

Benjamin West at the Court of George III

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From 1772 to 1801 a colonial American artist, Benjamin West, held the post of Official History Painter at the court of King George III of England. During his tenure, West's fellow colonists declared independence from their motherland, went to war to obtain it and dealt England an ignominious defeat. West sympathized openly with the Americans.¹ Yet he was able to secure this position at a time of increasing unrest in the colonies, and retain it after the actual outbreak of hostilities in 1775. This raises two questions: Why was a colonial artist selected for the post of Official History Painter, and why was West able to retain the position given his American sympathies? The purpose of this paper is to propose answers to both questions. Because the answer to the former informs the latter, it commands the greater share of attention.

The discussion is divided into two major sections. It begins with a brief review of the situation of English history painting in the 1760s and sketches of the activities of Benjamin West and George III. The commissions West received from the King prior to his appointment as Official History Painter in 1772 are then examined in chronological order. An understanding of these works provides insights into George III's expectations about art and West's ability to fulfill them, as well as the background against which a personal relationship between the artist and his patron evolved.

In the eighteenth century, England had developed a longing for a share in the great classical tradition of art.² This tradition subscribed to a hierarchy of genres which established history painting as the most elevated form; portraiture and landscape were definitely subordinate and genre painting was almost beneath consideration. In the 1760s portraiture dominated painting in England, presided over by such well-known artists as Reynolds and Gainsborough. History painting was in decline. In addition, England's most notable history painters of the past had been foreigners, with the exception of Sir James Thornhill in the early 1700s.³

George III was twelve when his father died, leaving him heir to the English throne. He was conscientiously groomed and educated for his future position, including training in the appreciation of art. Einstein states:

As a youth, a series of royal professors of perspective and of architecture had done their utmost to instill in their princely pupil a conviction, which the King retained, that cultivation of the arts conferred lustre on a reign.⁴

His reign began auspiciously in 1760, immediately after the Year of Victories in the Seven Years' War.⁵ Unfortunately the situation soon began to deteriorate. A decade of political instability followed the King's selection of Lord Bute as his chief minister. Although soon ended, the Seven Years' War left a legacy of debt and a huge empire to be defended. George III's attitudes regarding the power of the Crown met with Whig opposition.

Also, George III was one of the 'distasteful' Hanoverians. Although the most 'English' to ascend the throne, he married a German princess⁶ and continued to labor under the taint established by George I, who had been obvious in his dislike for England.⁷ In 1765 the King suffered his first mental breakdown. Given these circumstances, the reign of George III was much in need of lustre.

Benjamin West (Figure 1) was born in a Quaker community in Pennsylvania in 1738. He began drawing people and objects around him at about age seven. Because he had received no training he was perceived as a child prodigy. His talents were encouraged and through the good offices of various acquaintances West received education in classical literature in Philadelphia. A move to New York exposed him to more art and allowed him to continue his self-training as a painter. In 1760 he departed for Italy as the traveling companion of the son of an American grain merchant.⁸

West was the first American painter to study in Italy.⁹ Letters of introduction gained him entry into the circle of Cardinal Albani, which included Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Anton Raffael Mengs, the high priests of the new movement, Neoclassicism. While the simplicity of West's Quaker garb and unadorned locks fascinated the Italians, the tenets of Neoclassicism engrossed West. Neoclassicism, in its resolve to revive the art of classical antiquity, rejected the frivolity of the Rococo and sought didactic classical themes embodying calm dignity and heroic grandeur. Not surprisingly, history painting was considered the highest form. The movement adopted clarity and simplicity of balanced forms, a smooth, non-painterly facture and the dominance of linearity. In Italy, West was exposed to the many artistic trends then current but chose Neoclassicism. Perhaps its lofty principles and didacticism appealed to his Quaker sensibilities.

