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ARTISTIC LICENSE AND HISTORICAL MEMORY: BENJAMIN WEST'S 'THE DEATH OF GENERAL WOLFE'

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a thorough exploration of Benjamin West's landmark painting, 'The Death of General Wolfe,' positioning it at the intersection of artistic pursuit and historiographical discourse. By conducting a detailed analysis of the painting's complex composition, its profound historical context, and the varied receptions it elicited, this study suggests that West's artistic interpretation extends beyond simple depiction, entering the sphere of nationalistic expression and the artist's distinctive creative vision. The discussion delves into the vigorous debate sparked by West's deviation from traditional historical representations, highlighting his bold integration of factual accuracy with mythological and dramatic enhancements. These elements are designed to amplify the painting's narrative power. Further inquiry within the essay examines the effects of such artistic freedoms on the perception of history, arguing that artworks like West's play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and forging national identities. Through a nuanced examination of diverse materials like original historical records, discerning critiques of artwork, and responses from the times, the essay illuminates the intricate interrelationship between creative representation and authentic recollection of events from the past. This nuanced investigation not only brings to light the inherent challenges in interpreting historical paintings but also contributes significantly to the dialogue on the convergence of art and historiography. It underscores the essential function of visual art in constructing and perpetuating historical narratives, enriching the ongoing debate on the role of art in history.

Keywords: Artistic Interpretation; Historiography; Collective Identity; Visual Narratives; Nationalism

Introduction

“That very act of representation, though, makes you feel large because you yourself are in charge of the representation: it's you who must make complexity comprehensible, first to yourself, then to others. And the power that resides in representation can be great indeed...” (Gaddis, 2004, p. 7).

Benjamin West's portrayal of General Wolfe's demise in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (Figure 1) illustrates British identity. It highlights the importance of historians critically analyzing the accuracy of artistic interpretations of historical events. Although art can provide valuable insights into history, it is crucial for observers to establish the veracity of the subject matter before allowing the artwork to represent historical occurrences authentically. This essay contends that Benjamin West's 'The Death of General Wolfe' signifies a significant moment in British history and exemplifies the delicate equilibrium between historical faithfulness and artistic expression. Through the selective embellishment and omission of certain details, West constructs a narrative that surpasses a mere historical retelling, creating a nationalistic and emotionally impactful tableau. This approach, while challenging conventional expectations of historical precision, underscores the influential role of art in shaping collective memory and identity.

Literature Review and Discussion

The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West (1770)



Figure 1: West, B. (1770). *The death of General Wolfe* [Painting]. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
<https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/the-death-of-general-wolfe-0>

Benjamin West became interested in art at a young age and learned how to incorporate the natural environment into his artwork from an Indigenous friend. Encouraged by his friends, West pursued his craft and studied European art styles from other artists (Bennett, 2013). His passion for stories of heroic sacrifice led him to create paintings influenced by Italian art, with Roman figures often taking centre stage. Eventually, West was selected to paint pictures for King George III, who wanted him to “produce British history in the Grand Manner of European painting” (Bennett, 2013, p. 768). By this time, West had gained recognition as a well-known American artist and was well-suited for the task. In 1770, he painted “The Death of General Wolfe,” which quickly gained acclaim for its sensational portrayal of an esteemed British hero (Bennett, 2013).

Abrash (1975) cautions that illustrated depictions of historical events should be carefully approached. While such artwork may depict actual events, historians cannot rely on them as factual evidence. West knew that his painting was not simply a battle scene but an intimate moment of General Wolfe's death. However, he also sought to convey the narrative of the battle to the viewer. West chose to compress the depiction of the battle of the Plains of Abraham (Figure 1). In the painting, the French are defeated, with Montcalm falling off his horse and perishing, while smoke envelops Quebec's steeples (Montagna, 1981). However, Montcalm died from his wounds a day after Wolfe's death and the battle's conclusion on September 14, 1759. The British took control of Quebec shortly thereafter (Charters, 2009).

