British and American History Paintings of the 1700s

Sophisticated Europeans from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries deemed “history painting” to be the supreme achievement in the visual arts. In addition to imaginatively re-creating actual events from the past, history paintings also illustrated heroic or moralizing episodes from religion, mythology, and literature.

The central challenge of history painting lay in selecting a particular subject that could engage the heart and instruct the mind. In devising appropriate figures, the painter demonstrated his mastery of anatomy and expression. Grand settings and symbolic accessories proved the artist’s grasp of perspective depth and still-life draftsmanship. Compositions and color schemes had to be carefully conceived to accentuate the principal characters and to clarify the meanings of the incidents.

In depicting significant events that appealed to the conscience, history painting deserved its reputation as the most demanding and rewarding form of art—both for the creator and the viewer. The same desire for profundity in narrative pictures often invested portraits and landscapes with allegorical meanings and poetic overtones.

Idealism versus Realism in History Painting

Sir Joshua Reynolds, first president of London’s Royal Academy of art, delivered these words in a speech in 1774: “Invention is one of the great marks of genius; but if we consult experience, we shall find, that it is by being conversant with the inventions of others, that we learn to invent; as by reading the thoughts of others we learn to think.... It is vain for poets or painters to endeavour to invent with material on which the mind may work, and from which invention must originate. Nothing can come of nothing.”

For his own history paintings, Reynolds declared he would “sometimes deviate from vulgar and strict historical truth, in pursuing the grandeur of his design.” Thus, regardless of when and where the events occurred, Reynolds clothed his figures in classical robes and placed them before idealized scenery. In 1771, though, the American artist Benjamin West, who was to succeed Reynolds as the Royal Academy’s president, produced a startling shift in convention. West depicted a recent incident, set against a recognizable location, with figures in contemporary dress.

Defending his novel idea of conveying history plainly rather than allegorically, West stated, “The same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist.... I want mark the date, the place, and the parties engaged in the event; and if I am not able to dispose of the circumstances in a picturesque manner, no academical distribution of Greek or Roman costume will enable me to do justice to the subject.” Reynolds graciously acknowledged that West’s straightforward approach gave a new, more realistic, direction to history painting.

John Singleton Copley
American, 1738–1815 (Worked in Britain, 1775–1815)

***The Death of the Earl of Chatham*, dated 1779**

The Boston portraitist John Singleton Copley, urged by Benjamin West to further his artistic studies abroad, sailed for Europe in 1774. Within a few years, Copley had the necessary skills to undertake huge pictures of events from recent history.

On 7 April 1778, William Pitt, the 1st Earl of Chatham, rose to speak in London’s House of Lords. In the midst of a debate about the colonial revolutionaries, Pitt suffered a stroke and died one month later. His death removed one of Britain’s leading political moderates during the critical years of the American War of Independence.

This small oil painting is Copley’s preliminary compositional sketch for his large canvas now in the Tate Gallery, London. Sunbeams pour through a roundel window over the throne canopy, spotlighting the stricken Pitt. Following proper academic procedure, Copley first used browns and grays to work out the overall distribution of the scene before considering the color scheme and details. The pencil lines drawn over this study create a proportional grid—call “squaring”—that enabled the artist to transfer and enlarge the design. In 1781, the final ten-foot-wide canvas was displayed to popular acclaim in a private pavilion. How Copley had managed to persuade fifty-five noblemen to sit for their portraits became the talk of British society.

Oil on canvas, 0.527 x 0.645 m (20 3/4 x 25 3/8 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Gordon Dexter 1947.15.1

Henry Fuseli
British (born Swiss), 1741–1825

***Oedipus Cursing His Son, Polynices*, 1786**

Henry Fuseli’s dramatic painting, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1786, depicts the tense climax of *Oedipus at Colonus*, a drama by Sophocles. In that ancient Greek tragedy, King Oedipus had gone into self-imposed exile at Colonus, a town near Athens, after discovering to his horror that, unwittingly, he had murdered his father and married his own mother. Oedipus, having blinded himself in remorse, is depicted here with blood-red eyes in a thick, scabby paint—the opposite of the normal use of smooth, clear textures for eyes.