West spent three highly successful years in Italy, traveling and learning the new style. He was made an honorary member of the academies of Parma, Florence and Bologna. Shortly before his departure, his history painting *Cymon and Iphigenia* was widely acclaimed in Rome.¹⁰ Although he planned to return directly to America, at his father's request he stopped in England, his father's homeland. He arrived there in 1763, a fully trained history painter, lauded in Italy and painting in a new style virtually unknown in England.¹¹

West soon experienced moderate success in England which prompted him to remain and set up a studio, although he had to resort to painting portraits to earn a sufficient living. By 1765, his talent as a history painter had come to the notice of a few of the wealthy and powerful, most notably Dr. Drummond, the Archbishop of York.¹² He decided to remain in England, sent for his father who accompanied West's American fiancée to London, married and established a household.¹³

As a cleric, Dr. Drummond was impressed with West's theory that the purpose of art is "to assist the reason to reveal virtue through beauty."¹⁴ The two met often to discuss the edifying aspects of art. At one such meeting, the Archbishop engaged West to paint the story of Agrippina landing with the ashes of Germanicus. They read together Tacitus' description of the event and discussed Drummond's interpretation of it.¹⁵ In the end, West produced a painting (Figure 2) which so pleased the Archbishop that he arranged to have it shown to the King.

George III was enticed by the idea of having his favorite classical subjects depicted by the new celebrity whose lofty theories had been explained to him enthusiastically by the Archbishop,¹⁶ a man of high moral standing. He therefore consented to view the painting and meet the artist in 1766. The King was most impressed by the work. He personally assisted the servants in moving it to better light and called for the Queen to see it and to meet West.

Agrippina is a thoroughly Neoclassical work, depicting with solemn dignity the procession of a loyal wife, children and mourners. They accompany the remains of the hero Germanicus who, although pressed to claim the Empire for himself, remained loyal to Tiberius and did his bidding. The figures are arranged in a frieze-like manner with a background of monumental Roman architecture.

As noted earlier, the King was aware of the service which art could perform for his reign. Also, given his training, he was probably aware of the position of history painting as the apex of the academic hierarchy. He could see that West's *Agrippina* was a perfect vehicle for transmitting a message of loyalty and service. This message is embodied in the dignity of the scene and the reputations of the persons depicted. Furthermore, the clarity of West's Neoclassical style removes the possible ambiguity and distraction of lush surface detail.

At their first meeting, the King commissioned West to paint the subject of the departure of Regulus from Rome (Figure 3). Not to be outdone by the Archbishop, he sent for a copy of Livy, personally read to West the history of the event and instructed him to complete the work as soon as possible.¹⁷ The Regulus story is even more specific in its portrayal of the virtue of sacrifice for one's country. As a Roman captive of Carthage, Regulus had been sent home to secure acceptance of the harsh peace terms proposed by the Carthaginians. Instead, he urged Rome to refuse the proposals and fight on. West chose to depict the moment when Regulus is leaving Rome after the failed negotiations to return to Carthage and certain death. He walks forward calmly, escorted by a hooded figure,¹⁸ leaving behind the excited, pleading Romans and his wife, prostrate with grief. West's frieze-like arrangement of the figures emphasizes the actions of the protagonists. The background, as in *Agrippina*, is again composed of monumental Roman architecture which symbolizes the nation for which Regulus is about to make the ultimate sacrifice.

The commissioning of *Regulus* prompted many meetings between the King and West to discuss sketches and to determine such details as placement and size. A mutual respect began to develop and the artist was frequently invited to spend the evening at Buckingham House. George III sought West's counsel regarding the creation of a Royal Academy. He called him Benjamin and Queen Charlotte consulted West about such matters as the arrangement of her jewels.¹⁹

On West's part, the artist declared that "His Majesty's virtues had long been a theme of his profoundest admira-

tion, for in his heart he cherished the conviction that the Monarch was 'good from principle and austere from a sense of the beauty of virtue.'²⁰ West also believed that art would elevate its patron,²¹ a function which the King sought.

Artist and patron also shared many personal traits. "Both men were deeply virtuous, conscientious and industrious."²² Also, they were the same age. While it is dangerous to draw firm conclusions from such subjective sources as accounts of a given personality, this description of the two men recurs often enough in the literature that it can be given credibility. We may therefore assume that this compatibility did exist and most likely augmented their mutual respect.

