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Table of Contents

Bernardino Branca

Introduction

pp. 1-2

Konstantinos Gravanis

An Intellectual Journey through the Four Elements in Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura

pp. 3-38

Larry Silver

Benjamin West: Modern/History and Religion

pp. 39-59

Robert Pawlik

Note on Pierre Hadot as a Reader of Edgar Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*

pp. 60-70

Jonathan Blower

An Introductory Note to Edgar Wind's *Grundbegriffe*

pp. 71-104

Benjamin West: Modern/History and Religion

Larry Silver

Abstract

Edgar Wind's well-established fascination with eighteenth-century English painting chiefly focused on the heroic portrait tradition around Joshua Reynolds. However, his seminal article about "the revolution in history painting" engaged with Benjamin West's innovation: to combine grand manner history painting with modern events in modern costume, and, as Wind readily recognized, also with group portraits from the English genre of "conversation pieces." After his 1770 *Death of General Wolfe*, West painted other grand manner modern histories of virtuous deaths, featuring the Earl of Chatham (1778) and Lord Nelson (1806). But sponsored by King George III, West also began a massive series of religious pictures for Windsor Castle, proposed for a Chapel of Revealed Religion, never realized, even after two decades. Despite West's adherence to religious painting traditions, Wind neglected this artistic contribution, unusual for this period in England and aware of Roman heritage. But West's imagery, especially his depictions of Revelation became increasingly steeped in contemporary theories of the sublime, evoking both terror and horror of the Apocalypse, very much at odds with Wind.

Keywords

Benjamin West; Edgar Wind; Modern/History; Religion

Edgar Wind's fascination with painting extended to his adopted country, England, especially during the formative eighteenth century, when Joshua Reynolds headed the newly-formed Royal Academy.¹ While portraiture, especially by Reynolds but also by Gainsborough and other masters, remained a dominant cultural emphasis for English patrons, however, history painting acquired a new prestige in the nation, chiefly through the works of such London-based painters as Pennsylvania-born Benjamin West (1738–1820) and following him, a friendly rival, Massachusetts native John Singleton Copley

¹ His essays on English eighteenth-century painting have been collected and edited by Jayne Anderson as: Edgar Wind, *Hume and the Heroic Portrait. Studies in Eighteenth-Century Imagery*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: University Press, 1986).

(1738–1815).² Mindful of this shift, Wind wrote a pioneering article about West’s role in “the revolution of history painting,” the merging of grand manner history painting with events of contemporary heroism.³ This essay will investigate West’s later developments in the grand manner, which continued his personal reformulation of history painting but also returned him to ambitious canvases—and stained-glass designs—of religious subjects.

Modern/History

After the middle of the nineteenth century, both French and English artists, inspired by the experience of Roman traditions energetically pursued paintings of subjects that provided heroic morality, usually derived from Greco-Roman history, in what Robert Rosenblum (discussing French painting) labeled as *exempla virtutis*.⁴ Significantly, however, in the works of Benjamin West (1738–1820), recent events, often cast in a classicizing mode with figures modeled upon pictorial traditions emanating from ancient and Renaissance Rome, could add modern events to the inherited liturgy of historical examples.

The touchstone for West’s innovation, already signaled in Wind’s essay, stems from his famous, groundbreaking *Death of General Wolfe* (1770; Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada; Fig. 1).⁵ This much-discussed image records the turning-point battle in North America from the world-wide Seven Years’ War between England and France. Here British forces triumphed on the Plains of Abraham outside Quebec on September 13, 1759. A frieze of figures across the foreground turns inward toward the central event, the death on the battlefield of victorious Major-General James Wolfe. West depicts the commander slumping and expiring in his red uniform, while surrounded by consoling fellow officers, all standing beneath the British ensign. The ensemble derives traditional Christian images of mourning, the Lamentation over the recumbent body of Christ, but in fact this cluster of witnesses is a group portrait: six individuals’ names appeared in a key appended to the 1776 engraving by William Woollett after West’s painting. Wind already recognized the hybridity of this combination, pointing out that West’s *Death of General Wolfe* is “the documentary painting of distant marvels (*mirabilia*), which enters into history painting as well as into stage design; and the conversation piece, which, whenever heightened by solemn pathos or

² Nicholas Penny, *Reynolds*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy, 1985); Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds. The Painter in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). For West chronology and a fundamental essay by Allen Staley, *Benjamin West. American Painter at the English Court*, exh. cat. (Baltimore: Museum of Art, 1989); Helmut van Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). For the dialogue between the two Americans in England, Staley, *Copley and West in England 1775–1815* (London: Burlington Press, 2021).

