished…”⁴⁵ By opening his studio doors West benefited a large number of pupils from the Academy while also tapping into an almost endless supply of studio labor. If unenrolled, as many of his American students were, West encouraged his pupils to extend their stay and study at the Academy, for whose rigors he prepared them. John Trumbull, for one, wrote about how West offered him, Gilbert Stuart, and West’s son Raphael drawing lessons in preparation for their entrance into the Academy. Even after admission students continued to study with West as he offered more intimate lessons in combination with traditional academic methods that stressed the importance of antiquity, anatomy, and perspective. American and British students alike were attracted to West’s pedagogy, which as with so much else about him, was a hybrid of formal and informal mentorship and instruction. It is apparent that West’s different personas made him a flexible and accommodating teacher.

In his role as president of the Royal Academy, however, West was more conservative and promoted a curriculum that was based on his theories about the principles of symmetry, proportion, anatomy, and linear perspective. Like Reynolds, West believed that artistic insight, what was sometimes called “genius” in the academy, was the result of careful and meticulous study and experience. In his first lecture as academy president, West emphasized the importance of art education and established his dedication and “zeal for the cultivation of genius,” and warned that “genius is apt to run wild if not brought under some regulation. It is a flood whose current will be dangerous if

it is not kept within proper banks."\textsuperscript{46} West’s annual lectures to students, or \textit{Discourses}, reveal his persistent devotion to antiquity and reverence for the Old Masters, which marked his tenure as president.

West was not spared from controversy and criticism during his term. Over the course of his presidency “West made a series of professional blunders that angered his colleagues and raised grave questions about his competence.”\textsuperscript{47} His first offense was to believe a charlatan marketing the Venetian secret, or the magical formula behind the incomparable coloring technique employed by painters of the Venetian Renaissance. Then, in 1803, when Copley requested an extension to the deadline for submitting to the Academy’s spring exhibition, West opposed the extension, prompting Copley to speak against West’s contribution, pointing out that it had been exhibited in 1776 and a second showing would violate academy rules.\textsuperscript{48} Such a mistake opened West to harsh condemnation. Shortly after, George IV (the son of George III) rejected West’s services, expelled him from the payroll, and cancelled a major commission for a cycle of religious paintings intended for the Royal Chapel in Windsor Castle. This decision was prompted after West’s visit to France in 1802, where he exhibited his \textit{Death on a Pale Horse} (1796). Galt describes how the French invited West to an official dinner in Paris at which he was shown “professional regard” and was read a “celebratory poem” that touted his success. Although flattering to him, “any suggestion that West enjoyed a cozy relationship with the French” was dangerous.\textsuperscript{49} It had been a mere decade earlier that West was subject to suspicions as a “democrat” who was sympathetic to the French

\textsuperscript{46} Galt, \textit{Life of West}, 2:81, 85.
\textsuperscript{48} Kamensky, \textit{A Revolution in Color}, 381.
\textsuperscript{49} Rather, “Benjamin West,” 329.
Revolution and their American allies. Such uncertainties had lost him favor with the king. In 1805, he was told to cease production of his paintings for the Windsor Castle. Not long after, West resigned the presidency of the Royal Academy after years of waning support and his loss of royal patronage. Without the protection of the king, West was an easy target for hostile critics who condemned him for what they perceived as a lack of imagination in his works. Although he returned as president within a year and served until his death in 1820, West suffered major losses to his pride and his status in the art community, leading him to look to John Galt and the art of biography.

West and The American Revolution

West was at the height of his painting career when the American Revolution began. Although he never publicly declared his political allegiance, we can glean insights from different artworks. In 1812 West exhibited at the Royal Academy a portrait of the British politician John Eardley-Wilmot (fig. 3.3) that includes in the background a representation of West’s lost 1783 painting titled Reception of the American Loyalists by Great Britain in the Year 1783. Three years later, in 1815, an engraving of the painting by Henry Moses was published as the frontispiece to Eardley-Wilmot’s Historical view of the Commission for enquiring into the losses, services, and claims of the American Loyalists. West’s Reception of the American Loyalists portrays a colossal Britannia beckoning a variety of Americans, including African Americans and Native Americans. West included himself and his wife in the composition, standing on the far right under Britannia’s shield, as means of “express[ing] his own sympathy for … efforts to aid
Americans who fled to England during the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{50} Although the painting implies that West sympathized with American loyalists who opposed independence, other works, such as his unfinished 1783 painting \textit{American Commissioners of the Preliminary Peace Negotiations with Great Britain} (fig. 3.4), which depicts John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin at the Treaty of Paris, confirms his friendships with and admiration for America’s founders.

So, not surprisingly, the chameleon-like West signaled mixed messages about his politics. He had made his republicanism known and was an admirer of George Washington, yet his principal patron was the king of England. As James Thomas Flexner explains, “West had been strengthened by the radicalism of his American background, but when the Revolution actually broke out, his development was impeded.”\textsuperscript{51} While he had plans to create a series of paintings glorifying the events of the Revolution, possibly as a means of “establishing himself as the premier painter of the new nation,” he soon realized such a choice would have negative effects on his career.\textsuperscript{52} It had become impractical, even risky, for him to paint the contemporary history he had become admired for and he was obliged to hand over to John Trumbull, his pupil, the scheme to glorify the events of the American Revolution. Ultimately, West avoided controversy. He had not seen his native country in almost two decades by the time the Revolution commenced and he had never shown any indication that he would be disloyal to the crown. George III respected West for his honesty and sincerity and saw no reason to cut ties with the artist just because he had been born in the colonies.

\textsuperscript{50} Abrams, \textit{The Valiant Hero}, 198.
While West was determined to appear impartial during the war, observers waited for him to reveal his true colors and dissected his works for any clue as to his sympathies. But West was clever and never revealed his position. Describing his “slipperiness,” Sarah Monks writes:

West’s non-specificity, multiplicity and equivocation allowed him to evade definition, ensuring that his polished surfaces and pictorial grandiosity would remain intact as indications of ready acquiescence to the demands placed upon him. West’s evasive strategies are those of a man understandably keen to negotiate the tensions between his extraordinary professional success and his predicament as an Anglo-American during the period of British America’s extinction. That West felt this predicament is suggested by his colonial background, public profile, and the subtly-accented, thematically charged quality of his work.53

The “work” that Monks mentions includes the *The Allegory of Britannia* and the unfinished *American Commissioners*, which present apparently conflicting political attitudes. Because of his ambivalence, the historian Holger Hoock calls West “a Janus-faced patriot,” suggesting that West was not in fact apolitical but endorsed different positions in different contexts.54 As a neoclassical painter, West was dedicated to painting in an academic style fit for a king, but that very genre opened up the possibility of employing classicism as means to promote republicanism. As Abrams puts it, as Neoclassical history painting, once a style that promoted patriotism and duty to country, “transformed into messages of protest … [West] could ill afford to depict subjects that might be construed as overt acts of political defiance.”55 Because of this, he was compelled to transition to painting less controversial literary and religious subjects.

West’s ambivalence was crucial in order to maintain his status, a fact that compelled him to transform his nickname, the “American Raphael,” from an association with his homeland to the notion of an American colonist incorporating himself into European society. Long after the Revolution was over and the War of 1812 was looming on the horizon, many continued to remind him of his American origins and background, to which West responded by asserting his loyalty to the country he had lived in for almost half a century. His residency in London may have spared him some animosity, but he could not seem to escape the persistent questions about his allegiance to Britain. Ironically, near the end of his life, he would attempt to reestablish his connection with America in an effort to revive his reputation. However, his proximity to the crown and his fear of losing all that he had accomplished had forced West to remain silent on the matter of the Revolution. In doing so, he created a dueling persona that remains a point of contention when discussing his Anglo-American identity.
CHAPTER IV

WORKSHOP AND STUDENTS: WEST AS ANGLO-AMERICAN TEACHER

“Father, friend, and brother”¹

Introduction

Benjamin West’s *Pharaoh and His Host Lost in the Red Sea* (1792, fig. 4.1), an unfinished study for a large cycle commissioned by King George III for a chapel at Windsor Castle, is a charged composition full of drama and terror. It depicts Moses extending his rod and commanding the Red Sea to swallow the pharaoh whole. The study demonstrates West’s processes and attention to eighteenth-century art theories, especially color theory. He employed a technique called glazing, whereby he layered translucent colors on top of the underpainting; “the layers of glazes added depth and color” and created third colors that possessed an “inner light.”² This had been a traditional technique since the Renaissance and was “particularly associated with Rembrandt and Titian.”³ West was a devoted student of Titian’s techniques, so it is not surprising that he worked in this way and taught his students to do the same.

During the eighteenth century, most Western artists followed a set of standards established by art theorists and critics of the time; a few artists expanded on those theories through experimentation. Painting techniques and processes were systematic and meticulous, deriving from academic traditions that were studied during the

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³ Ibid., 203.
Enlightenment era. The leading theorists of the century were from England, France, and Germany, and they published their instructions in manuals. The art historian Jenny Carson offers this summary of the basic theories:

The first stage of painting … was called invention. Invention was the mental creation of a work, and was considered to be the most difficult aspect of art production. Because invention took place in the mind of the artist, it was one task that could not be farmed out to assistants, and was therefore the truest gauge of an artist’s skill. Composition was the next stage in the artistic process, and referred to devising the general arrangement of the picture. Once the composition was established, the artist could refine this arrangement even further through a process called design. 4

West emulated this process and other academic practices in his workshop, and his success as a teacher was the result of a clear set of standards, a benevolent nature, and his acceptance of almost any student who came to his studio. In sum, he participated in theoretical and critical discourses and drew on a plethora of sources to develop his practice and pedagogy.

West and Art Theory

Being a successful artist in the eighteenth century required technical skill and fluency in many concepts. One had to follow strict aesthetic, intellectual, and personal standards and demonstrate “a wide-ranging knowledge of the liberal arts, a moral character consistent with art’s lofty public purpose, and lots of hard work” as well as be proficient in a range of skills, such as an understanding of scientific devices and interdisciplinary research. 5 Some writers claimed that artists needed to be born with natural talent and a predisposition to technical excellence. In The London Tradesman

4 Ibid., 117.
5 Ibid., 73.
(1747), an advice manual in which he describes different professions, Robert Campbell stated that a painter “must be born, not made; that is, if he has not a natural genius, all the Learning and Art on earth cannot make him eminent or tolerable in his profession.”6 Others, like Jonathan Richardson, whose texts aided West’s development, listed the required fields of study for artists as “geometry, proportion, (which must be varied according to the Sex, Age, and Quality of the Person) anatomy, osteology and perspective” in order to “follow Nature exactly.”7 As mentioned in Chapter One, when the painter William Williams met the teenaged West, he gifted the young artist books by Richardson and Charles du Fresnoy, another leading art theorist.8 Although it is unlikely that West read these intricate texts at the time, Galt certainly named the titles at West’s request, meaning that they were influential at some point in his development. In brief, Richardson believed that “a painter’s lifestyle reflected his talents as an artist.”9 Du Fresnoy, on the other hand, claimed that “painting was a rational art” and that “the highest genre was history painting because it was best able to contain the important kernel of religious or moral truth.”10 These two notions had a powerful impact on the young West, though it was not until his arrival in England that he developed a deeper understanding of them.