A strong relationship between the King and the artist began to develop from this first commission. Although augmented by mutual respect and compatibility, it appears that this relationship was based principally upon the need of the King to enhance the grandeur of his reign and his belief that art was one source from which this could derive. As a fully trained history painter, acclaimed in Europe and England, and possessed of a new and appropriate painting style, West was well qualified to meet the King's requirements. He also received pragmatic benefits from the relationship in that the King's commission and friendship greatly enhanced his career.

Subsequent events were to strengthen this relationship further. In 1771, West painted *The Death of General Wolfe* (Figure 4). Although the King did not commission this work, he did order a copy. This fact and the significant effect which this work had on the connection between artist and patron warrant its inclusion in the discussion of commissions West received from George III.

With his *Death of General Wolfe*, West proffered a bold challenge to the academic tradition of history painting. In it he depicted his hero in contemporary dress and setting. When Dr. Drummond saw the unfinished piece he summoned Reynolds. Together they tried to persuade West to abandon the project, fearing he would lose his new-found favor.²³ He was, however, adamant. West had determined that the heroic deeds of contemporary figures should not be presented in the guise of classicism. He defended his view by noting that the event commemorated took place:

... in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans and at a period of time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costumes, any longer existed. The subject I have to represent is the conquest of a great province of America by 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.²⁴

Contemporary dress and setting had heretofore been proscribed by the academic tradition for fear that it would destroy the respect due the hero. West achieved a successful compromise. The scene did not descend to the rank of a genre painting or a conversation piece because he depicted his hero in an elevated mode. The positions of Wolfe's body and those close to him are clearly derived from the customary rendering of the lamentation (Figure 5). The academics, including Reynolds, had to admit that in this painting, noble and virtuous human action had not been compromised by dress or setting.

The success of *The Death of General Wolfe* encouraged West to expand his repertoire. In 1772, he suggested to the King that as pendants to the copy of *Wolfe* he should paint *The Death of Epaminondas* (Figure 6) and *The Death of Chevalier Bayard*²⁵ (Figure 7). Epaminondas was a Greek military tactician of the first century B.C. who also died heroically in battle. Like Wolfe, he had refused to succumb to his wounds until victory was confirmed.²⁶ West depicted his death in the academic tradition of the heroic nude.

By proposing the Chevalier Bayard as a subject, West admitted medieval history, as he had contemporary events, into the sacred canon of subjects acceptable to traditional history painting.²⁷ Bayard was a medieval French knight whose military career contained parallels to Wolfe's. In addition to this, when he was captured by English forces the English King magnanimously released him without parole in recognition of his valor.

In the composition of this work, West once again borrowed from familiar lamentation iconography for his placement of the hero's body. This, combined with the now-familiar frieze-like arrangement of the figures and the restrained emotions of the mourners, locates this work in the traditional realm of history painting.

These three paintings were designed to be hung together in the Warm Room of Buckingham House.²⁸ Because of his successful new approach to history painting, West was able to present themes of heroic service from the ancient, medieval and contemporary periods in the same series. The King was particularly excited with the prospect of depicting medieval themes. Before *Bayard* was finished, the King proposed a cycle of paintings from the life of his favorite, Edward III. As Greenhouse has noted: "In the history of Edward III and the Black Prince, George III had a specific model of kingly virtue."²⁹ While these paintings, now divided between Kensington Palace and the Palace of Westminster, were not completed until after the renovations at Windsor were finished, the seeds of this great cycle were sown as soon as West had proposed medieval subjects as acceptable for history painting.³⁰

We have seen that West's Neoclassical style and training as a history painter rendered him appropriate to fulfill the King's artistic needs. England's periods of greatness were the medieval and contemporary. Paintings which clearly illuminated this greatness rather than embedding it in the guise of antiquity would better serve the King. Thus West's successful elevation of medieval and contemporary themes into the exalted realm of history painting made him even more qualified to serve the interests of the King. It therefore comes as no surprise that in 1772, the year in which *Bayard* was suggested, the colonial artist Benjamin West was appointed Official History Painter.