³ Wind, “The Revolution of History Painting,” in *Hume and the Heroic Portrait*, 88–99 (orig. 1938, *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*).

⁴ Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 50–106.

⁵ Ann Uhry Abrams, *The Valiant Hero. Benjamin West and Grand Style History Painting* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1985), 161–184.

an exotic setting, passes almost imperceptibly from portraiture to history painting.”⁶ Meanwhile at the left edge, a soldier advances with the captured French standard to indicate the victorious outcome of the conflict. Contemporary uniforms locate the battle in the near-present, still unfolding in a smoke-filled background, as British ships on the St. Lawrence River at the right horizon are unloading artillery. Below the figure of Wolfe lies a musket, another weapon of contemporary wartime, replacing garments and weapons of the ancient world. Further locating the image on the American continent are two further figures in the left foreground: a moccasin-clad Ranger in green; and a semi-nude, tattooed, crouching Amerindian. That latter figure is purely symbolic, for no Indians participated in the struggle for Quebec. Wolfe employs an ideal body, albeit tattooed, as a noble allegory for the New World continent itself. His pose with chin in hand stems from the prophet figures and his muscles from the *ignudi* of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, visited by West during his European Grand Tour of 1760–1763, before he settled in London.



Figure 1. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, oil on canvas. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. (Image in Public Domain)

⁶ Wind, “Revolution of History Painting,” 93, continuing “the exotic setting tends to increase the documentary interest, and surrounds the portrait figures with an aura of distant marvels.”

West took considerable liberties with the documentation of the actual Battle of Quebec in order to provide both the group portrait ensemble but also the set pieces of heroic death and staged events coinciding with that martyrdom. In defending his representation of the event, West was quoted about painting as an “Epic representation” for the death of a national hero:

It must exhibit the event in a way to excite awe & veneration & that which may be required to give superior interest to the representation must be introduced, all that can shew the importance of the Hero. Wolfe must not die like a common soldier under a Bush . . . To move the mind there should be a spectacle presented to raise and warm the mind & all shd. be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the Hero . . . A mere matter of fact will never produce this effect.⁷

Arguing against Joshua Reynolds, who claimed that modern dress was not suitable for the inherent greatness of a historical subject, West countered by saying that the distance of Canada as a place compensated for the contemporaneity of that historic event:

The subject I have to represent is the conquest of a great province of America by the British troops. It is a topic that history will proudly record, and the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist. I consider myself as undertaking to tell this great event to the eyes of the world; but if Instead of the facts of the transaction, I represent classical fictions, how shall I be understood by posterity?⁸

Though born in Pennsylvania and already a much-sought portraitist, Benjamin West aspired early to visit Europe in order to experience the grand tradition and inform his ambitions to be a history painter. Dubbed “the American Raphael,” he arrived in London in 1763 and in 1768 became a charter member of the Royal Academy of Arts, led by Reynolds, who intended to foster the Grand Style and bolster the status of artists. West would later succeed Joshua Reynolds as the second President of the Royal Academy.

The trajectory and variety of West’s English output (other than portraits) was already set in 1768 at the Society of Artists, predecessor of the Royal Academy. There he displayed the following: a mythology, *Venus and Europa*; an Old Testament subject, *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*; and his history painting, a frieze-like theme from classical history (Tacitus), *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768; New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery; Fig. 2).⁹ These works allowed West to display his learning, his faith, and his familiarity with classical models for his figures, including the costumes and

⁷ Quoted by Staley, *Benjamin West*, 54, from the diary of Joseph Farington; also, Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 206. Wolfe’s own pose in the painting has been compared to another ancient model, the *Dying Gaul*. Yet when first beholding the *Apollon Belvedere* in the Vatican, West is quoted as gushing, “My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!” Quoted by Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 76, from the biography of West by John Galt (London: Cadell and Davies, 1816).

