

Development of Painting During the Revolutionary Period

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The American Revolutionary period, brimming with political unrest, financial instability, and crushing uncertainty, proved to be a turbulent environment for the aspiring artist. A land transitioning from a cluster of colonies to an autonomous nation had little time or funding to dedicate to the advancement of the arts. Yet the melodrama of war and the gravity of a new nation's birth provided ample artistic inspiration, resulting in not only the most influential works of the era but the most recognizable imagery in all of American history.

Congruent with the puritan ideals of the era, pre-revolutionary colonial artwork was valued primarily for its practicality and pragmatism.¹ The creation of art without clear function was seen as too frivolous for a man and too “impudent” for a woman, so arts outside of textile creation, silverwork, and other necessary crafts were neglected.² However, painted art thrived in a form that modern individuals may be surprised to hear described as essential: portraiture. Before the advent of photography, painted portraits were the most reasonable way to capture a person's likeness. As such, the upper class commissioned portraits to commemorate their achievements, honor their deceased, and project their status.³ As American art historian Lloyd Goodrich explains, this caused an “overwhelming” percentage of painted colonial art to be portraiture.⁴ Not yet craving distinction from their English counterparts, colonial portrait-artists followed the conventions of contemporary Europe. In the late eighteenth century, this meant adhering to the standards of neoclassicism.⁵

Neoclassicism, an artistic movement fronted

by French painter Jacques-Louis David, celebrated the values of antiquity.⁶ Its practitioners strove to recapture the gravitas and simplistic elegance of high Greek and Roman art, emphasizing technical mastery over innovation. Artists flaunted their understanding of *symmetria*, rational space, proportionality, and naturalism. Their dramatic use of shadows, harsh lines, and textures lent painted figures an almost statuesque quality, again harkening back to the idolized works of classical canon.⁷

One such neoclassical artist, John Singleton Copley, became an early example of notable American painters. Born in Boston to a lower-class family in 1738, Copley was an unlikely candidate for the high arts. But when his mother remarried in 1748 to engraver Peter Pelham, Copley gained access to a collection of English portraits.⁸ By studying these works, the young artist gained a unique ability to appeal to the English aspirations of wealthy Bostonians.⁹ Throughout the 1750s and 1760s, Copley painted a plethora of portraits for this demographic, most of whom had Loyalist ties.¹⁰ One such portrait, *Thomas Greene*, dated 1758, portrays the subject's allegiance to England through the addition of an English flag in the painting's background.¹¹ However, Copley did not exclusively work with Loyalists during this period. In 1768 he painted *Paul Revere*, a now extremely well-known portrait of the famed patriot.¹² Though Revere had not yet become the legendary figure history celebrates at the time of his painting, he was already a known revolutionary. This begs the question: where did Copley's allegiance lie? Christopher Brooks, contributor to the Oxford

Art Journal, characterizes Copley as having “loyalist sympathies,”¹³ while Jane Kamensky, in her biography *A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley*, refers to the artist’s political stance as “ambivalent”¹⁴ — an appropriate description for the man who declared: “Art and politics do not mix.”¹⁵ Though debate persists over the nature of Copley’s leanings, historians generally agree that the advancement of his career took precedence over any particular ideology.¹⁶