Richardson wrote several treatises on art in the early eighteenth century. In one of his more famous writings, An Essay on the Theory of Painting (1715), he equated painting with poetry and set out guidelines that painters should follow: “his business is to

8 Galt, The Life of West, 1:27.
express great, and noble sentiments; let him make them familiar to him, and his own, and form himself into as bright a character as any he can draw…. The way to be an excellent painter is to be an excellent man; and these united make a character that would shine even in a better world than this.”

The notion that painting is an art as noble as poetry is an ancient concept (*ut pictura poesis* [“as in painting, so in poetry”] Horace claimed) and is one that West fixated on early in his career. Carson states that he modeled his profession on the guidelines that Richardson promoted by “deflecting the reality of his poor background through a self-created mythology of artistic genius.”

His self-promotion as an exceptionally gifted artist was a tactic that stemmed from his need to set himself apart from his colonial peers.

Art theory of the eighteenth century called for nature to serve as a guide for the artist, but more as a means of laying a foundation that the artist could modify through the principles of symmetry and perspective. Charles du Fresnoy recommended the emulation of prints and paintings, a suggestion that Sir Joshua Reynolds, the famed British painter and first president of the Royal Academy of Arts, expanded upon in his Discourses (a series of academy lectures delivered between 1769 and 1790), in which he advised artists to perfect nature through methodical study of existing works. Based on these notions, West strove to find a balance between being “an artist who derived his education from nature while possessing an inherent understanding of the more abstract (or artificial) principals of art.”

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13 Ibid., 40.
painting as a didactic pursuit meant to improve the morals of his audience, especially through history painting. In *The Art of Painting* (1668) du Fresnoy establishes history painting as the most virtuous form of art, writing that historical events featuring a hero “are the subjects of noble pictures, and such are only to be undertaken by noble hands.”16 He even made the claim that the skill required to invent a historical painting was one that only the most gifted artists possessed:

Then bold INVENTION, all thy powers diffuse,  
Of all thy sisters thou the noblest Muse:  
Thee, every art, thee every grace inspires,  
Thee Phoebus fills with all his brightest fires.17

The notion that virtue is best demonstrated by heroic history paintings deeply affected West and his pedagogy.

Du Fresnoy also emphasized the importance of referencing the art of the Renaissance and antiquity, and West’s interest in classical art as well as the works of Raphael, Titian, and Michelangelo follow that advice. Reynolds, for instance, pointed out in his annotations to du Fresnoy’s text that “the pre-eminence which du Fresnoy has given those three great Painters, Raffaelle, Michael Angelo, and Julio Romano, sufficiently points out to us what ought to be the chief object of our pursuit.”18 West counseled his students to select figures from the antique world that would inspire narrative and expression in their paintings while exalting the ideal human figure. This was crucial to West, as he perceived the human figure to be the most essential aspect of any composition, as we see in *The Choice of Hercules* (1764), in which a nude Hercules

17 Ibid., 10.  
is positioned between Virtue and Vice moments before he chooses between them.\textsuperscript{19} As his first English neoclassical canvas, it was a visualization of his dedication to the ideal human figure.

West understood that in order to establish his reputation as a great artist, he not only had to be an avid collector of Renaissance drawings but he also had to copy them and produce his own. He often displayed his preparatory works in Royal Academy exhibitions to draw “attention to his ability to invent and compose large historical canvases, two aspects of art production that could not be farmed out to one’s students of assistants.”\textsuperscript{20} This emphasis on preliminary works as a display of artistic genius reflects Richardson’s argument that preparatory sketches and drawings have the potential to be more valuable than the finished work they precede: “in them,” he states, “we see the steps the master took to arrive at a finished painting which is little more than a copy of the drawings, and frequently by some other hand, at least in part.”\textsuperscript{21} Preliminary drawings, in other words, were the best reflection of progress on a commission. In the case of West, who was responsible for large historical pictures, his process would have been complex and constantly in flux as he sketched out basic studies and then developed drawings. For example, West told John Singleton Copley that he had created over fifty drawings and oil sketches in preparation for his \textit{The Departure of Regulus from Rome} (1769).\textsuperscript{22}

Another important aspect of eighteenth-century art theory was the emphasis placed on the selection of subjects for historical pictures. As mentioned before, an artist

\textsuperscript{19} Carson, “Art Theory,” 67.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{21} Richardson, \textit{An Essay on the Theory of Painting}, 82.
\textsuperscript{22} Letters from Copley to his brother Henry Pelham from London, June 25, 1775, in Guernsey Jones, \textit{Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham, 1739-1776} (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1914), 339.
had to be knowledgeable about ancient history, mythology, and religion in order to be considered a credible source. Patrons often recommended subjects, such as William Henry of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who suggested the death of Socrates for West’s first history painting. West’s first major patron in London, Dr. Robert Drummond, inspired *The Landing of Agrippina at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768), and *Thetis Bringing the Armor to Achilles* (1804) was stimulated by Thomas Hope. Still, West conducted deep research for his paintings, following Richardson’s recommendation that an artist must be able to “conceive it clearly, and nobly in his mind, or he can never express it upon the canvas,” a sentiment that inspired West’s dedication to historical accuracy. Like all good painters, however, West also advocated for a touch of poetic license, so long as it did not completely defy history.

**West, Reynolds, and the Royal Academy**

Such license is apparent in West’s most successful painting, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), which was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London. Although Richardson required artists to be good historians, he also asserted that it was acceptable to add figures that may enhance the prestigious nature of an event. Roger de Piles, a French painter and critic, outlined three kinds of truth in his 1699 treatise *The Art of Painting*: simple truth (what the eyes see), ideal truth (preferably derived from the antique tradition), and perfect truth (a combination of simple and ideal truth). West achieved simple truth by dressing the figures in contemporary costume; placing the event

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in an accurate natural setting, including scenes from the battle; and depicting figures, such as the Native American, to lend local detail to the scene. He accomplished ideal truth by dramatizing the general’s death with classical aesthetics and theatrical emotion.\textsuperscript{26}

In so doing, he synthesized local details with patriotic romanticism and Grand Manner moralizing, thus representing perfect truth.

In addition to Richardson and du Fresnoy, West studied Franco-Italian art theory while on his Grand Tour. In the words of one art historian, West learned that “the painter of secular history had to represent, not merely the physical beauty of heroes, but the greatness of their characters. He had to be skilled in depicting the operation of the passions on the body, so that the moral qualities proclaimed by history might be communicated to the spectator and evoke a corresponding response in his heart.”\textsuperscript{27}

According to the historian Joseph Allard, what makes \textit{The Death of General Wolfe} so significant not only to art history but to eighteenth-century art theory is that “it represents a conscious challenge by West, a Royal Academician, to the classical academic precepts formulated by Reynolds and outlined in lectures delivered annually at the Academy,” thus defying the traditional art theory calling for historical paintings to dress figures in antique costume.\textsuperscript{28} An aspect of French theory, promoted by du Fresnoy, was that the artist’s most vital mission was to improve nature, which was a feat that could be accomplished by displaying heroic actions represented in classical attire as a reference to the most noble period in world history, the ancient Greco-Roman world. However, West challenged such a notion by “creating an academic painting in the grand style, but

\textsuperscript{26} Carson, “Art Theory,” 131.
\textsuperscript{28} Joseph Allard, “West,” 403.
reflecting, in his choice of modern dress, certain developments of Continental academic theory that placed his ideas and practices in advance of Reynold’s classicism.” Allard argues that this move away from tradition reflects West’s colonial experiences, which liberated him from a mindless inclination toward tradition. His provincialism, in others words, provided him with a fresh perspective on art theory and allowed him to combine tradition with progressive ideas.

West also deviated from typical Royal Academy theories and teaching practices with his interest in Sir Isaac Newton’s color spectrum. Newton’s breakthrough led to the creation of the color wheel, which enabled artists to enhance their manipulation of color in their paintings. West was so entranced by this color theory that he shared it at great length in his lectures before the students of the Royal Academy. In 1797 he discussed the properties of color during a lecture on light and shade in the hopes of reducing the complexity of the subject for his students. Although West was not the only artist interested in color theory, other artists were more guided by the empirical analyses of light and shade rather than progressive theories. West’s approach to color theory was unique insofar as he “incorporate[d] Newton’s seven prismatic colors into more traditional philosophies of color, shading, and modeling,” thus synthesizing science and traditional art theory. West advised his students that in order to guarantee success in coloring, they must look to the examples of Titian and Correggio, by “making yourselves masters of the whole philosophy of colours.” He argued that Titian studied chemistry to truly understand the nature of color, which is why the Venetians were so adept at color.

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29 Ibid., 404.
31 Ibid., 178.
32 Galt, Life of West, 2:140.
In sum, West’s attention to color theory reveals his enlightened attitude toward combining chemistry and science with art theory.\textsuperscript{33}

West’s progressive approaches to color and history painting reveal his complicated relationships with Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy, which, after all, is where he did some of his teaching. Although Reynolds and West were collegial with one another (Reynolds was a frequent guest at West’s table) and achieved a level of mutual respect, they sometimes disagreed and had very different approaches to art education. While they shared similar understandings of art theory, regarding the notion that artistic genius could be fostered, their pedagogical approaches were drastically different. Reynolds’s teaching was “more philosophical than practical, and his painting was often a mysterious process even to his students,” while “West’s own studio output was guided by methods based on long-standing traditions that he openly shared with his students.”\textsuperscript{34} James Northcote, the same man who described West as one of Britain’s greatest teachers, had a very different opinion of Reynolds. Although he highly respected the British painter, he described Reynolds as “a very bad master in the Art.”\textsuperscript{35} He revealed that his assistants “were absolute strangers to Sir Joshua’s manner of working…. He made use of colours and varnishes which they knew nothing of, and [they] always painted in a room distant from him.”\textsuperscript{36}

West may have been the history painter to the king, but his daily routine was flexible enough that he could work on his commissions and accommodate the needs of

\textsuperscript{33} Carson, “Art Theory,” 182.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 63.
his pupils. He assisted his students in any way they needed, whether it be with the fundamentals of drawing or exhibiting a finished work. English painter and engraver John Thomas Smith recalled how West “often, in the kindest manner possible, gave up whole mornings to the instruction of those students who solicited his opinion of their productions.”37 By contrast, Reynolds was restrictive and unable to give constructive criticism to his students. John Trumbull, who studied under West in the 1780s, showed one of his works to Reynolds for comment; Reynolds bluntly replied, “That coat is very bad, sir, very bad. It is not cloth—it is tin, bent tin.”38

Perhaps the best indications of the two men’s distinct teaching practices are their respective Discourses, the annual lectures given to students at the Royal Academy. While Reynolds made the “Grand Style” of painting a central point in his lectures, West focused primarily on the importance of studying classicism and the Old Masters for practical purposes. West repeatedly “expanded his views on the importance of studying antique and Renaissance models by including his thoughts on color theory, and he even gave specific advice regarding the correct application of paint.”39 West emphasized the importance of art education and advised his students to adhere to good taste, which, again, was fostered by studying Italian Renaissance and antique forms. Although Reynolds also valued learning, he promoted a stricter pedagogical program that had no room for flexibility or spontaneity. In his Sixth Discourse, Reynolds scolded art theorists who stressed the notion of genius as a necessity for artistic excellence, saying the writers

considered genius to be “a power of producing excellencies, which are out of reach of the rules of art; a power which no precepts can teach, and which no industry can acquire.”

