Learning to Look: Navigating the Mysteries of the Art World

Week 3: Whose History is it Anyway?

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• Week 1: Who am I? A Closer Look at the Art of Portraiture
• Week 2: The Changing Nature of Landscape Art
• Week 3: Whose History is it Anyway?
• Week 4: Hidden Meanings in Still Life
• Week 5: Photographs – Capturing the Moment
• Week 6: “My kid could do that!” The Perils of Abstraction
Reminder:

There are no “plain facts” in the history of art – or in the history of anything for that matter, only degrees of plausibility.

H.W. Janson, introduction to first edition of “History of Art,” 1962

Art speaks to us, and we can get a great deal out of it – just by looking. But if we know more about what the artists were trying to say, who they were talking to and why, our experience is hugely enriched. Looking through history alters how we see art.

Martin Kemp, from “Art in History,” 2014
European Galleries, Second floor, NGC
The Death of General Wolfe, Benjamin West, 1770 (NGC)
The Classical tradition (Raphael’s *School of Athens*, 1509-11)
The dominant Classical tradition in history painting

The Oath of the Horatii, Jacques-Louis David, 1784 (Louvre, Paris)
The Death of Wolfe: Not a Classical History Painting!
Inspirations for figure of Wolfe

The Deposition of Christ, by Rubens, 1612-14 (central panel of a triptych, now in Antwerp)

The Lamentation over the Dead Christ, Anthony van Dyck, 1618-20 (Kunsthistorisches M. Vienna)
Details of West’s painting
Maj.-General the Hon. Robert Monckton at the Taking of Martinique, B. West, 1762 (and detail of him from Wolfe painting)
Colonel C.P. Stacey, Director of History, Department of National Defence, writing in a 1966 NGC Bulletin:

“West is reported to have justified the picture to King George with the remark, ‘the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist’. If he really said this, he did not practice what he preached; for The Death of Wolfe is a remarkably untruthful production. Almost everything about it is historically wrong.”

And:

“In the final stages of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham the senior officers of Wolfe’s army had other things to do besides grouping themselves picturesquely about the dying general.”
Detail from West painting, and detail of Raimondi’s engraving of “Judgement of Paris” by Raphael
William Woollett’s 1776 print (engraving) of the painting
Posthumous Portraits of the Generals

(Left: Portrait of Montcalm by Sergent, 1760 (Library and Archives Can.), Right: Portrait of Wolfe by Townshend, 1759 (McCord Museum, Montréal)
Bust of Wolfe, by Joseph Wilton (1760)/ Death mask of Napoleon
Benjamin West’s *Self Portrait*, 1770 (NGC)
The Death of Nelson, B. West, 1806 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)
Other (less exciting) versions of the story:

Death of General Wolfe, by Edward Penny, 1763 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)  
Death of General Wolfe by James Barry, 1776 (New Brunswick Museum, Saint John)
George Romney’s lost version (1760)

Study for *Death of Wolfe* by George Romney

Another study for *Death of Wolfe* by Romney
(Abbot Hall Art Gallery, UK)
An NGC painting by George Romney

Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant), 1776  

Detail...
Other images of leaders in the NGC collection

Sir Jeffrey Amherst. Joshua Reynolds, 1768

Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant). William Berczy, c. 1807
Classical inspirations

Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant),
William Berczy, c. 1807 (NGC)

Augustus of the Prima Porta (Emperor Caesar Augustus)
1st cent. AD, Rome; and Apollo Belvedere (c. 120 AD marble
Roman copy of a Greek bronze from c. 350 BC)
The Realities of War...

Confederate dead behind a stone wall in Fredericksburg, VA, Mathew Brady, 1860’s
(U.S. National Archives #524930)

Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, Alexander Gardner, July 1863 (NGC)
Pickett’s Charge, Peter F. Rothermel, 1870 (State Museum of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, PA)
Picasso’s *Guernica*, 1937 (Museo Reina Sophia, Madrid)
Guernica in ruins (1937), and detail of painting
War realities for Canadians

Drowning Sailor, Jack Nichols, 1942 (Canadian War Museum collection)

Alex Colville working on painting Bodies in a Grave, Belsen, 1946 (photo from collection of Colville Family)
Colville’s Infantry Near Nijmegen, Holland, 1946 (Canadian War Museum)
On being a War Artist:

Alex Colville: “I felt in a certain sense I was writing letters home for these people, depicting their lives, the dugouts, tanks, where they lived. I was making a kind of record. There is always this element in art: ‘Life is short but art is long.’ A lot of these people were killed.”
Olympic, With Returned Soldiers, Arthur Lismer, 1919
(Canadian War Museum)
A Copse, Evening, A.Y. Jackson, 1918 (Cdn. War Museum)
Gas Attack, Liévin, Jackson, 1918 (War Museum)
For What?, F.H. Varley, c. 1918 (Cdn. War Museum)
The Death of General Wolfe in the Royal Ontario Museum, painted by West and his studio assistants, 1776 (retouched 1806)
“Maybe somehow ... I can ... say to the viewer, ‘Look, as Native people we are just voyeurs in the history of this country.’ [In "Kanata"] the Indian is in parentheses, the Indian is surrounded by this gigantic red and this gigantic blue and is sandwiched in that environment ... And that is reality because the English and the French are still the major players in the making of this history, history as it was. That is what I would like to get across.”

Robert Houle in 1992, on his reinterpretation of Benjamin West’s The Death of General Wolfe
Repositioning art to reconcile with history
Relocated statue of Anishnabe Scout from base of Champlain sculpture Photo on right from Jeff Thomas’ “Bear Portraits” series, 1996 (NGC)
View of Hamilton McCarthy’s monument to Champlain from site of relocated ‘Anishnabe Scout’ (Major’s Hill Park)
Ouch! “Restored” 16th c. wooden sculpture of St. George, Estella, Spain
“Ecce Homo” fresco before and after amateur restoration by erstwhile Spanish parishioner