Another crucial colonial artist, Benjamin West, was also born in 1738. Raised in Springfield, Pennsylvania, West had little exposure to the fine arts.¹⁷ As recorded by John Galt in *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West, Esq., President of the Royal Academy of London* (regarded as the definitive biographical work on West), young Benjamin West first experimented with art at the age of seven when he “endeavored to delineate a portrait” of his infant niece.¹⁸ In Quaker Pennsylvania, artistic expression was not an encouraged nor expected facet of life, but after this initial outburst of creativity, West became enamored. Throughout the next year he sketched flowers, birds, and other subjects which “pleased his eye,” and at the age of eight, his budding passion was rewarded by a gift from his cousin: an engraving.¹⁹ This was the first professional piece of artwork West had ever seen. Unlike Copley, who had the guidance of his stepfather, West began his career entirely self-taught.²⁰ Yet, like Copley, before reaching the age of twenty, West was able to establish himself as a portrait painter. In 1758, West was commissioned to create a portrait of the young Thomas Mifflin, future governor of Pennsylvania.²¹ Though overshadowed by his later portrait of Mifflin (*Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin*, 1773), this early work by West shows that the painter had already reached a level of proficiency surpassing that of the painters around him.²² This talent did not go unnoticed. In 1760, West embarked upon a Grand Tour of Italy, sponsored by William Smith and William Allen, the former the provost of the College of Philadelphia and the latter a powerful Philadelphia-based politician.²³ This tour influenced West immensely, which in turn influenced the course of American art. Exposure to the works of Renaissance painters like Titian and Raphael inspired West to expand beyond the safety of portraiture and venture into the genre of history paintings.²⁴ Though even after advancing past the necessity of portraiture, West did not fully abandon it. After his tutelage in Italy, West settled himself in London where he continued the remainder of his career. In 1764 he

painted *Mary Hopkinson*, a lavish portrait featuring rich textures, including a pink silk gown modeled after the artist’s loose concept of fashion in the “orient,”²⁵ and in 1784, he painted *Richard Price*, a striking portrait of the famed Welsh philosopher with a bold use of *chiaroscuro*.²⁶ Decades later, West produced a portrait in 1812 of Sir John Eardley Wilmot, a former chief justice.²⁷ West had transitioned from neoclassicism to rococo, and his work little reasssembled his Pennsylvanian portraits of the 1750s; this complex, allegorical painting shows that portraiture is much more than a practical craft.

After gaining international renown, West became a tutor to many great American artists. Included in his long list of pupils are Ralph Earl, his brother James Earl, Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, and perhaps the most well-known of all Revolutionary-era painters: John Trumbull.²⁸ Trumbull first began studying under West in 1780 and, off and on, continued to receive his training over the next decade.²⁹ During this time, West “suggested” to Trumbull that he paint “a dozen or more scenes from the American Revolution,” setting Trumbull on the path to lasting fame.³⁰ In the words of Goodrich, “It was abroad, in the London studio of Benjamin West, that the first school of American historical painting was born.”³¹

As summarized by Goodrich, “Historical art can be divided into two main types: contemporary history, and reconstruction of past history.”³² Trumbull’s aspiration fell into the former, which, in a predominantly neoclassical period, was countercultural. The neoclassical mindset dictated that contemporary events need not be granted the same reverence as the events of antiquity, and modeling modern persons after the aesthetics of ancient emperors and deities was nigh sacrilegious. But, in the age of the American Revolution and the dawn of the French Revolution, artists had reason to question these accepted values. The new generation was violently challenging old, hierarchical Europe, and many saw the pertinence of capturing the spectacle around them rather than recreating the history of yore. Though it would not come to fruition for another few decades, the voices of revolutionaries were slowly building the impassioned and experimental path towards romanticism.

While with West, Trumbull completed the first of his great American history paintings. Both *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill* and *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec* were finished in 1786.³³ As one would expect,

each portrays an important battle of the Revolutionary War, but more interestingly, each of the represented battles were American losses. One might question why Trumbull chose these specific scenes to launch his historical series. Goodrich adds the insight, “historical art inclines towards the personal and the dramatic.”³⁴ As Trumbull himself was present at Bunker Hill, he likely did feel a personal connection to the battle, and the drama of both the Battle of Bunker Hill and the Battle of Quebec are undeniable. Though Bunker Hill had been a victory for the British, it was a psychological victory for the Americans. With twice as many British soldiers wounded or killed than American soldiers, this battle gave hope to the American public.³⁵ Alternatively, the Battle of Quebec, involving a blizzard, an ambush, and the death of General Richard Montgomery, was a poignant admonition of American overconfidence.³⁶

Ronald Paulsen, expert of 18th century English culture, provides further analysis of Trumbull’s work by drawing comparisons to literature from the same time period. Paulsen mentions the “youth-age metaphor,” used most notably by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*, to liken England to a mother and America to a child.³⁷ Extending this literary device to the visual medium, he observes, “In *Bunker Hill* the British tend to be fairly elderly and jowled, while the central American figures are young.”³⁸ By presenting the participating men in this way, Trumbull propagates the common image of America as a lively adolescent, yearning to tear away from the restrictive grasp of the British Empire.