Instead, he proclaimed that great art was made through diligent study and “was the result of long labour and application of an infinite number and infinite variety of acts….” He also called for studying nature, not for the purpose of slavish imitation but, rather, in order to better understand conceptual beauty and then apply it to portraiture so as to elevate the genre to the level of history painting. Whereas Reynolds’s term was characterized by constant promotion of the Grand Manner, or a generalized ideal form, West espoused the “traditional school of thought in which ancient and Renaissance art formed the principal foundation of the practice of painting and formation of taste.”

In sum, both men valued learning from classical traditions, but whereas Reynolds promoted a rigid concept of the Grand Manner, West promoted a more liberal understanding of tradition.

Reynolds championed the notion of the “Grand Style” and its relationship to history painting. Such a manner of painting was one that employed all the skills from minor forms of art but was designed to represent the ideal nature of historical events. Reynolds wrote in his Ninth Discourse, “The Art we profess has beauty for its object, the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it; it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart.” In his Third Discourse

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41 Ibid., 94.
43 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses*, 63.
(1770) Reynolds appeared to directly critique West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* when he “urged the students of the Royal Academy to avoid particularity in history painting, arguing that momentary, topical, or transitory aspects of a scene would make a work a prisoner of the time in which it was painted.” Reynolds advocated for “maintaining a clear, hierarchical distinction between the poetic freedoms of history painting and the commonplace particulars of ordinary history,” while West, by incorporating contemporary attire in *General Wolfe*, “subsume[d] the problem of contemporary dress under the requirements of history, thereby separating history painting from poetry and endowing it with a new obligation to the kind of truthfulness that Reynolds dismissed as ‘vulgar and strict.’” Such an acknowledgement of historical truth was revolutionary at the time and served as an indication of a new trend in nineteenth-century art, one that would find its way to the young America.

**West and John Singleton Copley**

West and the American painter John Singleton Copley had tumultuous relationship. What began as friendship and mutual respect turned into resentment and competition. Copley was born in Boston in 1738, just a few months before West, and he, too, boasted a precocious talent for art. Just as West had a natural instinct to draw a sleeping baby, Copley was compelled to sketch on his nursery walls. In her award-winning book about Copley, the historian Jane Kamensky analyzes this important relationship and explains how Copley observed from the colonies as West ascended to

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the heights of London’s art world. Although Copley had become relatively prosperous
selling portraits to Boston’s elite, his ambitions “reached beyond the limits of the
colonies.” As Kamensky puts it, “this was Copley’s British American dilemma: to leave
or to be left behind….”

Copley sailed for London in 1774, but his crossing of the Atlantic actually began
in 1765, with his painting *A Boy with a Flying Squirrel* (fig. 4.2). This portrait of
Copley’s half-brother Henry Pelham was not commissioned but rather sent to London to
be exhibited at the Spring Gardens in April 1765. Conceivably one of Copley’s finest
works, the elegant portrait beautifully captures the essence of his talent. Kamensky
describes how he:

plays with surfaces, conjuring illusions of velvet and stain, gold and glass, still
water and polished wood. He lavishes attention on the fluted edge of the gray fur
ruff that marks Henry Pelham’s (imaginary pet) not just as the kind of tamed
squirrel shown, by convention, in many boys’ portraits of the day, but more
particularly as a flying squirrel: a North American emblem that might speak
directly to the American Raphael.

The Pelham portrait was widely admired by spectators of the exhibition. Even Reynolds
praised the painting, though he also found that Copley painted with a “hardness in the
drawing” and “an over minuteness.” Copley, though, was most eager to hear from
West, who wrote with his critique in the summer of 1766. He admired the painting but
commented as well that it was too “liney,” that there was “too much neetness” at the
seams, creating an effect that was “apt to be too fine and edgey.” Surely “great
Painter[s] … strictly a voyded” such evident effort. He concluded: “nothing is wanting to

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48 Ibid., 104.
49 Reynolds, quoted in ibid., 113
Perfect you now but a Sight of what has been done by the great Masters.”

In his letter to Copley West was inhabiting two distinct personas: the British American playing mentor to a fellow colonist and the British history painter schooling a less advanced peer in the art of fine painting.

Copley responded immediately to West’s letter as he was eager to take up West’s offer of confraternity, as “an artist ingaged in the same studys with myself,” and whom he “esteem[ed] as my Country man, from whom America receives the Same Luster that Italy does from her Titiano and Divine Raphael.”

The feedback from Reynolds and correspondence with West persuaded Copley that there was no place for the fine arts in the colonies America. London was the best place for a British American artist. While other colonial painters, such as Charles Willson Peale and John Trumbull, were traveling abroad to improve their skills, Copley languished behind in Boston. In 1773, when Copley was still in Boston, West advised him to undertake an eighteen- to twenty-four-month Grand Tour and instructed him as to which artworks he should study while in Italy. He also offered feedback and critiques on works that Copley sent to England. Most important, though, he empathized with Copley’s feelings of inadequacy. Kamensky notes that West “wrapped himself in rusticism when it suited him,” but he agreed with Copley that “their shared America was a backwater, where painters were mere cobblers: a country so visually impoverished that Copley didn’t know what he couldn’t see.” “I am from America,” West wrote to Copley, “and know the little Opertunities is to be had their in they way of painting.”

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50 West to Copley, 4 August 1766, quoted in ibid., 115.
51 Copley to West, 13 October 1766, quoted in ibid.
53 West to Copley, 4 August 1766, quoted in ibid.
London had to offer, Copley finally set sail for England in June 1774, six months after the Boston Tea Party and just days after the retaliatory Boston Port Bill went into effect. The London that greeted Copley in July was very different from the city that greeted West almost a decade earlier. While “the American Raphael discovered a victorious, confident nation,” Copley came upon a declining empire whose “reversals in the American War presented a distinct challenge to a would-be English artist from Boston.” Still, West endeavored to make Copley feel welcome, inviting him to dinner, introducing him to Sir Joshua Reynolds, ushering him around the Royal Academy, and showing him the famed *Death of General Wolfe*. “No longer the backwoods prodigy,” Kamensky writes, “… West had become a courtier: History Painter to the King, with rooms in Windsor Castle. He was, in the fullest eighteenth-century sense, complaisant: graceful, eager to share his considerable bounty, especially with visitors from North America.” Their relationship was typical of a master and apprentice, in which Copley worked in West’s studio in exchange for advice on how to improve his paintings. However, “Copley was not entirely happy with this arrangement. He was already an able artist and was more skillful than most of his fellow assistants.” A rift grew between the two men when Copley embarked on a relentless quest to surpass his mentor, often without much grace. The first instance occurred when Copley beat out West for a commission to paint, for the City of London, *The Defeat of the Floating Batteries at Gibraltar* (1783, fig. 4.3), an enormous picture depicting Britain’s defeat of the Spanish

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55 Ibid., 224-25.
56 Carson, “Art Theory,” 100.
batteries that besieged Gibraltar for almost three years. John Trumbull produced a “rival” version in 1789, which West preferred.\footnote{Kamensky, \textit{A Revolution in Color}, 356.}

It was the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the subsequent election for his successor as president of the Royal Academy that destroyed the relationship between Copley and West. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Copley nominated himself as a contender for the position, which the British newspapers admonished. After losing to West, Copley ruthlessly pursued the critics that spoke negatively of him. In one instance, he went to war against Robert Bromley, whose \textit{History of Fine Arts} praised West’s \textit{Death of General Wolfe} as the supreme modern history painting. Copley sought to remove the book from the Royal Academy’s library, prompting Bromley to attack him in the \textit{Morning Herald}, writing that it was fruitless and vain to compare West’s “Wolf” to the “flying squirrel” that a young Copley had “sent hither … as the harbinger of his fame.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Copley suspected that West was behind Bromley’s jabs, as only West knew how fervently he craved British approval of \textit{Boy with a Flying Squirrel}. To Copley, “the figure of West—his mentor and his doppelgänger, his oh-so-much-better half in every way but the painting way—had loomed increasingly large among Copley’s multiplying phantoms.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Copley irreparably ruptured the friendship in 1802 when he accused West of taking advantage of academy rules by submitting a painting to the 1802 spring exhibition that he had exhibited previously, in 1776. Copley, at the forefront of the “hanging committee, had a history of opposing West, and he did not hold back in this matter or in
the broader, ongoing power struggle within the academy that often pitted the two Americans against each other." The maneuver cost West a portion of his reputation and his presidency, as he resigned shortly after the scandal. In her retelling of the failed friendship, Kamensky casts Copley as the antagonist: “West’s famous politeness stretched thin and tore,” she writes, “worn bare by Copley’s rough edges.” Considering how West suffered in this relationship it is remarkable that he never tired of mentoring colonial artists.

It was clear to the American painter Samuel F. B. Morse who survived the test of time. When Morse arrived in London in 1811, he found Copley old and infirm, and his most recent paintings “miserable.” West, by contrast, was “active” and still receiving praise for his work. Copley’s death was quiet; it certainly did not cause the same kind of frenzy that West’s death would bring four years later. Copley’s death also presented an opportunity for West to endeavor to reshape his image. Galt’s 1815 biography was an attempt to revive his reputation, by laying claim to his American heritage. Such a story was only possible with Copley gone, as he was “a professional irritant and rival in London and the one man who both could and would have challenged West’s American story.” What started out as an amicable relationship that could have been sensational, had they remained friends, turned into a fierce competition that damaged the reputation of American art in London.

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60 Rather, “Benjamin West,” 328.
61 Kamensky, A Revolution in Color, 382.
62 Morse quoted in ibid., 383.
63 Rather, “Benjamin West,” 332.
West’s Workshop and American Students

In addition to studying art theory and training in an academy, another option for ambitious artists was securing an apprenticeship in a workshop or studio. When a master artist took on an apprentice, he was expected “to provide room, board and fatherly guidance to his charge, while the apprentice agreed to keep his master’s secrets and to avoid any activities, like gambling, which would put his master’s property at risk.”64 West followed these standards and often provided room and board for the American students who traveled to study with him, such as William Dunlap, and even paid students who were unable to afford materials, as was the case with Benjamin Robert Haydon.