⁸ Quoted by David Irwin, *Neoclassicism* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 169; Staley, *Benjamin West*, 52.

⁹ Staley, *Benjamin West*, 41-44.

architectural setting of the latter picture, which conveyed a model of restrained, dignified mourning by the pious noble widow.¹⁰



Figure 2. Benjamin West, *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768, oil on canvas. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery. (Image in Public Domain)

That work, in turn, led to his royal patronage by King George III for a 1769 painting, *The Departure of Regulus from Rome*. In an even more densely populated composition, West represents another classical subject about a captured Roman general and consul who stoically kept his promise to return to his captors in Carthage during the First Punic War.¹¹ Such classical tales as *Regulus* highlight social moral responsibility and civic duty over personal sentiments, tinged with the patina of ancient Rome in the best Neoclassical spirit.¹²

Thus, West became a favorite of King George III, culminating with a role as Historical Painter to the King in 1772 and then Surveyor of the King's Pictures in 1791. West also significantly contributed to decorative programs at Windsor Castle from 1779–

¹⁰ Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 134-143; Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2010), 204-206, 209-218.

¹¹ Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 146-153; Staley, *Benjamin West*, 43-44.

¹² Irwin, *Neoclassicism*, 129-180, esp. 133-37, 156-159, 165-167.

1801, during which time he received an annual stipend of a thousand pounds, freeing him from commercial demands on his career. In addition, his audience comprised the highest nobility of England, allowing him opportunity to feature dramatic subjects of virtuous life and death from history.

Indeed, heroic death frequently formed the subject of West history pictures. Already as a young teenage artist before any experience of Europe, he had painted a *Death of Socrates* (ca. 1756; location unknown).¹³ Twice he painted *The Death of Epaminondas* (1773; 1779), an ancient Theban general, who died, like Wolfe, enquiring about the status of his army in battle.¹⁴ Both that obscure subject and the *Regulus* were subjects assigned by the Society of Arts for a competition in 1759. The earlier version of *Epaminondas* was also made for George III and intended to hang beside a replica of *The Death of General Wolfe* in the royal collection. From Elizabethan English history, West also painted on commission the death of English knight and poet, Sir Philip Sidney, who died of wounds in battle in 1586, with the virtuous title, *Sir Philip Sidney, Mortally Wounded, Rejecting the Water Offered to Him, and Ordering it to be first given to a Wounded Soldier* (1806).¹⁵

But following up on the success of *General Wolfe* and the new concept of modern history painting, both Copley and West (ca. 1778; New Haven, Yale Center for British Art; Fig. 3) painted intricately detailed images of another heroic modern demise, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*.¹⁶ This was the sudden collapse in April 1778 of another national hero, the “great commoner,” William Pitt, speaking in the House of Lords shortly after his elevation to the peerage. The leader had governed (1757–1761) over England’s success in the Seven Years’ War, including battles in America. Once again, this modern history is steeped in the demands of group portraiture, as Wind recognized. In Copley’s large-scale, more theatrical version, completed later (1781), fully fifty-five individuals are depicted, and his figure of Pitt recalls West’s recumbent, diagonal Wolfe, whereas West positions the slumping earl in pain on a chair with a walking stick, while observed from both sides by a more compact group of framing lords.

West also collaborated with the king on a series of historical canvases about English battlefield glory, particularly from the medieval Hundred Years War, to decorate the Audience Chamber and throne room at Windsor Castle.¹⁷ Following on the success of *General Wolfe*, these paintings required historical research into period costumes to glorify with accuracy heroic events from the formation of the nation and its royal rulers, especially

¹³ Staley, *Copley and West*, 143-44, fig. 83.