Now referring to both *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker’s Hill* and *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec*, Paulsen identifies Trumbull’s work as “baroque.”³⁹ Baroque defines the dominant art style in Europe throughout the 17th century, which remained popular until roughly the 1740s and the rise of neoclassicism.⁴⁰ This style is characterized by dramatism, fluidity of motion, and emotionality. As such, Trumbull’s bold death scenes, ripe with tragedy and teeming with movement, could logically fall under this category. As well as the subjects and stylistic details, the compositions of these paintings also hearken to the baroque. Paulsen observes that each scene is “constructed on [a] long diagonal[] from upper left to lower right, focusing on an attacked, dying man.”⁴¹ The use of diagonal lines rather than the geometric symmetry so common in neoclassicism creates a dynamic and tension-filled plane, ideal for a highly dramatic scene.

Before continuing his historical series, Trumbull, acknowledging the need for factual accuracy, returned home to a changed America in 1789.⁴² For the next five years he traveled through the colonies to assemble “data,” “portraits of the principal actors in the Revolution,” and “background material.”⁴³ Trumbull hoped that after establishing himself as a historical painter he could “persuade the federal government to commission [paintings] on a large scale.”⁴⁴ To the artist’s misfortune, the American government had “advanced little beyond the colonial governments in recognition of art”⁴⁵ and was wholly uninterested in Trumbull’s proposition. Not until decades later, in 1817, were Trumbull’s aspirations fulfilled. The federal government commissioned Trumbull for four paintings to decorate the Rotunda of the Capitol Building. The four resulting works, *Declaration of Independence*, *Surrender of General Burgoyne*, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*, and *General George Washington Resigning his Commission*, were intensely scaled-up recreations of Trumbull’s earlier paintings and sketches.⁴⁶ Due to a childhood eye injury, the artist was less skilled at creating large works, perhaps leading Theodore Sizer, director of the Yale University Art Gallery in the 1940s, to refer to these works of art as “ill-painted murals.”⁴⁷ Goodrich concurred that they have “little of the vitality”⁴⁸ of the original works. However this may be, Trumbull’s reputation rests on these monumental paintings. *Declaration of Independence* became not only Trumbull’s best-known work, but a symbol of early American society.

Charles Willson Peale, student of West, blended the colonial tradition of portraiture with the newly embraced practice of history painting. Peale created portraits of the most influential men in America, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. His portraits “sometimes represented [his subjects] in historic actions and settings,”⁴⁹ differentiating Peale from his contemporaries. In addition to receiving instruction from West, Peale was guided by another famed artist: John Singleton Copley. Copley, celebrated for his portraits’ forthright simplicity and realism, “made a deep impression on Peale.”⁵⁰ His impact shines through Peale’s portraits, particularly in Peale’s implementation of “polished tables”—a staple of Copley’s work—and increased realism.⁵¹ Peale, the only person to paint Washington before the American Revolution and the artist who painted Washington “more times from life than any other artist,” is known for his portraits of the esteemed general.⁵² One portrait

in particular has become Peale's legacy, that being his 1779 portrait *George Washington at Princeton*. In this painting, although Peale paid homage to Thomas Gainsborough's *Augustus Hervey, 3rd Earl of Bristol* through Washington's stance, his choice of accuracy over idealism in the general's proportions relates to Copley's influence.⁵³ Met with more than a warm reception, Peale was commissioned for dozens of recreations by state governments, private collectors, and foreign courts alike.⁵⁴ The portrait demands attention even in the modern day, with copies still featured in Princeton University, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Colonial Williamsburg, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.⁵⁵