American students were so attracted to West for very simple reasons. First, they “found him an ideal teacher because he guided by positive example and gave them freedom to exercise their developing skills; the diversity of their production bears out his leniency.”65 West, although traditional in many ways, condemned pedagogical inflexibility and criticized attempts to conform to a single style. Moreover, students “were drawn to him because he was able to clearly explain the purpose behind every brushstroke, rendering his individual instruction particularly helpful.”66 Since there was such a lack of art education in the colonies, American artists were grateful for the transparency and instruction that West provided them. His belief in the civic purpose of art, especially when it came to the importance of history painting, provided incentive for American artists determined to avoid the grunt work of portraiture. West’s reputation as an excellent mentor, one who was patient, generous, and welcoming, was recorded in

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64 Carson, “Art Theory,” 78.
65 Rather, The American School, 119.
diaries and letters, and there is no doubt that he was an outstanding teacher, which can be measured by his students’ success in America.

Carson explains that West’s “pedagogical program was more casually arranged than that of a traditional apprentice-master relationship,” which put his students at ease.67 He believed that it was crucial to moderate philosophical theories of the fine arts to a sequence of understandable rules. On this score Reynolds apparently agreed, noting in his annotations to du Fresnoy’s *The Art of Painting* that “to become a great proficient, an Artist ought to see clearly enough to enable him to point out to others the principle on which he works, otherwise he will be confined, and what is worse, he will be uncertain.”68 While earlier critics and theorists professed that art was an inherent skill that one must be born with in order to excel, West’s benevolent pedagogy reflected the Enlightenment sentiment that anyone could be an artist through deep study and experience of the natural world.

By the turn of the nineteenth century and the rise of Romanticism, there was a shift from emulating the Renaissance apprenticeship model to learning from the direct observation of nature, but West continued to preach the importance of studying antiquity and the Old Masters, and he continued to attract students, especially from America. West ran his studio democratically, insofar as he accepted virtually any student who came to his door and in the manner in which he managed its operations, leaving many aspects of the studio to the students’ discretion. Rather than limit pupils to a specific practice, his openness to different methods of learning demonstrates his ability to create a liberal learning community. As we have seen, Matthew Pratt’s *The American School* (1765)

67 Ibid., 62.
illuminates West’s approach to artistic education. As a teacher West combined tradition (professing the importance of academic training and learning from antiquity and the Old Masters) with a more progressive and intimate model of the traditional apprentice-master relationship.

His educational program stressed a deep knowledge of the liberal arts, the development of a moral personality, and, interestingly, loyalty to country. In his *Discourses* from 1792, for instance, he claimed that the arts should serve “truth, justice, and the love of our country.”69 This was a reference to the nobility of history painting and its ability to “explore lofty, universal themes like patriotism, virtue and honor. Many of West’s American pupils adopted this theme, a popular idea in England during the period, and sought to propagate such grandiose ideas throughout their native country.”70 In fact, perhaps one of his best lessons to his pupils was that becoming a history painting was a noble and patriotic ambition, a sentiment that his American students brought back to their young nation. Whether his students realized it or not, West was endowing them with the Grand Manner traditions that would alter the course of American art, steering it from portraiture to a civic themes and nation-building.

West’s “American school” was comprised of a diverse cohort of men, each with their own unique skills and roles in the history of American art. If there was anything they shared, it was the common experience of traveling across the Atlantic to receive training from West in London and returning to America, where they were expected to contribute to the development of a national style. The first comprehensive list of West’s

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70 Carson, “Art Theory,” 74.
students, which appeared in William Dunlap’s 1834 two-volume *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, lists twenty-four students: Matthew Pratt, Abraham Delanoy, Charles Willson Peale, Joseph Wright, Gilbert Stuart, Ralph Earl, John Trumbull, Mather Brown, Raphael Lamar West, Thomas Spence Duché, William Dunlap, George William West, Henry Sargent, Robert Fulton, Washington Allston, Rembrandt Peale, Abraham G.D. Tuthill, Edward G. Malbone, Charles Bird King, Thomas Sully, Samuel Lovett Waldo, Samuel F.B. Morse, Charles Robert Leslie, and Gilbert Stuart Newton. Most of these artists were expected “to show works to the master and receive his suggestions, to be present in his workshop while he was working on canvases, and to work as a studio assistant on his many massive historical canvases.”\(^71\)

Here I will focus on three students, each from a different generation, whose association with West says the most about his influence on the development of American art: Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), John Trumbull (1756-1843), and Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872).

Charles Willson Peale was a gifted artisan who he dabbled in many trades, including natural history, clockmaking, silversmithing, and painting. After receiving letters from West that encouraged him to pursue a career in painting and agreed to instruct him, Peale departed Maryland in 1767 for London, where he remained for two and a half years. Once he arrived, “West received his ingenious and enterprising countryman frankly, and imparted instructions for his conduct and safety.”\(^72\) Although West was a major advocate for history painting, his flexible pedagogical arrangement

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enabled his students to pursue their own individual interests. For instance, when Peale expressed an interest in miniature painting, West, who had no experience with the genre, borrowed miniatures from a respected artist for the benefit of his student.73 Such generosity was characteristic of West, who often arranged for his students to visit other London artists if he proved unable to instruct them.74 West also arranged for Peale attended life-drawing classes at St. Martin’s Lane Academy, where West was serving as director.

West never solicited payment for his instruction as he perceived it as his duty to profess the virtues of fine art. Moreover, he enjoyed teaching. “He never … appeared to be more gratified,” one observer stated, “than when engaged in enlightening the minds of those who looked up to him for instruction.”75 He did, however, get something in return, often asking his apprentices, starting with Peale, to assist on his canvases. According to the art historian Dorinda Evans, “Peale was the only American student in 1769, when he visited West almost daily and posed for Regulus in The Departure of Regulus, West’s first commission from the king. Thus, Peale was the pupil who experienced the beginning of West’s great success and would … have joyously shared the responses of George III.”76

Peale also learned a great deal about portrait painting from West, as he had the honor of sitting for a portrait by his mentor during his time in London (ca. 1768, fig. 4.4). In this portrait, West depicts a young Peale in typical eighteenth-century attire looking off to the left with writing utensil in hand. He is relaxed and poised as he sits for the man

74 Evans, Benjamin West and His American Students, 39.
75 Dunlap, History, 105.
76 Evans, Benjamin West and His American Students, 43.
who taught him more than he could have ever learned in the colonies. When Peale returned to Annapolis in 1769, he established himself as the most popular portraitist in the mid-Atlantic region, and, according to one writer, “perhaps second to John Singleton Copley in North America.”77 His commissions reflected the fundamentals of British portrait traditions, which he had learned in West’s London studio. And while Peale’s Annapolis patrons were eager to commission portraits in the British manner, he never abandoned completely his empirical—some would say “American”—style. The notion of nature as one’s guide was a distinctive quality that early American artists and scientists proclaimed. In his “adaptation of the British portrait tradition to American conditions, both Peales [Charles and his son Rembrandt] contributed to the development of a national portrait style, one that simplified the British model and so departed in many important ways from it.”78 Peale, in other words, was more interested in a sitter’s personality as it was revealed in observable external features than in those attributes that could be surmised by intuition. We can see this empiricism in his portrait of Hannah Lambert Cadwalader (1771, fig. 4.5), the wife of Dr. Thomas Cadwalader, who was from a prominent Philadelphia family and served as the medical director of the Continental Army. While Peale conforms to the compositional conventions of the grand style of eighteenth-century British portrait painting, he renders her face and the fabric of her dress with that direct and “liney” quality critics noted in Copley’s Boy with a Squirrel.

West and Peale remained correspondents until West’s death and shared their respective discoveries about artistic and scientific novelties. The lessons that Peale

absorbed from West were evident in his artwork until his death. Perhaps more important, Peale learned from West about the essential role that an education in the arts played in developing civic virtue, which inspired Peale to establish some of America’s earliest museums. Peale was in London for the launch of the Royal Academy and the excitement around that event motivated him to play an instrumental role in the founding of America’s first art academy, the Columbianum, which opened in Philadelphia in 1795. “Although short-lived,” Evans explains, “the Columbianum was the seed and the precedent for further such organizations in the United States.”

West’s association with Peale demonstrates how much influence he had on the development of artistic culture in the young United States. It also shows how American art grew from trans-Atlantic exchanges and Anglo-American friendships rather than a spirit of total independence.

John Trumbull, a key artist in the second generation of American students who came to West’s studio, had a dramatic introduction to London. As an officer in the Continental Army it was difficult for him to make the voyage to England out of fear that he would be arrested as a rebel. After receiving assurance that he would not be bothered if he devoted himself exclusively to the study of art, Trumbull made the voyage and arrived in London in 1780. Benjamin Franklin introduced Trumbull to West, with whom he studied for several months prior to being arrested, imprisoned for three months, and eventually deported back to the colonies. Immediately after the Treaty of Paris became effective in May of 1784, he returned to London and studied with West for two years.

During his initial months with West in 1780, Trumbull’s lessons mostly entailed making copies of West’s copies of Italian Renaissance masterworks, but after rejoining

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79 Evans, *Benjamin West and his American Students*, 46.
West in 1784 “Trumbull became part of the elder artist’s ongoing attempts to negotiate his American identity in light of contemporary English politics…”

Upon his return Trumbull began work on a series of paintings depicting events from the American Revolution, a project that West had hoped to complete but abandoned because he was apprehensive about offending any number of people, including King George. West’s colonial roots became increasingly problematic during the War of Independence and his association with Trumbull made matters even more difficult. Initially Trumbull’s presence in West’s studio was a concern, but according to one scholar West was a savvy diplomat:

> West found a way to transform his mentorship of Trumbull into a boon. He strategically abandoned multiple artistic projects with pro-American subjects, and encouraged Trumbull to take them up instead, thus positioning Trumbull as the most outwardly ‘American’ artist active in England. In turn, this approach allowed West to forestall critiques over his own nationality and political interests, while his mentorship of Trumbull maintained his American associations to the citizens of that new nation.

In other words, by assigning Trumbull to paint events from the American Revolution, West could claim loyalty to whichever nation the situation demanded.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between aristocratic standards and national pride, Trumbull selected subjects that had the potential to appeal to observers with different loyalties. This is evident in *The Battle of Bunker’s Hill, June 17, 1775* (1786, fig. 4.6) and *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775* (1786, fig. 4.7), two works that represent American heroism in the face of British victory.

West’s influence is apparent in the way the compositions incorporate a romantic classicism—virtuous sacrifice dramatized by turbulent skies and emotional expressions.

