An heroics of empire: Benjamin West and Anglophone history painting, 1764-1774

Abstract
This dissertation interrogates correlations between imperial expansion and the history paintings produced for London audiences by the American-born artist Benjamin West (1738-1820) during his first decade in England (1764-1774). Within that ten-year span, Grand Manner academic history painting shaped and reflected the imperial anxieties that elite Britons experienced as a result of dramatic territorial gains, consolidations and losses in North America and South Asia. To follow the trajectory of history painting's rise, relevance and obsolescence is to track Britons' negotiation of their global status as a "free though conquering people." As England's pre-eminent history painter, West secured for himself a place within the discourses of the imperial self-imaginary by developing two types of iconographic program. First, the selective appropriation of narratives from classical antiquity allowed West and his patrons to inculcate their audiences with visual models for British imperial virtue. Advancing the cause of imperial self-ratification through classical narrative, West cast the English as the natural heirs to the Roman empire. The resulting images paralleled and buoyed contemporary textual discourses of empire and intersected with antiquarian collecting practices, both of which were based on the notion of modern British proprietorship of classical antiquity. Second, developing and refining a model introduced by Francis Hayman (1708-1776) at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in 1761, West contrived a pictorial format which introduced persons living and recently dead into a realm of visual expression formally reserved for characters from biblical and classical textual sources. Invoking some of history painting's most familiar compositional and figural conventions, West recombined history painting, portraiture, landscape and genre to formulate the iconographically hybrid heroics of empire, complete with its own set of pictorial motifs through which West and his followers styled their subjects exemplars of classical imperial virtue. Imperial anxiety afforded history painting its short-lived relevance among English-speaking audiences during the second half of the eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth centuries, and imperial self-acceptance rendered that most highly-esteemed of artistic genres obsolete. Through the visual heroics of empire, Benjamin West established history painting as a viable form of Anglophone cultural production during his first decade in London.
Benjamin West was an Anglo-American painter of historical scenes around and after the time of the American War of Independence. He was the second president of the Royal Academy in London, serving from 1792 to 1805 and 1806 to 1820. West was born in Springfield, Pennsylvania, in a house that is now in the borough of Swarthmore on the campus of Swarthmore College, as the tenth child of an innkeeper. West learned Wollaston's techniques for painting the shimmer of silk and satin, and also adopted some of "his mannerisms, the most prominent of which was to give all his subjects large almond-shaped eyes, which clients thought very chic". The Death of Socrates: 1756. Choose your favorite ottoman empire paintings from millions of available designs. All ottoman empire paintings ship within 48 hours and include a 30-day money-back guarantee. On the Way between Old and New Cairo, Citadel Mosque of Mohammed Ali, and Tombs of the Mamelukes Painting. Louis Comfort Tiffany. $16. More from This Artist. Similar Designs. The Defence of Rhodes by Foulques de Villaret and the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, 1309 Painting. Gustaf Wappers. $16. More from This Artist. Similar Designs. The Defence of Rhodes by Foulques de Villaret and the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem Painting. Gustaf Wappers. $16. More from This Artist. Similar Designs.