The Revolutionary War severed the American Colonies from the British Empire, allowing ambitious American painters the ability to grow beyond the confines of European expectations. The inherent tragedy of bloodshed, the theatrics of battle, and the exhilaration of change ushered in a period of astounding artistic advancement. Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, John Trumbull, and Charles Willson Peale, among other talented individuals, emerged from the cacophony of revolution invigorated and inspired. Recognizing that the events happening around them, like the signing of the Declaration of Independence and George Washington's resignation, would one day be heralded as legends equal to the tales that neoclassicism so enthusiastically memorialized, these painters adapted from the established rules to blaze their own path. And when the burgeoning United States also arose from revolution (now with sufficient resources to allocate for the arts), these artists gladly fulfilled the high demand for portraits, history paintings, and historical portraits. Many of the works created during this tumultuous period retain the admiration of art critics, historians, and the general public thanks to the innovation of their creators.

Endnotes

¹ "American Art: The Colonial Period."

² McFarland, "Art and Artists," 167.

³ *Ibid*, 163.

⁴ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 284.

⁵ *Ibid*, 289.

⁶ Irwin, "Neoclassical Art."

⁷ Irwin, "Neoclassical Art."

⁸ Shank, "John Singleton Copley's Portraits," 130.

⁹ Barratt, "John Singleton Copley (1738–1815)."

¹⁰ Shank, "John Singleton Copley's Portraits," 130.

¹¹ Cincinnati Art Museum, "John Singleton Copley."

¹² Shank, "John Singleton Copley's Portraits," 131.

¹³ Brooks, "Charles Willson Peale: Painting," 31.

¹⁴ Walsh, "Review: *A Revolution in Color*," 1014.

¹⁵ Prown, "John Singleton Copley," 70.

¹⁶ Shank, "John Singleton Copley's Portraits," 131.

¹⁷ McFarland, "Art and Artists," 163.

¹⁸ Galt, *Life and Studies West*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁰ Barratt, "John Singleton Copley (1738–1815)."

²¹ Johnson, "Thomas Mifflin."

²² Shank, "John Singleton Copley's Portraits," 130.

²³ Prown, "Benjamin West Antiquity," 30-31.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁵ Smithsonian American Art Museum, "Mary Hopkinson."

²⁶ The American Revolution Institute, "Richard Price by Benjamin West."

²⁷ Yale Center for British Art, "John Eardley Wilmot."

²⁸ Prown, "Benjamin West Antiquity," 29.

²⁹ Jaffe, "Contemporary Words and Picture," 31.

³⁰ Sizer, "John Trumbull, 'Patriot-Painter,'" 286.

³¹ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 285.

³² *Ibid*, 284.

³³ Jaffe, "Contemporary Words and Pictures," 32.

³⁴ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 284.

³⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Battle of Bunker Hill."

³⁶ Yale University Art Gallery, "American Paintings and Sculpture."

³⁷ Paulson, "John Trumbull and Representation," 352.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 352.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 353.

⁴⁰ Britannica, "Baroque Art and Architecture."

⁴¹ Paulson, "John Trumbull and Representation," 353.

⁴² Jaffe, "Contemporary Words and Pictures," 31.

⁴³ Sizer, "John Trumbull, 'Patriot-Painter,'" 286.

⁴⁴ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 285.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 285.

⁴⁶ Architect of the Capital, "Capitol Rotunda."

⁴⁷ Sizer, "John Trumbull, 'Patriot-Painter,'" 293.

⁴⁸ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 285.

⁴⁹ Goodrich, "Painting of American History," 285.

⁵⁰ Brooks, "Charles Willson Peale: Painting," 32.

⁵¹ Ibid, 33.

⁵² United States Senate, "George Washington at Princeton."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

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