The various factors which coalesced to prompt West's appointment also served as the basis of an exceptionally strong relationship with his patron. The pragmatic aspect of this understanding was augmented by mutual respect and compatibilities of age, philosophy and personality. These, along with West's unique qualifications, raised the bond above political concerns. Therefore, when war actually broke out between England and the colonies, West was able to retain his position due to the strength of his relationship with the King. Indeed, the King supported and publicly defended him despite his American sympathies.³¹

It must also be noted that West was discreet in voicing his sympathies and provided no incident which could justify a call for his removal. Furthermore, West had brought his wife and father to England and intended to remain there, thus giving tacit support to the British system.

It seems clear that the ultimate reason West was appointed and retained was his unique and innovative attitudes regarding history painting. This approach used the academic tradition, while at the same time challenging it. That West dared doing so could well be the result of his American heritage. There he had been free of the burden of tradition which pressed upon artists in the Old World. Therefore, although it is doubtful that either the King or West was aware of it, it was the painter's colonial origins which may have made him so vital to George III.

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- 2 Grose Evans, *Benjamin West and the Taste of His Times* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), p. 10.
- 3 Joseph Burke, *English Art 1714-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 96.
- 4 Lewis Einstein, *Divided Loyalties* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), p. 299.
- 5 J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 91.
- 6 Plumb, p. 93.
- 7 Plumb, p. 39.
- 8 Richard Hirsch, *The World of West* (Allentown: Allentown Art Museum, 1962), pp. 11-12.
- 9 Einstein, p. 287.
- 10 Hirsch, p. 30.
- 11 Einstein, p. 293.
- 12 John Pye, *Patronage of British Art* (London: Commarket Press, 1970, a facsimile reprint of the original published in 1845), p. 130.
- 13 John Galt, *The Life of Benjamin West* (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimilies and Reprints, 1960, a facsimile reprint of the original published in 1820), vol. 2, p. 10.
- 14 Einstein, p. 296.
- 15 Galt, p. 12.
- 16 Einstein, pp. 295-297.
- 17 Galt, pp. 25-26.
- 18 In ancient Rome, priests covered their heads when performing sacrifices.
- 19 Einstein, p. 300.
- 20 Einstein, p. 298.
- 21 Galt p. 89.
- 22 Einstein, p. 297.
- 23 Galt, p. 46.
- 24 Galt, p. 48.
- 25 Galt, p. 50.
- 26 Dennis Montagna, "Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*: A Nationalist Narrative," *American Art Journal*, 13 (1981), p. 81.
- 27 Wendy Greenhouse, "Benjamin West and Edward III: A Neoclassical Painter and Medieval History," *Art History*, 8, No. 2 (1985), p. 188.
- 28 Greenhouse, p. 179.
- 29 Greenhouse, p. 185.
- 30 Galt, p. 51.
- 31 Einstein, pp. 306-307.