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81 Ibid., 130.
Trumbull’s paintings mirror West’s *Death of General Wolfe* insofar as they spotlight fallen heroes limp in the arms of a compatriot. In all three paintings victory and tragedy, exhilaration and agony, are enmeshed. Like West himself, the paintings embody the widespread ambivalence engendered by the political violence of the era.

Interestingly, Trumbull’s romanticism did not always play well at home. His *General George Washington at the Battle of Trenton* (1792, fig. 4.8), for instance, was rejected by the City of Charleston, in South Carolina, on the grounds that it was too flashy. Trumbull, who served as Washington’s second aide-de-camp during the Revolution, depicts the moment when the general’s maneuvers at Trenton, New Jersey, led to a decisive victory at Princeton the following day, a major turning point of the war. Trumbull’s Washington appeared to his patrons as too heroic and lacking the humility that so many associated with the democratic principles espoused by the nation’s founding figures. The “Grand Style” of British portraiture was not well-suited to the political ideals of the new nation and Trumbull would go on to produce some much more sober portraits of American leaders, including many of Alexander Hamilton.

Trumbull was instrumental in the establishment and governance of the American Academy of the Fine Arts, which was founded in 1802. He was elected director in 1804, when it was still called the New York Academy of the Fine Arts, which “signal[ed] his new status as one of the elder statesmen of American art.”82 He remained a leader of early-National art and in early 1817 was elected president of the American Academy. Although a great accomplishment for Trumbull, “this also seemed to be the culmination

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82 Ibid., 169. Founded in 1802 as the New York Academy of the Fine Arts, the organization changed its name later in 1804 to the American Academy of Arts, then in 1816 to the American Academy of the Arts, and in 1817 to the American Academy of the Fine Arts.
of Benjamin West’s efforts to place himself as the forefront of the development of art in North America, with one of his students at the head of the primary artistic academy opening in one of the leading cities of the United States of America.”

Earlier, in 1805, West was selected as the first Honorary Academician of the new Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Trumbull acknowledged the American Academy’s indebtedness to West by featuring his works in the American Academy’s annual exhibitions. Much like West, Trumbull was better at painting than leading an art academy. His tenure as president of the American Academy was marked by financial difficulties and an authoritarian pedagogy, which was ironic considering his mentor’s teaching style. Nevertheless, of West’s American students, Trumbull had the most direct influence on the establishment and promotion of a national art, and he did so “by working closely with West during the waning years of the elder artist’s life.”

After a career devoted to the advancement of British art, West insinuated himself into the American artworld during the final two decades of his life. In sum, he found it a convenient moment to rediscover his Americanness.

Samuel. F. B. Morse was one West’s last students. While in London and studying at the Royal Academy from 1811 to 1815, Morse visited West’s studio and received private instruction from him. Morse, who had painted small portraits while a student at Yale University from 1805-10, was swayed by West’s conviction that fine art must have a moral purpose. The ideal in “art’s ultimate importance to society, coupled with [West’s] commercial success in the realm of history painting, was compelling to young American artists who, even in the nineteenth century, attached the way a man lived with the quality

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83 Ibid., 174.
84 Ibid., 183.
of his art.”\textsuperscript{85} Morse came to view his moral identity as dependent on the kind of art he produced, which is why he abandoned portrait painting in favor of history painting. His first success in London was the largescale \textit{Dying Hercules} (1812, fig. 4.9). In preparation for the painting he had sculpted a clay model of the Hercules figure, by which West remarked that he was “extremely delighted.” Flattered, Morse wrote in his journal, “He said it was not merely an academical figure, but displayed mind and thought. He could not have made me a higher compliment.”\textsuperscript{86} “The art of painting has powers to dignify man,” West had written in 1809, “by transmitting to posterity his noble actions, and his mental powers, to be viewed in those invaluable lessons of religion, love of country, and morality; such subjects are worthy of being placed in view as the most instructive records to a rising generation.”\textsuperscript{87}

Like Trumbull, Morse returned to the United States prepared to alter the course of American art, and in 1825 he became the first president of the National Academy of Design in New York, an institution that was “to be of, by, and for artists,” in contrast to the conservative American Academy of the Fine Arts.\textsuperscript{88} Trumbull, who was still president of the American Academy (he served until 1836), ran a rigid program that supporters of the National Academy believed inhibited artistic development. Morse’s lofty goals included providing a center of instruction, exhibition, and the cultivation of American taste; promoting the cultural importance of art for society; and encouraging the establishment of a national art worthy of international respect and independent from

\textsuperscript{85} Carson, “Art Theory,” 90.
\textsuperscript{88} Rather, \textit{The American School}, 236-37.
European art. Interestingly, though both Trumbull and Morse based their academies on West’s pedagogy, which they perceived as a “paragon of the artistic education they sought to emulate in the United States of America,” they implemented that influence in different ways, further evidence that West was a man of many faces.\(^89\)

**Conclusion**

West’s success as a teacher can be attributed to several factors. His ability to combine a devotion to both nature and the artifice characteristic of eighteenth-century art theory as well as his analytic but democratic approach to his craft were easily comprehended by his students. Richardson’s and du Fresnoy’s treatises combined with lessons learned during his Grand Tour formed the foundation of his art theory. Although conservative in his fidelity to the Renaissance and antique traditions, West was liberal in the way he educated his students to pursue their own unique approaches to their craft. An examination of West’s adherence to eighteenth-century art theory and his diffusion of those ideas to his American students provides a deeper understanding of how he was able to achieve the role of “father of American art.”

West saw himself as a vital contributor to the arts right up until his death. In 1814, Washington Allston (1779-1843), another of his many American students, depicted West as old and infirm (1814, fig. 4.10) By contrast, in his final self-portrait (1819, fig. 4.11), West shows himself as engaged and alert. Even as a new generation of American painters, the first artists of the new nation, turned away from Europe’s influence and forged ahead with their own institutions, West remained resolute in his confidence.

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\(^{89}\) Fox, “The Great House of Benjamin West,” 184.
Allston highlights a different truth of West by portraying a “more reverential view of him, as an enthroned authority (even a relic from the past) with a transcendental spiritual strength.” This portrait is perhaps more revealing of the reality of how West appeared to his younger, new generation of students. On the other hand, West’s self-portrait suggests how West perceived himself and wished to be remembered. He portrayed himself as the energetic and active man that he thought he still was. It reveals “a man who is neither mild nor quiet, but certainly believes in his own immortality.” He holds a writing utensil in his right hand and sits in front of a blank sheet of paper on his desk. Even in the last few months of his life, he was still actively engaging in the work that brought him fame. He was also actively shaping his own reputation, especially by collaborating with John Galt on his biography. The story he would now tell was of the “American” West.

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90 Evans, *Benjamin West and His American Students*, 184.
91 Fox, “The Great House of Benjamin West,” 228.
CHAPTER V

WRITING WEST’S LIFE AND AFTERLIFE: BIOGRAPHIES AND ART HISTORY

“Incontrovertibly the father of American painting”

Introduction

The trajectory of West’s career has made his historical reputation as an American problematic. Unlike Copley, who established his career as the premier portraitist in North America, West did not reach fame until after he departed the colonies in 1760. Even though Copley also left the colonies for London prior to the American Revolution, he “left behind a compelling body of work: hundreds of portraits that vividly captured prosperous Americans on the threshold of independence.”¹ Though leaving the colonies benefited West’s career—his Grand Tour radically transformed not only his style but his prospects; his early works in London captured the attention of King George III, who made him “Historical Painter to the King”; and his election as president of the Royal Academy far outranked anything he could have accomplished in the colonies—his identity as an American artist is far more ambiguous than Copley’s. During his fifty-seven years in England, he never returned to North America. So how is it possible that he came to be called “incontrovertibly the father of American painting”?²

West earned the title, in part, by playing a critical role in the training of American artists for over fifty years. Matthew Pratt’s The American School (1765) confirmed as much at the very beginning of West’s tenure as a teacher and mentor. As this thesis has shown, in the years between 1765 and his death in 1820, West played his Americanness

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¹ Rather, “Benjamin West,” 324.
² Flexner, America’s Old Masters, 74.
up or down depending on the circumstances. The same man was the official history painter to the King of Great Britain on one day and insinuating himself into the earliest American art academies the next day. But an artist as famous as West did not shape his reputation alone; during his own lifetime and subsequently, in his afterlife, biographers and art historians have contributed meaningfully to the construction and deconstruction of his hybrid identity. This closing chapter offers a reflection on these texts.

Nearing the end of his life, and having lost his commission for Windsor Castle, West was desperate to revive his reputation. His American heritage seemed convenient at this moment and so in 1816 he enlisted the Scottish novelist and commentator John Galt to write his biography, *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West*. By collaborating with Galt on the first volume of the biography, West was able to shape his public image as he saw fit. Galt’s account, which portrayed West as essentially American, would serve as the blueprint for understanding West for the next century and more. Books by leading historians of American art, especially William Dunlap and James Thomas Flexner, took Galt’s accounts mostly at face value. More recently, however, scholars have critiqued Galt’s hagiography and recast West as a clever Anglo-American shapeshifter.

**Galt’s Biography and West’s American Identity**

John Galt’s interest in writing materialized early on his life and manifested in trialing of different genres—poetry, playwriting, essays, biography—but he did not realize his full potential until several publishings in Scottish newspapers and journals. His earliest attempts at writing about art consisted of “two books of essays and an article
based on his travels in the Mediterranean.”

He continued to write more essays about artworks he encountered during his European travels until he became acquainted with West. Little is known about how Galt became interested in West, but he published the first volume of the biography in 1816. Volume one, The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq., President of the Royal Academy in London, Prior to his Arrival in England, Compiled from Materials Furnished by Himself, covers West’s life in America starting with his birth in 1738 up to the early 1760s, when West left for Italy. In 1820, Galt published the second volume, The Life, Studies, and Works of Benjamin West, Esq., President of the Royal Academy in London, Compiled from Materials Furnished by Himself, which begins with West’s move to London in 1763 and ends with his death in 1820. In the author’s note in the second volume, Galt explains that West himself read the contents of the first volume to check for accuracy, but that due to illness was unable to read over the second volume.

The impact of Galt’s account on West’s reputation cannot be overstated. Its mythical portrayal of the artist’s early life, in which he effortlessly acquired a talent for art by looking only to nature for instruction, served the purpose of establishing him as rooted in the woods of the rustic colonies. When West approached Galt to write his story,

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3 Rather, “Benjamin West,” 332.
it was “at a time when West’s reputation was suffering from the scorn of his colleagues and the disrespect of a younger generation having new artistic goals.” Because of this, he “was asked to create an apotheosis. His ultimate purpose was to correlate West’s life with those of the great Italian masters, providing the American with a prototypically English position in the galaxy.” Galt certainly succeeded at constructing West’s childhood in the same manner as Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* (1550) from the mid-sixteenth century is the foundational example of anecdotal and idolizing art history. Just as Vasari portrayed the Old Masters to be men who were naturally talented child prodigies and future painters to kings, bishops, and noblemen, so too did Galt highlight West’s rise from a provincial background to the king’s painter.