West's painting includes various background events that did not all occur simultaneously with Wolfe's death. For example, the Redcoats are shown scaling the cliffs onto the plains from the St. Lawrence River, when they had done so five hours before Wolfe was fatally shot. As West painted “The Death of General Wolfe” eleven years after the battle and was not present at the actual events, the painting cannot be considered an accurate historical account. Nevertheless, it contains a significant amount of patriotic content. Shortly after the battle, Wolfe was commemorated as a British martyr. West's artwork further heightened British identity and nationalism and fueled anti-French sentiments. Major-General James Wolfe served as the commander-in-chief for the expedition to Louisbourg and led the naval fleet to Quebec (Mackellar, 1848). Wolfe's army successfully landed at the Point of Orleans, where they faced little resistance as they occupied French territory. From there, they strategically surrounded Quebec (Mackellar, 1848). The Battle of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham turned out to be an unexpected victory, described as “a truly miraculous event,” and this battle brought General Wolfe into prominence (Montagna, 1981, p.81). Wolfe expressed in letters that victory seemed highly unlikely before the battle commenced, given the French troops' superior numbers, battle capabilities, and the protective walls of Quebec (Montagna, 1981). Montagna (1981) suggests that if Wolfe had not died as a victorious hero on the battlefield, he would not have achieved such renown (p. 81).

Initially, Wolfe was hailed as a flawless hero of British history, but more recent historians now view him as an "inept commander" (Olson et al., 2002, p. 958). Adair (1936) argues that Britain became so "hypnotized" by Wolfe's victory in Quebec that they overlooked the circumstances that favoured him on the day of the battle and dismissed his poor judgement and inadequate leadership skills (p. 23). Initially, there were theories that Wolfe fought in the battle for several hours; however, historians now believe that he died only an hour into the battle (Charters, 2009).

It is possible that Wolfe's strategy for the Battle of the Plains of Abraham lacked careful planning. However, his approach to gaining a foothold on the Plains involved intricate calculations considering factors such as moonlight and tidal flow on the St. Lawrence River (Olson et al., 2002). Wolfe intentionally delayed the invasion to ensure the perfect night for safely bringing his troops down to the river's edge and stealthily drifting to the designated location south of Quebec, remaining undetected by the French forces (Olson et al., 2002). His ships followed the river's ebb and landed at Anse au Foulon before sunrise without being discovered by the enemy (Olson et al., 2002). West acknowledged this significant naval achievement in his painting by depicting the pale blue of the St. Lawrence River on the right side of the viewer, with the rigging of the ships rising behind General Wolfe and his army. Wolfe's meticulous plot to outthink the Canadiens may have been the step that brought him to victory. However, Olson et al. (2002) suggest that although this was a brilliant and surprisingly successful plan, potentially labeling Wolfe as a Navy genius, he seemed to have a more minor role on the battlefield. No one knows if Wolfe intended to make it as far as the Plains of Abraham, as his knowledge of what to do when he got there seemed to rely only on how his enemy, Montcalm, would choose to react to their presence (Olson et al., 2002). Wolfe believed Montcalm must have been close to surrendering since they were strained on supplies, and the citizens were starving; they would have little choice once Wolfe's army attacked them head-on (Adair, 1936). The loss of lives in this battle was significant; around 650 British and 700 French men perished on the Plains of Abraham (Charters, 2009).

Nevertheless, in "The Death of General Wolfe" Figure 1, West depicts his supporting comrades' concern and attentive adoration, regardless of Wolfe's possible failure to plan the battle more meticulously. Abrash (1975) wisely noted that "art in the context of history is inescapably dualistic; it presents a distinctive development of its own. However, it obviously must have some relationship to the larger world - and efforts to evade this difficulty cannot produce a satisfactory understanding of art or history" (p. 558).

West's portrayal of the General and other characters in the painting involved careful thought, including how they were outfitted. Typically, West followed the famous art style of European art, which was Romanistic idealized scenes, typically derived from biblical stories. West used this style for many of his art pieces, including those with British narratives (Prown, 1996). So, it was expected by King George III that the event of Wolfe's death would be in a classic, idealized style and have him in a Romanic setting, including having them wear togas instead of military outfits (Bennett, 2013). However, West pushed back against this idea, stating, "...the event... took place on September 13, [1759], 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" (Bennett, 2013, p. 770). By doing this, West sets North American-styled art apart from the traditional styles of European art. There is a line that is drawn through representing either truth or an ideal when it comes to history; the artist is at risk of "show[ing] himself ignorant of history" (Mitchell, 1944, p. 22). Mitchell (1944) argues that compared to similar classically trained artists, West's depiction of General Wolfe's death was more accurate, thanks to the historically accurate costumes. However, there is debate about whether West was well-researched and stood on the plains for his reference. Although West did portray some battlefield realities in his painting, he also exaggerated certain aspects. One puzzling element in the painting is the presence of an Indigenous warrior during General Wolfe's death. There is no evidence to suggest that Indigenous people fought alongside the British in this battle despite having alliances with some tribes like the Iroquois (Charters, 2009). The French army recruited many Indigenous allies to protect their land from British rule (Charters, 2009). While West accurately depicted the Indigenous man, his involvement in Wolfe's death is not accurate. The warrior looks upon Wolfe in a way that suggests he is honoured to be in the presence of a British man, dying for a country that the Mohawk may not identify with (Prown, 1996).