The kneeling Polynices, one of Oedipus’ two sons, hopes to win his father’s favor over his brother, who had usurped the throne. Outraged at both his unfaithful boys, Oedipus condemns them to die in battle by each other’s hand. The blind king extends his powerful arms to curse them, while Polynices recoils as if struck a painful blow. Standing between her father and brother, Antigone seeks reconciliation. In contrast to Antigone’s strength of will, her weeping sister, Ismene, personifies sorrow. Lightning flashes over this violent nightmare, disclosing a color scheme of clashing oranges and blues.

Fuseli, a Swiss clergyman, became a classical scholar before studying art in Rome. After immigrating to London in 1780, Fuseli was elected the Royal Academy’s professor of painting.

Oil on canvas, 1.498 x 1.654 m (59 x 65 1/8 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.41

William Hogarth
British, 1697–1764

***A Scene from “The Beggar’s Opera,”* 1728/1729**

At its London premiere on 29 January 1728, *The Beggar’s Opera* triumphed as an immediate success. In his comic operetta, John Gay parodied both government corruption and the vogue for Italian opera. The arias were popular ballads with new lyrics by Gay, and the characters were pickpockets and prostitutes. William Hogarth, as Gay’s friend, painted six canvases of the final scene, which is set in Newgate Prison.

On trial for robbery, Captain Macheath stands in shackles, while two of his lovers plead for his life. Lucy, his mistress, kneels before her father, Lockit the jailer, who wears keys on his belt. Macheath’s wife, Polly, also implores her father, Peachum, a criminal mastermind and fence, to intervene on Macheath’s behalf. The other figures are not actors but theater patrons who, according to custom, were privileged to sit on stage. Adding to the fun, these spectators include caricatures of prominent aristocrats.

Before becoming a painter, William Hogarth earned fame with sets of humorous prints—his “modern moral subjects”—that satirized contemporary life. In 1753, Hogarth published the earliest major book of art theory in English. His *Analysis of Beauty* extolled lively, sinuous lines, such as the complex curves of the figures’ poses and the stage curtain in this theatrical tableau.

Oil on canvas, 0.511 x 0.612 m (20 1/8 x 24 1/8 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.42

GALLERY 61

Benjamin West
American, 1738–1820 (Worked in Britain, 1763–1820)

The Battle of La Hogue, about 1778

Benjamin West sailed from colonial Philadelphia to Rome in 1760. Visiting London three years later, the American artist decided to stay in England, where he soon became principal history painter to King George III.

A London newspaper's review of the 1780 Royal Academy exhibition stated that *The Battle of La Hogue* "exceeds all that ever came from Mr. West's pencil." In 1692, Louis XIV of France had mounted an ill-fated attempt to restore James II, a fellow Catholic, to the throne of England. In response, Britain and her Protestant allies, the Dutch, massed their fleets and engaged the enemy for five days off the northern French coast near La Hogue. Nine decades later, West employed much artistic license to devise this patriotic scene that is almost entirely propaganda.

Standing in a boat at the left, for instance, Vice Admiral George Rooke embodies heroic command with his raised sword. Yet he undoubtedly gave orders far from the thick of battle. At the right, a Frenchman deserts his craft with its fleur-de-lis motif. Having lost his wig, he becomes an object of ridicule. West parted the foreground's thick smoke to reveal the French flagship beached in the center distance. Actually sunk a few days before this encounter, *The Royal Sun* is here imaginatively refloated—only to be run against the cliffs so that West might better symbolize the French defeat.

Oil on canvas, 1.527 x 2.143 m (60 1/8 x 84 3/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1959.8.1

Benjamin West

The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, 1791

In 1779, Benjamin West had conceived his life's "great work," intending to rebuild the Royal Chapel at Windsor Castle as a shrine to Anglican theology. His proposal involved some forty different subjects from the Old and New Testaments, all rendered on a colossal scale. After sponsoring West's elaborate scheme for two decades, King George III canceled it in 1801. Although the overall project was abandoned, many individual canvases were completed. This nine-foot-long *Expulsion* had been shown at the Royal Academy of art in 1791.

The Archangel Michael, as the agent of the Lord's wrath, expels the first sinners from Eden. Overhead, a sharp ray of light cuts through the air in reference to God's "flaming sword" in the Book of Genesis. While Eve implores forgiveness, Adam covers his face to hide his sobbing. They wear fur robes because God clothed them in "coats of skins" so that they could stand unashamed in his presence. Satan's serpent, now cursed, slithers away on its belly to eat dust.