There is the issue of whose decision it was to portray West as an American-born painter with empirical skills and a foundation in nature. On one hand, it is possible that Galt took creative license with the stories that West gave to him for the basis of the biography. Rather than incorporate the accomplishments that West had use to define himself in British society, Galt focused more on the notion of West as an American who happened to succeed in British society because of his colonial roots. Because of this, “Galt’s narrative of the American innocent had a powerful effect on West’s reputation, rehabilitating him as an American artist. This may not have been precisely, or at any rate wholeheartedly, West’s intent.” However on the other hand, West has been proven to have been involved in controlling what was written about him, especially near the end of his career when his reputation was in shambles. West’s “controlling hand becomes graphically evident when these early biographies are compared with an autobiographical

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5 Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 41.
manuscript in West’s handwriting, marked as an original text by his numerous strikeovers and insertions.” This behavior would suggest that Galt’s biography was not the first time he played a role in the reshaping of accounts from his life with the expectation of saving image. However, as Susan Rather points out, the decision to ultimately portray West as American was Galt’s who did so to shape “West’s image for posterity,” but he could not have accomplished this if it had not been for West’s approval. Both men played a role in the remodeling of West’s identity: Galt’s weapon of pen and paper combined with West’s recognition of his exotic roots proved to be a tactical move that ultimately was successful.

Galt’s motives in the first volume become apparent early on, when he describes a young West learning the rudimentary principles of primary colors from the Native Americans in his backyard. Galt presents the story as true but readily admits that the anecdote serves a narrative purpose: “The mythologies of antiquity furnish no allegory more beautiful; and a Painter who would embody the metaphor of an Artist instructed by Nature, could scarcely imagine any thing more picturesque than the real incident of the Indians instructing West to prepare the prismatic colours.” West would pay homage to the Native Americans that are characteristic of the New World in several of his paintings and in his renowned response to seeing the Apollo Belvedere for the first time. By including a story that roots him in nature, by virtue of a connection to his Indigenous neighbors, West suggested “that as a native-born American, he had the authority to record the New World’s history,” which he did in some of his most famous paintings,

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7 Ibid, 215.
8 Ibid, 221.
9 Galt, Life of West, 1:18.
such as *The Death of General Wolfe* and *Penn’s Treaty with the Indians* (1771-72, fig. x).\(^\text{10}\)

To further the narrative that nature was West’s first teacher, Galt claims, falsely, that West “invented” a camera obscura. In fact, his first teacher, William Williams, taught him how to draw landscapes by means of a camera, but Galt asserts that West learned about the camera’s principles independently. He did so to further his claim that West had “that peculiarity of intellect which is discriminated from the effects of education, by the name of original talent,” which, again, presents West as natural talent.\(^\text{11}\) Not only does the biography work at establishing West’s roots in his homeland, it also underscores West’s association with wilderness at the very moment that Romanticism, which glorified natural talent and processes, had come to dominate both European and American art.

In this telling, when West arrived in Italy his “American innocence [was] intact.” As Galt put it, West was “original and self-instructed,” evidenced by “the single fact, that he was born in Pennsylvania, and did not leave America till the year 1760.”\(^\text{12}\) Yet Italy is where West began to shed his American skin and assume an air of Britishness, as seen in his manner of dress. In a sketch by Angelica Kauffman “the round-faced boy in the sober dress of his Quaker forebears lost his rusticity along with his baby fat. Depicted in the court costume of an earlier era fashionably resurrected as a kind of Van Dyck masquerade, West joined the artistic lineage that was coming to be known as the English school.”\(^\text{13}\) On the other hand, upon his arrival to London, West proudly carried the

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\(^\text{10}\) Vivien Green Fryd, “Rereading the Indian,” 79.

\(^\text{11}\) Galt, *Life of West*, 1:45-49.


\(^\text{13}\) Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color*, 84.
nickname of “American Raphael,” which highlighted his accomplishment of achieving fame despite his colonial roots. Over the course of his career, the inconsistency of his inclination to be perceived as American is apparent, considering his endorsement of early biographical accounts that denied his Pennsylvanian roots. So why the change of heart regarding his identity after decades of denial?

West’s career in England was characterized by lucky timing and exceptional talent, which combined to make him famous. It became clear that he had “dedicated [his] life, to inform future times of the heighth of the British School of History,” an assertion that was even more confirmed by his appointment as history painter to King George III and unanimous election to the Royal Academy presidency. However, over the course of a dozen years West made several grave mistakes that upset his colleagues and raised serious questions about his competence. While in the midst of a crisis in 1804, West confided to Joseph Farington that had it been ten years earlier, he would have returned to America as “having attracted talented young American painters to his London studio over the course of four decades gave [him] confidence that art would eventually flourish in the land of his birth.” While West had some interest in the American fine arts—he was aware of the new academies opening in the United States as this time—there was little indication that he wished to preside over the development of arts in America. In fact, he publicly withheld details of his American past out of fear it would harm his status as a noble gentlemen artist. Early biographies, accounts in magazines and newspapers,

understated his Americanness and amplified his British identity. His history paintings, with their patriotic allegories, were easily interpreted as essentially English as well.

West’s claims to Britishness were, as Susan Rather puts it, part of an attempt “to facilitate his identification as head of the English school of painting.”\textsuperscript{16} After the publication of James Northcote’s \textit{Memoirs of Sir Joshua Reynolds} (1813), a biography that was designed to exalt Reynolds as the founder of modern British painting, West began to ponder his posthumous legacy and the possibility of a biography. Even though Reynolds had spent the majority of his life as a portraittist, he was associated with the rise of history painting due to his many \textit{Discourses} on the genre to the Royal Academy.

“West was thus robbed of the one important action in the history of British art for which he could reasonably claim agency,” one art historian notes. “Alongside Reynolds, the mid-eighteenth-century artist William Hogarth was rediscovered as a second founder of British art; West correctly realized there was no public desire for a third.”\textsuperscript{17}

How Galt and West became acquainted remains unknown, but the nature of their relationship has been mischaracterized for some time. Had it not been for Galt’s intervention, “it seems highly unlikely that [West] would have decided to produce a full public account of his American experience,” especially considering his “previous reticence about his life in the American colonies and his endorsement of repeated characterizations of himself as English.”\textsuperscript{18} It is also unclear when West made the decision to tell his American story, but it is possible that he felt more inclined to do so after Copley’s death, as he was the one man qualified to challenge West’s colonial roots.

\textsuperscript{16} Rather, “Benjamin West,” 330.
\textsuperscript{17} Fox, “The Great House of Benjamin West,” 216.
\textsuperscript{18} Rather, The American School, 225.
When Galt and West began their collaboration, it became clear that the stakes were high for West, whose reputation was on a constant decline near the end of his life. He hoped to use the biography as a tool “to persuade the British art world to read his American origins as closer to nature, a quality more valued in 1816 than academic credentials.” Indeed, the ethos of Romanticism, which at this very moment was surpassing Neoclassicism as the dominant art movement in Europe, was based on natural law and what Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously called “the state of nature.” In short, nature was replacing civilization as the spring of morality. Rather explains that West had plenty to gain by revitalizing his colonial roots: “fifty-six years away from his native land had limited his negative exposure there, while more than two dozen American students augmented the positive. In the role of mentor, West had done as much to nurture the development of American art as anyone.” Predictably, the 1816 biography did little to change perceptions of West and critics were quick to condemn his attempts at portraying himself as “an instrument chosen by Providence to disseminate the arts of peace in the world,” an attempt that was perceived to be both arrogant and erroneous. In the United States reviewers were not as ruthless but did not find anything spectacular about the biography, and there were no attempts at claiming him as an American. One reviewer for the American journal *Analytic Magazine* wrote, “Mr. Galt, infected with the common biographical reverence for the subject, is sometimes incline to make miracles of ordinary

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19 Rather, “Benjamin West,” 335.
20 Ibid.
occurrences.” So it was without much resistance that Galt’s biography became part of the history of the American art.

**Dunlap’s Reconstruction: West and Trumbull**

Galt’s narrative was canonized by William Dunlap (1766-1839) in his *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834), a three-volume record of biographies of American artists. Dunlap, a former student of West’s, had abandoned art to become a playwright, actor, and historian. The publication of Dunlap’s *History* “tapped into a growing level of American interest in identifying the characteristics of national art from the 1830s onward, as a means of determining national identity and aspirations.” Before writing the book Dunlap had been involved in artworld politics, as he was both a founder and vice-president of the National Academy of Design and a member of the American Academy during Trumbull’s tenure. Dunlap disapproved of Trumbull’s presidency and restrictive pedagogy and so was inclined to praise men like West. His *History* “reserved harsh words for artists who did not offer assistance when they could, whereas he honored others whose active mentoring helped nurture American art. As a teacher, West had no peers, and Dunlap could with good reason pronounce his effect on American art ‘incalculable’.”

West’s was the first biography that Dunlap composed for the book, thus making it the foundation and standard for all the others. Dunlap declared West to be “indigenous”

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West exemplified qualities of virtue, industry, and talent, which the first pages of his book emphatically defined as the only criteria of personal superiority in the United States. Never mind that West was a British courtier and never lived in the independent United States; he lived by American principles, absorbed from American soil, where ‘from the very first settlement of this country, the germs of republican equality were planted.’ Without Galt’s *Life of West*, Dunlap would have been challenged to develop a credible profile of West as an ‘indigenous’ artist.

Dunlap collected his information about West mostly from former students but also incorporated elements from Galt’s account. Nevertheless, he criticized Galt for crafting “absurd tales” and being a “most injudicious biographer.” Dunlap expressed “hope” that he would be able to “separate the poetry from the facts.” The two biographers agreed on one thing, however, which is that West was the prototypical American artist.

Dunlap concludes his narrative of West’s life with an interesting anecdote about a speech given by Sir Martin Archer Shee, the Royal Academy president in 1834. In the lecture Shee remarked that in Britain West “is unsparingly censured where he fails, and is allowed little credit where has succeeded. He is tried, not by his merits, but by his defects, and judged before a tribunal which admits only evidence against him … few artists have been less favoured by fortune, or more ungenerously defrauded of their fame.” Shee concluded, “Who will hesitate to acknowledge that the author of such noble compositions … well merits to be considered, in his particular department, the most distinguished artist of the age in which he lived?”

Although West had fallen out of

28 Shee quoted in ibid, 106-09.
favor, as his traditionalist classical approach was outdated, Dunlap, by highlighting British negativity at the conclusion of West’s biography, “implicitly challenged Americans to do the right thing by honoring West … as founding father of the American painting tradition.”