¹⁴ Staley, *Copley and West*, 142-43, fig. 79; Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 186-188, fig. 118. The latter version of *Epaminondas* was paired with a medieval subject, *The Death of Chevalier Bayard* (1799); *ibid.*, fig. 80, already the subject of a large canvas (1772; royal collection; Staley, *Benjamin West*, p. 55, no. 16).

¹⁵ Staley, *Copley and West*, 139-40, fig. 77; also an earlier version of the same theme, fig. 78.

¹⁶ Staley, *Copley and West*, 67-76, figs. 35-36; Staley, *Benjamin West*, 56-57 (sketch, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum); Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 189-191.

¹⁷ Staley, *Benjamin West*, 68-71; Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 195-197, figs. 11-12, 126-127.

under Edward III (r. 1327–1377), such as the victorious Battle of Crécy and the Founding of the Order of the Garter at Windsor within the seven-work ensemble.



Figure 3. Benjamin West, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, ca. 1778, oil on canvas. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art. (Image in Public Domain)

After a committed interval of two decades working for the king on a series of religious pictures for a Windsor Castle chapel (see below), West returned in the new century to his breakthrough success with *General Wolfe*. He persisted in producing ambitious, grand manner history painting, but still devoted to current events or formative British milestones, increasingly in dialogue and rivalry with his fellow American expatriate, John Singleton Copley.¹⁸

In October 1805 at the naval Battle of Trafalgar, Admiral Horatio Nelson also expired in victory over the French, another triumph in echo of Wolfe at Quebec. Within

¹⁸ Staley, *Copley and West*; Emily Ballew and William Pressly, *John Singleton Copley in England*, exh. cat. (Washington: National Gallery, 1995). A fine biography of Copley, with discussions of West, Jane Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley* (New York: Norton, 2016).

the emerging cult of Nelson, West soon turned to the project of another enormous landmark painting: *The Death of Lord Nelson* (1806; Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery; Fig. 4).¹⁹ He showed the uniformed admiral expiring on deck from a sniper's bullet while lying prone on a diagonal, surrounded by onlookers who turn to face him. These are fellow officers in dress blue but also marines in red coats as well as ordinary sailors. This painting, too, generated an engraving of 1811 by James Heath, which identified fully fifty-eight onlookers by name in their group portrait. The naval conflict appears in the left background, a tangle of sails and billowing smoke above burning decks. As with *General Wolfe*, West took liberties with his scenario that departed from strict documentation, despite his specific research into details of the event from survivors, who revealed, expressly, that Nelson died below deck. In defense of his visual presentation of "alternative facts," West's comments to Farington about "Epic representation," quoted above also expressly grouped Nelson with Wolfe: "Wolfe must not die like a common Soldier under a Bush; neither should Nelson be represented dying in the gloomy hold of a Ship, like a sick man in a Prison Hole."²⁰

Ultimately, West's enormous *Lord Nelson* painting looks crowded and undramatic when compared to the reduced number of figures and intensified focus of *General Wolfe*. Its inverse was painted at enormous scale by celebrated marine painter J.M.W. Turner, who had studied Nelson's flagship *Victory*. Instead, Turner recreated the excitement and confusion of battle: *The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizzen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory* (1806–1808; London, Tate Gallery).²¹ He featured small figures gathered around the dying Nelson on its deck, but that scene appears in the midst of the crowded sea battle, filled with closely mingled sails and cannon fusillades. Nelson ship, seen from above, is charging at an angle into the fray with guns blazing. Here Turner's aim is to simulate naval military conflict as a docudrama.

But West persisted in making another contribution to the Nelson celebrations, which canonized the martyred hero even more than the earlier posthumous celebrations of Wolfe.²² The admiral was famous for his patriotism, led by his dictum that "England expects that every man will due his duty." His famous last words were, "God and my country." For a commissioned sculpted monument for St. Paul's Cathedral, West decided to go further in his conception of a second Nelson memorial. In 1807 he painted a sketch for a multi-media monument that re-injected his classical learning and pictorial vocabulary in celebration: *The Apotheosis of Lord Nelson* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art; Fig. 5).²³

¹⁹ Staley, *Copley and West*, 129-134; Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Bonapartism 1800–1815* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 106-108; Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's Death of Nelson," in Douglas Fraser et al., eds., *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolf Wittkower* (London: Phaidon, 1967), 265-73.