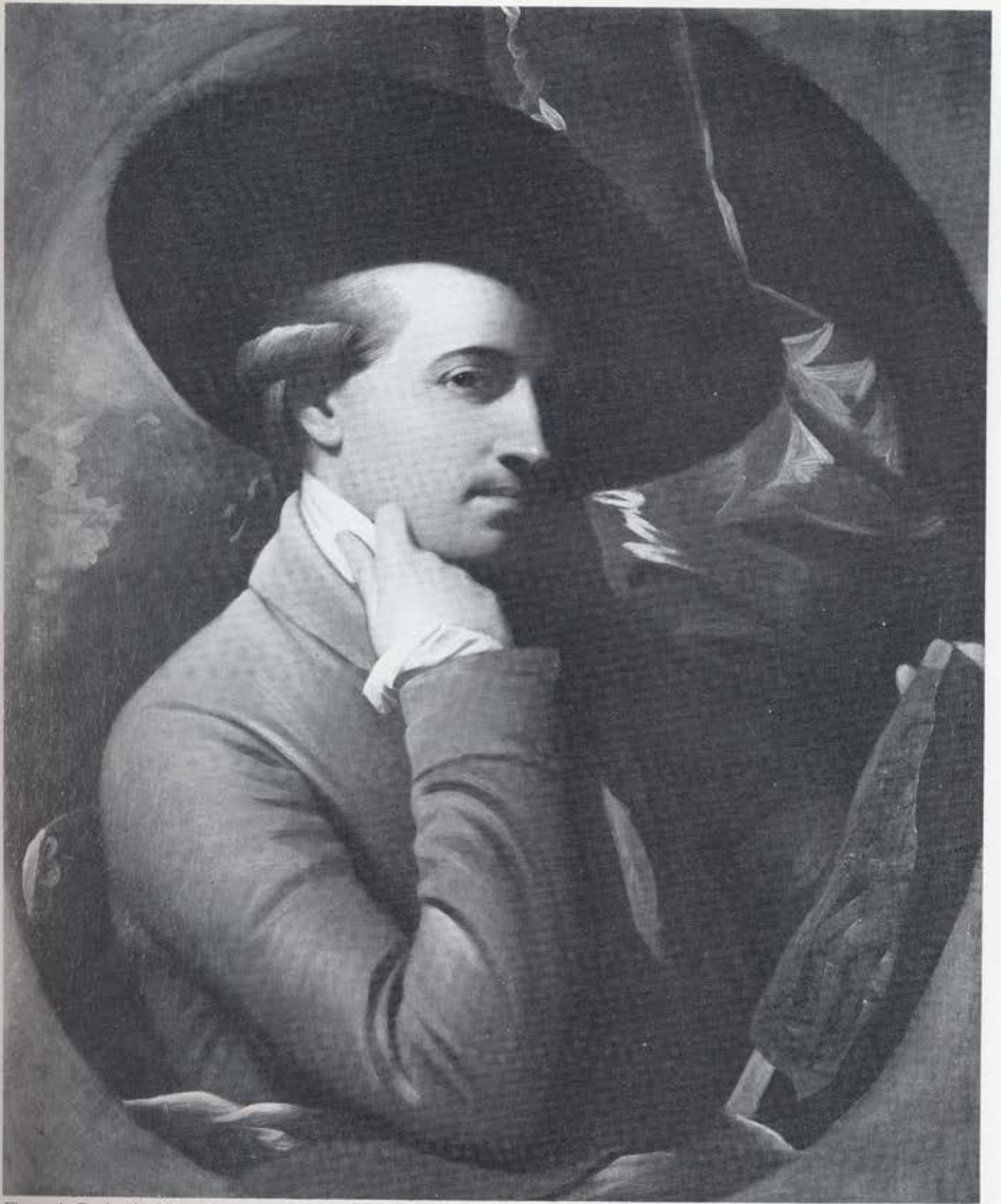


Figure 1, Benjamin West, *Self Portrait*, ca. 1771-1776, The Baltimore Museum of Art; Gift of Dr. Morton K. Blaustein, Barbara B. Hirschhorn and Elizabeth B. Roswell, in memory of Jacob and Hilda K. Blaustein; courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art.