This, then, is also some of what Dunlap meant when he called West “indigenous.”

The playwright Dunlap constructed his *History* so as to cast West and Trumbull in opposing roles: West as hero, Trumbull as villain. The casting seems counter-intuitive. Though West mentored many American artists, he never stepped foot in an independent United States, whereas Trumbull brought the grand style of history painting to the United States after studying with West. Trumbull’s impact on American art was enormous, not least because the U.S. Capitol Rotunda featured his paintings depicting events from the American Revolution. So why did Dunlap’s *History* diminish Trumbull and elevate Wests? According to the art historian Maura Lyons, “Dunlap was supporting a radical redefinition of authority within the visual arts—carving out a place for American art within the canonical western tradition, rejecting the elevated status of the traditional art patron, and advocating the establishment of professional authority through artist-run institutions.” These tensions emerged in the conflict between the progressive National Academy of Design (inspired by West’s benevolent teaching) and the conservative American Academy of Fine Arts (run by Trumbull). Dunlap used the two men to dramatize competing models of leadership—one based on democratic virtue and the other on pride.

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In Dunlap’s telling West quickly emerges as “an admirable character” whose “artistic genius and good fortune resulted in [his] many successes—his conquest of the Roman art world, his ability to secure patronage of the British monarch, and the public acclaim he garnered for his large-scale religious paintings.” Dunlap’s analysis of the *Death of General Wolfe* emphasizes the moral imperative at the heart of West’s decision to feature contemporary clothing in the painting. Dunlap recounts how West responded to Reynolds’s criticism of that choice:

> ‘I answered, that the event to be commemorated happened in the year 1758, in a region of the world unknown to Greeks and Romans, and at a period of time when no warriors who wore such costumes existed. The subject I have to represent is a great battle fought and won, and the same truth which gives law to the historian should rule the painter. If instead of the facts of the action I introduce fictions, how shall I be understood by posterity?’

With this anecdote Dunlap establishes that “it was West’s innate honesty that led him to engineer an influential redefinition of the venerable genre of history painting.”

Dunlap also praises West for opening up his London studio to American artists seeking mentoring. Not only did he help with their technical development, he also established the democratic principles that drive an education in the arts. Cleverly, Dunlap incorporated personal accounts from those who studied under or interacted with West. In doing so, he created a persuasive and credible testament to West’s influence as a mentor to the first generation of American artists. Dunlap writes, “It is curious to observe how uniformly his American pupils speak of him as a friend, a brother, or a father to them.”

West’s benevolent behavior registered on his students and his advice sustained them in a

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31 Ibid, 94.
profession that was not yet firmly established in the new nation. Dunlap’s *History* drew “a clear line of succession by emphasizing the links between West and his students.”\(^{35}\)

Dunlap’s broader goal was to present West as the agent of American art and build an entire national tradition around him. As Lyons writes in her analysis of Dunlap’s biography, “As a native-born artist he provided an example of indigenous talent, and as an international figure he connected his fellow artists to a larger art tradition. A combination of colonial pride and the artist’s own efforts prevented West from fading to a distant memory in his homeland.”\(^{36}\) While Dunlap positioned West as the wellspring of American art he attacked Trumbull after years of festering animosity. The two men knew each other from their days in London and associated mostly as competitors, first as painters in a small art market and then as advocates for rival art institutions. Dunlap deemed West to be noble in both character and practice, linking his virtue to his art, and questioned Trumbull’s patriotism by reminding readers that he had resigned from the Continental Army in 1777, shortly after the start of the Revolution, and that his *Battle of Bunker’s Hill* depicts a battle the Americans lost. (It is worth noting that Dunlap did not criticize other American-born artists, such as Gilbert Stuart or John Singleton Copley, for working in London during the Revolution.) Moreover, he finds numerous historical inaccuracies in Trumbull’s portrayal of the event, which, he claims “is particularly objected to by many of the inhabitants of Boston and its neighbourhood”\(^{37}\). In sum, Dunlap accuses Trumbull of inflating his patriotism, doctoring visual representations of the Revolution, and emphasizing British victories. This assertion is certainly ironic.

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\(^{36}\) Lyons, *William Dunlap*, 98.
considering that West’s *Death of General Wolfe* was criticized for historical inaccuracies as well, not to mention that West never served in the Continental Forces.

When discussing the awarding of the U.S. Capitol Rotunda commission to Trumbull, rather than portraying it as a great moment in the history of American art Dunlap instead quipped, “Let not foreigners, or men of after days, take these pictures, because of their situation, as a standard by which to measure the arts of design in our country at the time they were painted.”\(^{38}\) Instead of praising Trumbull for receiving thirty-two thousand dollars from Congress for his Rotunda paintings, an impressive accomplishment for any painter at the time, Dunlap blasted Trumbull for exploiting government patronage. By portraying Trumbull as “mercenary and self-serving, Dunlap exploited the continuing uncertainty among Americans about the proper role of art in their society.” He tried to undermine Trumbull’s paintings, so as to elevate West’s, and thus missed the moment’s true meaning: Trumbull’s government commission was “the ultimate realization, never so completely attainted by West himself, of what a history painting was supposed to be: public art in a public place, serving a public purpose.”\(^{39}\)

Dunlap’s *History* was published at a moment of generational shift, when artists of the early national period (ca. 1789 to 1837) had either died or were nearing the end of their lives. In addition, it was a time when leadership positions at the new national art institutions were vacant. Therefore, Dunlap used the book to advocate for the values he believed should be at the forefront of a national art. It is telling that Dunlap presented the London-based West as the ideal pedagogue; clearly he believed that West’s more progressive teaching outweighed his country of residence as a factor in his legacy. The

\(^{38}\) Dunlap, *History*, 358.  
\(^{39}\) Von Erffa and Staley, *Benjamin West*, 59.
lack of artistic succession in the American community compelled Dunlap to portray West “not only as the founding father of the American art world but also as its permanent model.”

While to some degree, he must have believed his own claims about West as father of American art, it would not be farfetched to assert that Dunlap used his former teacher to further his twin agendas of promoting a national style by establishing a clear line of artistic lineage and of explaining how national art institutions should impart education. Dunlap’s subjective admiration for his former teacher can be easily detected as he closed West’s biography with the anecdote of West and his Christ Healing the Sick in the Temple (1815-17, fig. 5.1):

> We know that Mr. West, when he made this noble present to the Pennsylvania Hospital, intended that it should be free to students and artists, for he justly thought that as a model, it would promote the progress of painting in his native country. He expressed this wish and intention to the managers of the hospital, but it has not been complied with. It is the only exhibition of painting in the United States where money is received from the artist or the student. Yet this is the free gift of an American artist, who delighted in pointing the way to excellence in the arts.

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**West and Contemporary Art History**

While nineteenth-century authors were quick to establish West’s American identity, contemporary art historians have been more discerning in their assessments of his many faces. Writing after the establishment of the so-called “new art history,” which replaced hagiography and connoisseurship with more theoretical and critical approaches to the field, scholars such as Ann Uhry Abrams, Sarah Monks, and Susan Rather have shown that West constructed hybrid personas both out of self-interest and a genuine identity crisis brought on by his alienation from the colonies. By examining primary

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sources—diary entries from West’s students and companions, journal accounts, and newspaper reviews—and closely reading Galt’s *Life of West* and Dunlap’s *History*, these historians have exposed his biographers’ agendas and presented the different political ideologies, national myths, aesthetic theories, friendships, and human emotions that fed West’s self-image and public personas.

The American art historian Ann Uhry Abrams published the *The Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand-Style History Painting* in 1985. It was the first major study of the artist in nearly fifty years. West’s Anglo-American identity is not a major theme of the book as Abrams deeply examines West’s early history paintings and their connection to the theatre as well as the underlying political messages of his paintings (two themes that reviewers have deemed problematic). Her main goal with her theories is to “make West’s works come alive again” and the best way to do so, she argues, is to “pay special attention to the early part of his career, the years before 1771 when he was developing his mature style.” Her focus on the earlier part of his career is sensible as he never really lived up to the full potential of this period as he did later in his life. Abrams claims that Galt’s *Life of West* was typical of its time insofar as it followed the Vasarian method of hagiography. Interestingly, she then proceeds to cultivate a similar portrayal of West. For instance, she points out how in the first paragraph of his biography, Galt claims that West’s lineage can be traced all the way back to Lord Delawarre, a noble Englishman of high rank. Although this is assumed to be untrue, Abrams writes, “ties with Lord Delawarre endowed West with ancestral legitimacy in royal circles, while refusal to be

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known as ‘Sir Benjamin’ kept him on equal footing with his American students and associates.”\textsuperscript{44} Such a description creates this mistaken impression that West’s reputation has been free of any controversy and that he was untroubled by his dual identity. It would be up to later scholars to look more closely at these kinds of assumptions.

Abrams does discuss the problematic nature of West’s association with the Society of Friends. She hypothesizes that Galt included mention of his Quaker background to establish the notion that West was of divine birth, a characteristic that Vasari championed in \textit{Lives of the Artists}. As Galt tells it, when Quaker orator Edward Peckover gave a sermon about “the future greatness of America,” Sarah West was “taken with the pains of labour,” which “nearly proved fatal both to the mother and the infant.” After West was born, Peckover told West’s father that “a child sent into the world under such a remarkable circumstance would prove no ordinary man.”\textsuperscript{45} With this anecdote Galt implicitly “endowed West’s entrance into the world with the sanctity of a spiritual mission.”\textsuperscript{46} Although West boasted of his alignment with the Quakers, he and his wife attended Anglican services in London. Despite this, he clearly linked himself with his Quaker roots in his 1772 family portrait, which Abrams perceives to be both “an apology” and “a rationale,” perhaps an apology for his mother’s disgrace and a rationale for aligning himself with the Quakers later in his life.\textsuperscript{47} The matter of West’s Quakerism remains puzzling. His family portrait uncovers “a stake in the association, something he

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{45} Galt, \textit{Life of West}, 1: 8-9; The validity of West’s claim of his heritage to Lord Delawarre is impossible to prove or disprove due to the lack of records that trace West’s lineage back to the time period of Lord Delawarre. However, twentieth-century researchers have discovered that West’s immediate ancestors were middle- and lower-class yeomen, craftsmen, and soldiers. This genealogy can be found in Letta Brock Stone, \textit{The West Family Register} (Washington, D.C.: W.F. Roberts Co., 1928), 311.
\textsuperscript{46} Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 37.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 38.
never discouraged, as [Benjamin] Franklin (more removed from the faith even than West) had not while on the Continent, where Quakers were held in higher regard than in England.\(^{48}\) He preserved his roots but did so in a quiet manner that would not threaten his position in British society. With that in mind, it appears that West was constantly trapped in a cycle of taking any measure to maintain his privileged status in European society, even if it meant concealing his true self.