In the painting, a messenger carries the French flag to indicate that their enemy, Wolfe, has fallen while the fighting continues in the background, with men showing concern for his well-being. However, the only individuals present during Wolfe's death were Lt. Henry Browne (depicted wearing the British colours in the painting), James Henderson, who witnessed Wolfe being struck, and Hewitt, the attending surgeon (Annus, 2007).

Henderson was able to drag Wolfe away from the battlefield and later detailed Wolfe's final moments and statements in a letter, where he described Wolfe's acceptance of death and his expressed sentiments (Annus, 2007). Henderson also mentioned that British officers informed Wolfe of their victory shortly after removing him from the battlefield (Annus, 2007; Montagna, 1981). Upon hearing the news of the British victory, Wolfe is said to have experienced a state of ecstasy as he passed away. There is ample symbolism in "The Death of General Wolfe." The positioning of Wolfe as he lies back in his final moments, surrounded by concerned gentlemen, and the arrival of a message of victory in the background all contribute to the symbolism. In West's painting, James Wolfe is depicted lying in what appears to be the middle of the battlefield with an outstretched hand, bandaged from a wound sustained early in the battle. Three men hold him while ten others gaze upon him. West positions Wolfe in a manner reminiscent of a painted scene of Jesus being brought down from the cross and aided by mourners. This similar theme is also seen in Peter Paul Rubens's painting "Lamentation of Christ" (Figure 2), created in 1613, which illustrates the death of Christ as a martyr. In Rubens's painting, mourners surround Christ shortly after his descent from the cross. The scene is crowded, and a dark sky looms overhead. Like West's depiction of Wolfe, Rubens's portrayal of Christ considers the mourners' grief and uses diagonal positioning to guide him towards the heavens, creating a dynamic theme. The use of diagonal positions for saint-like heroes is common among several artists, as it signifies their proximity to the heavens (Montagna, 1981). West likewise presents Wolfe in a similar light, highlighting the connection between a British hero and a martyr of Christendom through Christian iconography. Mourners on either side are depicted swooning over Wolfe's death as if witnessing the passing of a saint (Prown, 1996). Even the dark storm clouds that cover the Plains serve as a symbolic manifestation of mourning for this significant loss. At the same time, the Union Jack flag directs Wolfe's body towards the heavens (Bennett, 2013).

The Martyrdom Fallacy of General Wolfe

According to Abrash (1975), treating great art as something other than what it truly is leads to inevitable misconceptions. This overlooks its real historical meaning and questions its value as an illustration (p. 559). Bennett (2013) states that West was criticized for creating a glorified scene of the young commander's death (p. 769). The accuracy of the events depicted was called into question (p. 769). West aimed to portray Wolfe with the utmost grandeur possible (Bennett, 2013).



Figure 2: Rubens, P. P. (1613). *The lamentation of Christ* [Painting]. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna Austria <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/1612/>

He strategically set up the painting to depict every step leading to his death, showing only victorious scenes of the battle (Bennett, 2013). West sought to create an idol for the British to admire, even if it meant altering the realities of the events. He omitted Wolfe's vulnerability, horrors, and questionable leadership decisions. West defended himself against these accusations by emphasizing the importance of portraying Wolfe as a hero for such a victory (Bennett, 2013).

He argued that presenting only the factual events would produce a different effect (Bennett, 2013, p. 769). General Wolfe became revered in England as a martyr who fought for Britain's goal of global dominance.



Figure 3: Penny, E. (1763). *The death of General Wolfe*. [Painting].
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK.