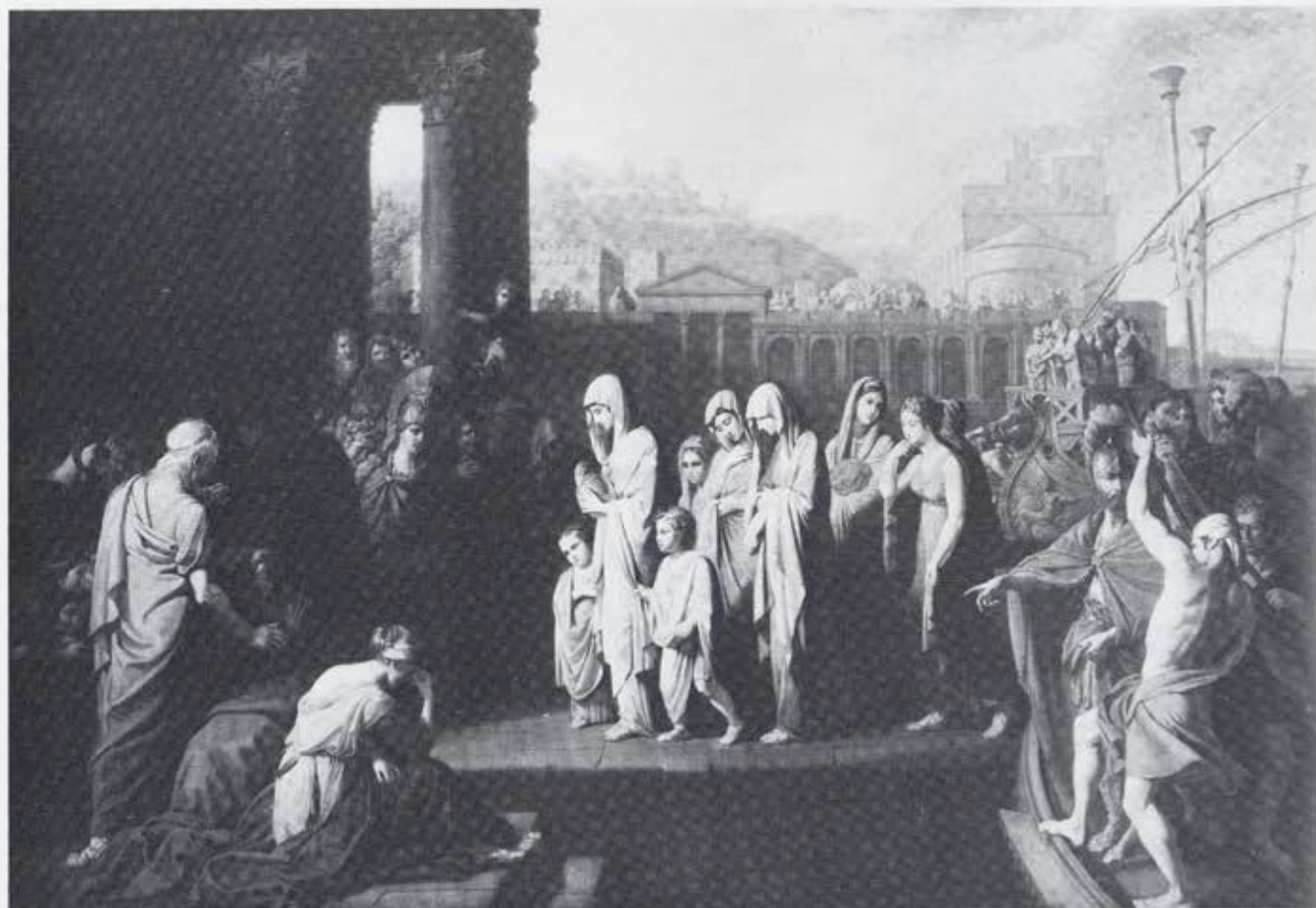


Figure 2, Benjamin West, *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768, Yale University Art Gallery; Gift of Louis M. Rabinowitz; courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery.



Figure 3, Benjamin West, *The Departure of Regulus*, ca. 1767, copyright reserved to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; courtesy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



Figure 4, Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, ca. 1769, copyright reserved to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; courtesy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



Figure 5, Anthony Van Dyck, *Lamentation Over the Dead Christ*, 1634, Alte Pinakothek, Munich; as seen in Larson, Erik, *L'opera completa di Van Dyck*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1980, plates xxxvi-xxxvii.



Figure 6. Benjamin West, *The Death of Epaminondas*, 1772, copyright reserved to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; courtesy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



Figure 7. Benjamin West, *The Death of the Chevalier Bayard*, 1772, copyright reserved to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; courtesy of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.