²⁰ Quoted by Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 206.

²¹ Boime, *Age of Bonapartism*, 104-106.

²² For Wolfe celebrations and the 1772 monument for him in Westminster Abbey by Joseph Wilton, Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 161-170.

²³ Abrams, *Valiant Hero*, 206-207.

Like a deceased Roman emperor, the body of Nelson in a toga-like shroud is handed up by Neptune, god of the seas, for transport to heaven by the allegorical figure of winged Victory. Accompanying genii with the laurel wreath of conquest and a banner reading “Trafalgar” present his body to the armored personification of Brittania, whose face is shadowed in grief. In his role as President of the Royal Academy, West put this design on public display. In tribute to the sister arts of the Academy, he also proposed a classical frame with heroic Doric columns, flanked by sculpted standing figures of contemporary seamen with cannons and ensigns. West’s design was also realized in a full-scale painting (1807; Greenwich, National Maritime Museum).



Figure 4. Benjamin West, *The Death of Lord Nelson*, 1806, oil on canvas. Liverpool Walker Art Gallery. (Image in Public Domain)

The St. Paul’s memorial was finally assigned to John Flaxman (1897–1818). It featured the hero standing in uniform on a pedestal with river gods, while presented by Minerva, goddess of war and a smaller standing pair of midshipmen.²⁴ Minerva, however, also merges with the allegory of armored figure Brittania, accompanied by the British lion.

²⁴ Irwin, *Neoclassicism*, 278-86.

Like West in both tributes to Nelson, Flaxman also cosmeticized the hero, omitting his blind eye and disguising with a cloak his amputated arm, lost in battle.



Figure 5. Benjamin West, *Sketch for a Monument to Lord Nelson*, 1807, oil on canvas. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art. (Image in Public Domain)

Beyond Nelson, however, contemporary heroes of historic significance were scarce. West returned, therefore, in his latter two decades to his earlier Christian projects, chiefly the Chapel of Revealed Religion, but also other biblical subjects. Unlike his more narrowly composed vertical or horizontal paintings for the Chapel, however, which usually focused

on a small number of figures, these works on huge horizontal canvases display dramatic actions by large figure groups. These ambitious works focus anew on Gospel events.²⁵

Religion

Even more boldly, on commission from King George III, West undertook to reinforce the Anglican national religious tradition, still headed by the King of England, even though it ran against the period grain of Enlightenment rationalism and the checkered English Reformation history, a heritage of hostility about religious images. Despite the presence of history paintings and representation of scenes from literature, including canonical English literature, such as Shakespeare and Milton,²⁶ virtually no other artists besides West (and, following his lead, Copley) were painting biblical subjects. For example, shortly after the formation of the Royal Academy, West and several other members proposed to decorate St. Paul's Cathedral with paintings, but their project was vetoed by the bishop of London as "popery."²⁷

Across two decades, from 1779–1801, West designed large stained-glass windows and numerous paintings (some thirty-six of them planned) for the King at Windsor's Royal Chapel (once adjacent to St. George's Hall), to comprise an overall theme, the Progress of Revealed Religion "from its commencement to its completion," across Old and New Testaments and to allow West to become the heir in grand manner religious art to such legends as Raphael and Michelangelo.²⁸ Considering Wind's passion for the High Renaissance masters and religious iconography, it is surprising that he did not also engage deeply with West's own massive religious project; however, part of the reason might have been its wide dispersal, with most of the extant images now residing in less prominent American collections. During the long period of preparation, plans changed, and the paintings have largely been dispersed or else survive only in sketches. Several works were also displayed at the Royal Academy, including his massive apocalyptic theme, *Death on a Pale Horse* (1796; Detroit, Institute of Arts; reprised at large-scale, 1817, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; see below). Work on the Chapel project was finally suspended in 1801, so it remained uncompleted, as the artist and monarch clearly became

²⁵ Staley, *Benjamin West*, 92-95.