West's inventive interpretation in this Expulsion contains two motifs not found in Genesis or any traditional pictures of the theme: an eagle swoops upon a helpless bird and a lion chases frightened horses. In general terms, such beasts of prey might imply the destruction of harmony that resulted from Original Sin.

Oil on canvas, 1.868 x 2.781 m (73 9/16 x 109 1/2 in.)
Avalon Fund and Patrons' Permanent Fund 1989.12.1

Richard Wilson
British, 1712/1714–1782

Solitude, about 1762/1770

Richard Wilson, who began as a portraitist, became Britains' first major landscape painter. During a seven- to eight-year stay in Italy in the 1750s, he realized that landscapes could be metaphors of the human condition. Inspired by the arcadian scenes painted in seventeenth-century Rome by Claude Lorrain, Wilson produced evocative vistas that combine classical grandeur with English rusticity. One of the thirty-six initial members of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1769, Wilson found patrons among British gentlemen who had taken Grand Tours of Italy.

The Mediterranean scenery here, including the sunlit church and smoking volcano, evokes memories of Italy. But, the woodland glens and the cavern by the brook are distinctly English. Three hermits inhabit this shadowed grove. The two at the left are robed as Christian monks, while the partial nude at the right may be a pagan priest. He lies beside a crumbled statue of a lion, symbolic of civilization's vanities.

The romantic subject recalls poetic lines in *The Seasons*, a long blank verse finished in 1730 by James Thomson:

"...And all is awful, silent gloom around.
These are the haunts of Meditation, these
The scenes where antient Bards th'inspiring breath,
Extatic, felt; and, from this world retird."

Oil on canvas, 1.421 x 2.101 m (56 x 82 3/4 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.45

Joseph Wright
British, 1734–1797

The Corinthian Maid, 1783–1784

Josiah Wedgwood, the pioneer of pottery manufacturing, commissioned this mythological scene that illustrates the invention of the art of modeling bas-relief sculpture. Wedgwood's own fired-clay vessels, decorated with low reliefs, would have been seen by an eighteenth-century audience as the aesthetic descendants of this ancient Greek maiden's attempt to preserve her beloved's profile.

The girl was the daughter of a potter in Corinth. Her boyfriend was about to embark on a perilous journey to foreign lands, taking only his spear and dog. As a memento, she traced her sleeping lover's silhouette onto the wall. Her father then used the drawing to model a clay relief, which he baked in his kiln to create a ceramic keepsake.

Joseph Wright, a master of artificial illumination, concealed a hanging lamp behind the curtain, suggesting the source of the beams that cast the youth's shadow. In contrast to the lamp's gentle glow, intense sparks and embers leap inside the potter's fiery furnace.

Wright researched his topic for archeological accuracy. Wedgwood loaned antique vases from his own art collection so that Wright could copy their shapes, and the clothing derives from ancient sculpture. Classical symmetry pervades the design; the curtain and archway flank the focal action of the maiden's stylus tracing the youth's profile.

Oil on canvas, 1.063 x 1.308 m (41 7/8 x 51 1/2 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.46

Joseph Wright

Italian Landscape, dated 1790

Joseph Wright of Derby, nicknamed after his birthplace in Derbyshire, was noted for dramatic lighting effects such as the twilight cliffs in this imaginary landscape. The contrast of moss-green highlights against rose-violet shadows generates a remarkably decorative effect. These mountains are bracketed between a distant sky of jade and amethyst and a rust-brown foreground with its solitary, seated peasant.

The villas and castles atop the bluffs recall Wright's studies in Italy from 1773 to 1775, but the rutted road and gentle hills in the front resemble his own central England. Although the inspiration is from ideal landscapes by seventeenth-century artists, the shimmering colors are unique to Joseph Wright. He perfected such enchanting light effects in scenes of blacksmiths at their forges, scientists conducting experiments at night by candles, and moonlit landscapes with erupting volcanos or electrical storms. Note, for instance, Wright's contrast of different flames in *The Corinthian Maid*, normally in this room.

For all of his fame at depicting unusual illumination, Wright of Derby earned his income mainly as a portrait painter of the middle-class gentry. Since he chose to live in Derbyshire, Wright was isolated from London's art circles. Elected to the Royal Academy of Arts in 1781, he quarreled with that institution and resigned three years later.

Oil on canvas, 1.035 x 1.304 m (40 3/4 x 51 3/8 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.47

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.

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July 1994