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-death-of-general-wolfe-142476>

He was praised for dying victoriously, and numerous songs, poems, sermons, and plays were written in his honour (Montagna, 1981). The myth surrounding the gloriousness of Wolfe's death fueled nationalism, driving the British to advance their imperialistic ideologies and push for further westward expansion (Annus, 2007, p. 106).

Shortly after the battle, many other artists created renditions of General Wolfe's death that depicted more accurate accounts. Artist Edward Penny painted a more faithful version of events based on firsthand accounts. Penny's "The Death of General Wolfe" (1763) (Figure 3) portrays the dying General surrounded by three men in a more private setting, away from the other troops who had just defeated the French. Wolfe was aware of their victory (Montagna, 1981). Although Penny's work is not entirely factual, it was praised for its simplistic and realistic approach to the events. Wolfe did not witness the end of the battle but was with only three men at his death, fully aware of their impending victory (Montagna, 1981).

After discussing the historical inaccuracies and artistic liberties West took in 'The Death of General Wolfe,' it is crucial to acknowledge the role of artistic license in conveying emotional and moral truths that surpass factual accuracy. Art often aims to evoke a deeper understanding or feeling about historical events rather than serving as a literal record. West's portrayal reflects broader themes relevant to his contemporaries, such as heroism, sacrifice, and the emergence of a British identity, thus offering insights into the social and cultural values of the period.

Furthermore, these interpretations help keep historical narratives alive and accessible to wider audiences, sparking interest and debate that can lead to a more engaged and informed public discourse about history. By highlighting the importance of diversity in historical representation, it becomes evident that multiple interpretations, including West's, contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of past events. Integrating these points provides a more balanced view that recognizes the complexities and contributions of artistic interpretations in shaping our understanding of history.

The Artful Establishment of a Hero

West conferred the title of British hero upon Major-General James Wolfe, despite some historians arguing that his victory was mostly due to luck, not merit (Adair, 1936). Before his death, Wolfe was not widely acknowledged as a notable general.

However, his noble demise evoked a deep sense of national pride among the British, as this triumph in Quebec allowed them to establish dominance over the colonies in the New World. West aimed to perpetuate this nationalist sentiment by immortalizing Wolfe as a martyr figure through deceptive artistic themes.

As observers, it is our responsibility to pragmatically acknowledge the embellishments present in historical art and interpret it with a discerning eye, recognizing its lack of objectivity in certain cases.

“They cannot simply view the fog and mist, though: they must find ways to determine what lies beneath it and to represent whatever they find in such a way as to persuade those for whom the representation is intended that it is reasonably accurate.” (Gaddis, 2004, p. 44).

Conclusion

When analyzing Benjamin West's painting "The Death of General Wolfe," it is important to consider the relationship between art and history. This relationship involves a dynamic exchange between factual truth and creative interpretation. Although West took some historical liberties, his masterpiece goes beyond depicting General Wolfe's death and explores broader themes of heroism, martyrdom, and the construction of national identity. Through his portrayal, history is not simply retold but vividly reimagined, prompting viewers to recognize art's significant role in shaping historical awareness.

This essay has examined how West navigates the fine line between artistic expression and historical accuracy. Despite criticism of its departure from strict historical truth, the painting is celebrated for its narrative depth and emotional impact. West's creation demonstrates the unique power of art to immortalize moments and transform them into symbols that resonate with larger cultural and national narratives. Furthermore, "The Death of General Wolfe" invites us to reconsider the role of historiography in shaping our understanding of the past. In an era heavily influenced by visual media, West's approach provides valuable insights into how art can enhance historical analysis by capturing the essence of historical events in ways that textual descriptions alone cannot achieve.

Looking ahead, the interplay between art and history remains highly relevant. In times when the line between factual and interpretive content can become blurred, West's painting serves as a critical reminder of the importance of engaging critically with both historical and visual sources. It urges us to question, explore, and appreciate the complex processes through which our historical narratives are constructed and remembered.

In summary, "The Death of General Wolfe" is a monumental artistic achievement and a pivotal piece that sparks discussions about the nature of historiography and the enduring impact of art on collective memory. As we continue to unravel the complexities of representing history, West's masterpiece exemplifies the potential of art to enlighten, shape, and enrich our understanding of the human journey through time.

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