²⁶ John Boydell opened his Shakespeare Gallery in 1789; a print dealer, he commissioned paintings by leading artists and had professional engravers produce replicas of their works. For example, West's *King Lear: Act III, Scene IV (King Lear in the Storm)* was submitted as a painting (1788; Detroit Institute of Arts; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; sketch, Rhode Island School of Design), then replicated as an engraving by William Sharp in 1793. Walter Pape and Frederick Burwick, eds., *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery* (Bottrop: Peter Pomp, 1996); Winifred Friedman, *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery* (New York, 1976). Staley, *Benjamin West*, 82-83, suggests that this image might subtly comment on George III's increasing madness.

²⁷ Staley, *Benjamin West*, 71.

²⁸ Staley, *Benjamin West*, 71-76; Nancy Pressly, *Revealed Religion: Benjamin West's Commissions for Windsor Castle and Fonthill Abbey*, exh. cat. (San Antonio: Museum of Art, 1983); Jerry Meyer, "Benjamin West's Chapel of Revealed Religion: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Protestant Art," *Art Bulletin* 57 (1975), pp. 247-275.

estranged for reasons that remain murky (The king's mental illness and West's republican politics have both been offered as explanations). The paintings were returned to West's sons by George IV and eventually left England.

The proposed early layout of the chapel wall is apparent in an architectural drawing with West's included outlines of the proposed paintings, designed for the site (New Haven, Yale Center for British Art; Fig. 6). From left to right, in the upper register they follow in order (with current locations): *Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh, their Rods turned into Serpents*; *Pharaoh and his Host Lost in the Red Sea* (1792; sketch, Worcester Art Museum); *The Twelve Tribes of Israel Drawing Lots*; and *David Anointed King*. Beneath them larger paintings dominate the space: *The Baptism of Christ* (Greenville, S.C. Bob Jones University); *Christ Healing the Sick*; *The Ascension*, tallest of all (Bob Jones University; sketch, ca. 1782, London, Tate; Fig. 7); *The Inspiration of St. Peter*; and *St. Paul and Barnabas Rejecting the Jews and Receiving the Gentiles* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts). Another drawing in the royal collections shows a chapel altar with the Last Supper below (London, Tate Gallery) and a tall altarpiece above (now in the House of Commons), *Moses as the First Law Giver*, as the leader, enveloped by clouds, receives the tablets of the Decalogue from atop Mount Sinai as they descend from the divine light of heaven. Another sketch of Moses survives (1801; New York, Metropolitan Museum; Fig. 8) for a work near the end of the project, so never finally executed: *Moses Shown the Promised Land*. It shows the leader, bearded and recumbent in clouds but with hands upraised in acknowledgment; succored by angels, he receives the divine revelation again as a diagonal shaft of light, presented by a gesturing angel standing angel at right.



Figure 6. Benjamin West, *Design for a Wall for the King's Chapel*, ca. 1779–1781, pen and ink with wash and watercolor. New Haven, Yale Center for British Art. (Image in Public Domain)



Figure 7. Benjamin West, Sketch for *Ascension of Christ*, ca. 1782, oil on canvas. London, Tate Gallery. (Image in Public Domain)

The overall scheme would have traced the progress of Revealed Religion through time. The final phase was the Endtime, Revelation, which followed after Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Gospel themes. Despite their uncertain placement, several tall vertical images feature major prophets in dialogue with angels: *Isaiah's Lips Anointed with Fire* (Bob Jones) and *Jeremiah* (both sketches; Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts). Here the prophet figures are passive recipients of the divine message that they transmit, just as Christ reveals his divine nature in the *Ascension* and shows his supernatural powers in hovering over his earthly disciples.