Galt, Abrams writes, “was asked to create an apotheosis. His ultimate purpose was to correlate West’s life with those of the great Italian masters, providing the American with a prototypically English position in the galaxy.”\(^{49}\) Rather than portraying him as an American, she argues that Galt was more concerned with positioning him on the same level as the Renaissance painters in order to establish his mythical status. Susan Rather explains that American artists were especially concerned with how they would be remembered by history. Painters like Reynolds and Hogarth, she says, were less driven to fuss over their legacies, leaving that work to their peers. American artists had no institutional support and so had to convince the public of their prestige. American painters were desperate to be recognized as equal to their British counterparts. Although Abrams ignores some of the more nuanced aspects of West’s self-fashioning, she does identify a critical aspect of West’s life: the need to establish himself as a legitimate artist worthy of a place in history.

Susan Rather’s *The American School: Artists and Status in the Late Colonial and Early National Era* was published in 2016 but includes chapters that appeared as articles as early as 2004. It provides a critical re-assessment of how West came to be seen as the

\(^{48}\) Rather, The American School, 121.
\(^{49}\) Abrams, The Valiant Hero, 41.
leader of early-national art. The book primarily focuses on what it meant to be an American artist during the colonial era through the early republic, but her analysis of the fluidity of the term “American” into the nineteenth century demonstrates how a national art was fashioned by the mutual transmission of ideas between England and America. She is not an American exceptionalist, yet she does not depict early American artists as mere copyists of British styles. Rather’s acknowledgement of the “instability of professional status and the changing strategies by which artists sought to secure it” sets up her portrait of West. She shows that the notion of an “American artist” at the time was ambiguous and took many forms, which begs the question: was there a true American artist from this period? In 1939 James Thomas Flexner exalted Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, John Copley, and Benjamin West as the country’s “Old Masters,” yet each of them left America for London in order to advance their skills. Additionally, American art of this period did not deviate at all from the genres and styles that that dominated British art.

Still, because of writers such as Dunlap and Flexner, British and American art before 1837, the end of Andrew Jackson’s second term as U.S. President, tend to be taught as separate entities to this day. Rather suggests, however, that the cultural permeability between the two regions facilitated West’s attempts, as well as those of his biographers, to establish American credentials. The early painters did not perceive themselves as separate from the British. In fact, “as early as 1763, the English had begun to use the term ‘American’ as a consistent way of differentiating its colonial population; another decade passed before the colonists were ready to adopt the term themselves.”

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50 Rather, The American School, 8.
51 See Flexner, America’s Old Masters.
52 Rather, The American School, 119.
She explains, moreover, that it is a mistake to think that the Revolution interrupted the flow of transatlantic exchange. The artists of the colonial era that are recognized as the first American painters were more Anglo-American than is generally understood. Their legacies have been easier to root in American identity because they returned to their homeland, but West’s legacy has proven controversial due to his permanent residency in London. In a review of Rather’s book, the art historian Bryan Wolf explains:

> Becoming an artist, from this vantage, has less to do with the content of one’s work and more to do with who controls the narrative. This helps explain the sustained attention Rather gives not only to Galt’s biography of West but to the larger theme of artists painting other artists…. She identifies the theme of artists on art as one of the foundational topoi of modern painting, reading it implicitly as a marker of how artists came to be viewed as different from other people and thus legitimated as more than mere artisans and skilled laborers.\(^{53}\)

One could argue that it was an easier task for Galt to portray West as the archetypal American artist than a figurehead of British painting. As mentioned earlier, Reynolds and Hogarth were established already as England’s masters. The new republic, on the other hand, was young and lacking obvious cultural leaders. The void gave West the opportunity to feature his American story, both for the purpose of placing himself within an “indigenous” context as well as “persuading the British art world to read his American origins as closer to nature, a quality in the ascendant relative to academic credentials in 1816.”\(^{54}\) By positioning himself as an American, as one who is close to the earth and, therefore, possesses a natural genius, Rather concludes that West was soliciting recognition from America and/or Britain as the principal history painter of the era. It was a risky but clever maneuver.

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\(^{54}\) Rather, *The American School*, 226.
Sarah Monks, a British art historian, published the article “The Wolfe Man: Benjamin West’s Anglo-American Accent” in 2011. She covers some of the same territory that Rather covers in her scholarship on West but endeavors to tell a more theoretical story based in psychocultural analysis. Monks’s principal claim is that West was deeply ambivalent about his personal and national identities. The best indicators of his “slipperiness” are his artworks, which reveal how he “situated himself between different genres, positions, manners and selves, on the verge, and in the vicinity, of statements with which he cannot decisively be attributed.”

Even in the first decade of his career, West tried to position himself as a versatile artist capable of moving between cultures as he triangulated his being a British subject who studied Italian traditions and incorporated American motifs into his art. Such hybridity is best evidenced by the Death of General Wolfe, which “offered West an unparalleled opportunity to incorporate his American-ness within a scene of lasting positive significance for British audiences.”

West continued to flourish as the “American Raphael” until critics turned the name against him, as a way to account for any mediocrity in his work. He was then compelled to revitalize the name and extol the virtues of his colonial roots.

Monks explains that West did not assimilate easily to British artistic conventions. He still possessed ties to his home, as indicated in a letter he sent Charles Willson Peale in 1775:

The present commotions between this country and its colonies is a subject I could dwell long on, but prudence and the times will not permit my saying any thing and what I might say would have but little weight in the scale of opinions. If it would, I should stand forth and speak it boldly, though it were at the risk of my all. As opposition and differing in opinion in regard to the right of taxing America, seems to be hastening to a crisis, I hope my counrymen will act with

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56 Ibid., 655.
that wisdom and spirit which seems to have directed them as yet, and be the means of bringing about a more permanent union than has been for these some years past between that country and this … should measures with you be as wrongly advised as with us, both countries are for some time undone, and which if pursued must finally break those extensive outlines of British Empire which those colonies alone must have procured her.\textsuperscript{57}

Although he does declare outrightly his allegiance to the Revolutionary cause, West walks a fine line between support for the colonies and loyalty to the crown at a time when observers were eager to know his position. According to Monks, his works depicting mythological and historical scenes of erotic love were clever representations of the Anglo-American tensions that he embodied. Such scenes, like \textit{Venus and Europa} (1768, fig. 5.2), of “sexual love and attraction was part of the very rhetoric with which Anglo-American relations were described during this period by those who supported both the American cause and America’s continued colonial status, a position without contradiction until 1783.”\textsuperscript{58} In other words, West cloaked his ambivalence in the aesthetics of a genre popular with King George III so that he could easily defend himself against accusations of disloyalty. His erotic love scenes speak to an Anglo-American identity and allowed for a kind of hybridity that was impractical to perform in the public arena. Monks perpetuates this notion through an analysis of West’s images of love that spoke to the problem of Anglo-American identity. With the case of \textit{Venus and Europa}, Monks asks that “West’s painting encourages us to do a cost-benefit analysis of both independence and loyalty. Do the rewards of a relationship with bountiful sovereignty outweigh the pains? Are the heavy costs of independent action irredeemable, as Europa’s still-

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\item \textsuperscript{57} West, letter to Peale, February, 10 1775, in \textit{The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and his Family}, 5 vols., Lillian B. Miller \textit{et al.}, eds. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), 1:152.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Monks, “The Wolfe Man,” 664.
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unrelieved grief suggests, or will they ultimately pay off?"59 Such questions were being asked as tensions were rising in the colonies. Many colonists feared to deny loyalty to the crown if it meant losing their privileges, but they did so to the harm of the rebels who needed support. Erotic images such as the ones that West created suggested a hybridity that was needed in order to survive such internal turmoil. This begs the question of should he have declared himself completely British and enjoyed the bounties that came with royal patronage while silently feeling the shame of abandoning his birth place?

Although Monks’s argument that allegories of love and sexual attraction were a symbolic representation of the transatlantic conflict for West is plausible, it is also a highly speculative based on the psychoanalysis of a man long dead. She admits as much, writing that her thesis has roots in a method “first developed within Sigmund Freud’s case history of ‘the Wolf Man’, an essay on infantile trauma in which the sexual, linguistic and imagistic effects of proximity to the primal scene and its threat of castration are hypothesized.”60 In my estimation, Monks overinterprets West’s erotic paintings. While he did reference himself as an American several times in letters to his acquaintances, there is little evidence that he was tortured by longing for his colonial home.61 In fact, he seemed more concerned about ensuring that he did not appear to support the American Revolution in order to maintain his privileged status in British society.

59 Ibid., 669.
60 Ibid., 654.
61 For example, in a letter from 1763, he reported that he had “at last arrived at the mother country, which we Americans are all so desirous to see.” West to Joseph Shippen, September 1, 1763, quoted in Thomas Balch, ed., Letters and Papers Relating Chiefly to the Provincial History of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Crissy and Markley, 1855), lxxi.
Monks does make revelatory claims about the ambiguity of West’s character and his Anglo-American identity. Clearly, he was sensitive about how he appeared to his counterparts and took measures to ensure that he conformed to expectations. She concludes that “his fraught status compelled a strategic ambiguity to which the concept of an inherent, consistent, and revealing self is insufficient and upon which any symptomatic analysis…must stumble. Significantly, and for all his imagery of deep feeling, ‘Benjamin West’ was meant to be impenetrable at its core.”

Whether it be the American Raphael, History Painter to the King, or president of the Royal Academy, West had many skins and knew which one to wear depending on the situation. He was strategically vague about his true allegiances, and that equivocation was both his best tool and greatest weakness. He had a successful and enriching career in England, but his significance to the history of American art remains hard to establish.

Conclusion

West slipperiness enabled him to avoid definition, which was a strategic tactic that benefitted him in the long run. However, just as West was ambiguous, so too were the critics and writers who used him to perpetuate their own agendas. While it is unclear whether Galt had personal reasons for wanting to portray West as American, Dunlap certainly used West for his own ambitions. At the same time, West was a man who struggled with his Anglo-American identity at a moment when the two regions were at war. To view him as another victim of violent conflict adds a necessary human quality to this story. We tend to perceive the Revolutionary War in black-and-white terms when in

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reality the majority of colonists did not even want independence initially; they wished to be free of unfair taxation. Ambiguity and ambivalence were typical of the era, as evidenced by John Singleton Copley. We might be tempted to criticize West for his lack of conviction, but we must also understand that personal peace and prosperity are reasonable goals.

As we have seen, West’s reputation as the “father of American art” is also a slippery problem. The fact of the matter, however, is that West taught nearly all of the great colonial and early national artists and there were no obvious alternatives to assume the mantle of leader of a national art. Moreover, those who became directors of art institutions, such as Trumbull, Morse, and Dunlap, cited West’s influence. At a time when the American style was so aligned to European tradition, there was no other artist who better embodied the Anglo-American dialectic. The aesthetic, political, and psychological tensions of the transatlantic cultural exchange personified by Benjamin West remain fascinating to this day.
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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

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