Figure 8. Benjamin West, Sketch for *Moses Shown the Promised Land*, 1801, oil on panel. New York, Metropolitan Museum. (Image in Public Domain)

West's annual royal stipend also ended in 1810 with the accession of a new monarch, George IV. The painter responded by producing enormous canvases, chiefly for himself in the unlikely event of finding a buyer for such works, but also for display as a private exhibition for a paying public—a tactic employed for income by Copley earlier. The first of these large works, the *Rejection of Jesus* (1814; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Fig. 9), an incident in all four Gospels, was prepared with a surviving oil sketch (1811; Rochester University, Memorial Art Gallery). It contrasts the central figure of Jewish high priest, wearing his ceremonial robes with arms outstretched, against the subdued and humbled figure of Jesus, standing at left and facing the priest, while holding the mock reed scepter and wearing the crown of thorns after enduring his tortures during the Passion.

This crowded scene, facing inward toward the principal figures, unfolds across the breadth of a classical building, whose rounded arches and Doric columns hark back to the settings of both the *Agrippina* and the *Regulus* pictures from the outset of West's career nearly half a century earlier. In that respect as well as in its very grandeur of scale, this canvas draws on West's foundational ambition. Like *Agrippina*, the dark-robed Virgin Mary in the lower right corner is draped in her grief as she stands with other holy women witnessing the scene. They provide a quiet visual counterpoint to the dramatic poses and dialogue between Jesus and the high priest and his entourage of elders. In effect this large

crowd suggests the subsequent scene when Pontius Pilate will present Jesus to the people for possible pardon, the traditional *Ecce Homo* scene (“Behold the Man;” John 19:5), but they reject that possible clemency. This narrative from the life of Jesus departs from the previous Chapel imagery of Old Testament patriarchs and prophets as well as the glory of Incarnation and Resurrection to reframe Gospel events as history, now as fully populated as his *Death of Nelson*.



Figure 9. Benjamin West, *Christ Rejected*, 1814, oil on canvas. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. (Image in Public Domain)

In the new century, West also turned to Jesus’s mission, a scene of *Christ Healing the Sick in the Temple* (ca. 1815/1817; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Hospital; Fig. 10). That hospital commission first came to the artist, a native of the region, as a possible donation in 1800, and its subject (Matthew 21: 14-15) is a scene of miracles and conversions of *the* sick and the halt, to the consternation of witnessing priests and Pharisees. West had painted an earlier painting of the same subject (destroyed), a vertical composition with compact figures facing a haloed, standing Jesus; that work is preserved in an engraving by

Benjamin Smith (1813).²⁹ The first version of the subject was completed in 1811, purchased by collectors as a founding gift for a potential museum project, the British Institution (est. 1805); however, it was later damaged by and lost to a flood (though preserved in an 1822 engraving by Charles Heath). West did paint a second version, still at the Hospital, one of America's oldest (founded 1751); it was delivered in 1817.



Figure 10. Benjamin West, *Christ Healing the Sick in the Temple*, ca. 1815–1817, oil on canvas. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Hospital. (Image in Public Domain)

Dense crowds fill the Temple space, which is indicated by the large columns and oil lamps above as well as by the candelabrum in the left background. West has relegated the hostile, staring priests and scribes to the shadowy second rank behind Jesus and the youthful St. John Evangelist beside him. Across the immediate foreground various supplicants kneel or bow. A mother in the lower left corner looks up while holding her ailing child. Across from her a lame man on a litter clasps his hands in prayer, as a woman companion beside him holds a crutch. Other sick petitioners appear on the right side within the crowd. Here West has moved from his earlier images drawn from classical tales of moral conduct to reassert the same kind of historicity for Gospel events and the life of Jesus. Rembrandt's famous *Hundred Guilder Print* (ca. 1649) of Christ's mission doubtless served as West's visual model.³⁰

²⁹ Staley, *Copley and West*, 88-90, fig. 50.

³⁰ Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt's Hundred Guilder Print: His Master Etching* (London: Lund Humphries, 2021).

As the impetus waned in the 1790s for his Chapel of Revealed Religion for King George III, West received a commission from William Beckford to decorate his proposed chapel at Fonthill Abbey with imagery from the Book of Revelation.³¹ That project, never realized, began with designs for large stained-glass subjects drawn from Revelation and had ended by 1801 along with the Revealed Religion series. But with the overlap between these religious projects, West was already turning his attention to apocalyptic imagery. His 1796 sketch, *Death on a Pale Horse* (Detroit, Institute of Arts; Fig. 11), exhibited at the Royal Academy, already depicts the famous passage of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:1-8). At the very center rides the figure of mounted Death, beneath an unholy flock of flying demons and followed by the flames of Hell. The other horsemen, bearing weapons on other colored horses (white, red, and black, respectively) represent pestilence, famine, and destruction, released to devastate the earth. Beneath their hooves, victims are dying from weapons, starvation, and animal attacks. Despite the fantasy at the heart of this vision, West still draws on venerable models, particularly the equestrian hunt scenes by Peter Paul Rubens.³² This devastating subject might derive from contemporary millenarian anxieties at the turn of a new century as well as the unstable political fallout from recent revolutions in both West's native land and France.



Figure 11. Benjamin West, Sketch for *Death on a Pale Horse*, 1796, oil on canvas. Detroit, Institute of Arts. (Image in Public Domain)

Once the Chapel of Revealed Religion project was definitively ended, West continued to explore apocalyptic subjects in drawing sketches and paintings derived from the

³¹ Nancy Pressly, *Revealed Religion*, 57-67; Staley, *Benjamin West*, 85-91.

³² Arnout Balis, *Rubens Hunting Scenes. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XVIII.2* (Oxford: Harvey Miller, 1986).

ensemble.³³ Notably, his *Destruction of the Beast and False Prophet*, preserved in a sketch that he displayed at the Royal Academy in 1804 (Minneapolis, Institute of Art; Fig. 12), also draws from the apocalyptic text of Revelation 19. It shows mounted heavenly armies, with a Faithful and True leader on a white horse who subdues the beast, the false prophet, and the kings of the earth. West shows the heroic leader bearing a weapon of light in his upraised hand, as the horrific beast covers in the lower right corner. Likely part of the last arrangement plan for the Chapel of Revealed Religion, which West diagrammed in a final plea of 1801 (Swarthmore College), this work got detached for presentation as an individual composition.³⁴



Figure 12. Benjamin West, Sketch for *Destruction of the Beast and False Prophet*, 1804, oil on panel. Minneapolis, Institute of Art. (Image in Public Domain)

Following his Gospel images of Jesus, both healing and rejected, West finally painted a last, large-scale, biblical canvas of *Death on a Pale Horse* (1817; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Fig. 13), perhaps newly reinforced by the Napoleonic episode,

³³ Nancy Pressly, *Revealed Religion*, 48-49, with a discussion of another image of Burkean sublime, *The Deluge*, *ibid.*, 27-31; Meyer, "West's Chapel," 258-259.

³⁴ Nancy Pressly, *Revealed Religion*, 18, fig. 7.

ended at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, shortly before he began his huge painting. England's costly war with France encompassed the long period of both works, from 1793 through 1815. Whatever his motivation for this horrific imagery, to which he would return, West's final large biblical canvas turns to the fearsome image of the sublime, also featured in the work of his contemporaries, Blake and Fuseli.³⁵



Figure 13. Benjamin West, *Death on a Pale Horse*, 1817 oil on canvas. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. (Image in Public Domain)

Perhaps for this reason Edgar Wind did not turn from the eighteenth-century achievements of Reynolds, chiefly in heroic portraiture (shared with West), to these latter-day religious works by West, already so distant from his greatest love, the painted work of Michelangelo and Italian humanism. The power of divine revelation over human reason and heroic agency, indeed of the emerging Romantic over the (Neo-)Classical, opened an unbridgeable distance from Wind's artistic ideals.

³⁵ Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), esp. 57-110; Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution 1750–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 260-370; David Bindman, *William Blake: His Art and Times* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982); Jean Hagstrum, *William Blake. Poet and Painter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), esp. 58-71, 91-103; Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli* (London: Tate Gallery, 2001). Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* appeared in 1757; see also Morton Paley, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

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