



1. John Singleton Copley (American),
Watson and the Shark, 1778,
oil on canvas, 182.1 x 229.7 cm.
Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art,
Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund, no. 1963.6.1.

COPLEY, WEST, AND THE TRADITION OF EUROPEAN HIGH ART

We have become used to seeing American painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a European perspective, that is, as an art of only relative merit. In the eighteenth century, American art seems totally dependent on English models, while in the nineteenth century it is largely dominated by the influence of the Düsseldorf school. Very often it is precisely the American element in American painting that is considered provincial and naive. Recent exhibitions – such as Thomas Gaetgens's *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt* – have tried to do justice to the particular contribution of American painting.¹ As a correction of current views, this is useful and necessary. In academic discourse, however, established positions are not that readily discarded. I think it justifiable, therefore, to assume the European role once more – playing a kind of devil's advocate.

In the following discussion of American history painters working in England at the end of the eighteenth century, I shall argue that the novelty of American history painting – so abundantly stressed in recent critical discussion – is not so much a specifically American phenomenon but instead follows an English tradition and is part of a general change of the European conception of painting in the late eighteenth century. It is possible, however, that the American origin of these painters made them react more sensitively and decisively to these new trends, which can be related to a new manner of art reception resulting from the changed character of the public.

England's prominent role in this change derives, roughly speaking, from two English peculiarities: first, from the early existence of a constitutional monarchy, which, at least in large cities, brought about a measure of

social transparency, if not social permeability, with a powerful debating press, and, second, from the absence of a specifically English art tradition before the first third of the eighteenth century. Subsequently, this absence led to a need to compensate by inaugurating a national school of history painting, and at the same time it created an awareness of English particularity. The general change in the European conception of painting first became evident as an international Neoclassicism during the second half of the eighteenth century in Rome. The important share English artists had in this development has only now been realized. The separate English way and the change of European art language converge in what we now call the rise of historical thinking.

This meant that English art did not see itself as an integral part of a European tradition of High Art but began to look at this tradition in an art-historical way (which was connected to the rise of a new public and facilitated by the development of a new aesthetics of perception). It also meant that the archaeological dimension of this international Neoclassicism — its attempt to reconstruct the purity of classical antiquity — accounted for its sentimental and reflective tendency. This specifically English consciousness of artistic and historical difference was expressed with great lucidity by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1790 in the last of his Royal Academy discourses:

In pursuing this great Art [i.e., the High Art tradition of Michelangelo], it must be acknowledged that we labour under greater difficulties than those who were born in the age of its discovery, and whose minds from *their infancy* were habituated to this style; who learnt it as language, as their mother tongue. They had no mean taste to unlearn; they needed no persuasive discourse to *allure them to a favourable reception of it, no abstruse investigation of its principles to convince them of the great latent truths on which it is founded.* We are constrained, in these later days, to have recourse to a sort of *Grammar and Dictionary, as the only means of recovering a dead language.* It was by them learned by rote, and perhaps better learned that way than by precept.²

I shall attempt to show in a detailed analysis of a single painting by John Singleton Copley what consequences such consciousness and the recourse to the dictionary of a lost language of art had for the American-English art of the late eighteenth century. It will be necessary, however, occasionally to

broaden the context to include Benjamin West and, beyond West, William Hogarth, in order to show the relevance, in this context, of a genuinely English tradition.

Copley's *Watson and the Shark* (fig. 1) has certainly received exhaustive critical attention.³ This appears to be even more true of West's *Death of General Wolfe* (fig. 2).⁴ Nevertheless, I shall discuss Copley's painting once more, using West's *Wolfe* as a foil. I cannot come up with new historical evidence, but I hope to give more depth to what we already know by looking at it from a different perspective.

The novelty of West's as well as Copley's historical paintings lies — as established scholarly opinion has it — in its concentration on contemporary history in contemporary guise. This new realism in history painting is the first American contribution to Western art, as one can read in the standard work on Copley.⁵ West, the Quaker from Philadelphia, and Copley, the Puritan from Boston, developed a distinctly naturalistic pragmatism, free from the burden of European tradition. West — as the more nuanced opinion of a more recent monograph would have it — on the one hand aimed at authenticity, at the reconstruction “of how it actually was,” and on the other strove to achieve the monumental dignity of the classic historical tradition.⁶ In the case of *Wolfe* he was able to link both by transcending the merely illustrative elements: Wolfe's death connoted Christian martyrdom by the dying general's assumption of the pose of the dead Christ. Or, as maintained elsewhere, the death for the fatherland is ennobled by the allusion to Christ's death for mankind.⁷ In similar fashion one could say of Copley's *Watson* that its youthful hero, in attacking the monstrous shark, assumed the role and figuration of Saint Michael forcing Evil back into hell. Thus the common contemporary event was made part of Christian sacred history.⁸ None of these interpretations is wrong: West's *Wolfe* is indeed modeled after the scene of the Lamentation of Christ, and Copley's hero definitely follows the Saint Michael type. And yet both observations are nevertheless insufficient, for the connection to the Christian model is in both cases much more complex. Therefore its meaning has to be modified.

First we shall examine Copley's *Watson*, exhibited in 1778 at the Royal Academy in London. Its quality of reportage has often suggested a comparison with Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the “Medusa”* (*Radeau de la “Méduse”*), 1818–1819 (Paris, Musée du Louvre). In other respects, too, these two paintings would seem to be related: with the unusual novelty of their themes,



2. Benjamin West (American),
The Death of General Wolfe, 1770,
oil on canvas, 153.7 x 213.4 cm.
Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, no. 8007.

they both aimed, quite successfully, at the audience's curiosity, its lust for excitement and sensation.⁹ Thus, the functional aspect of a new bourgeois art becomes evident: since the reaction of the public – that is, the audience and the press – determined the ranking and success of an artist, the artist had to surpass in novelty his competitors, whose works covered the walls of the Academy exhibition by the hundreds. Ever since the late eighteenth century, the arts, compelled by the market and its peculiar forms of distribution, have thus been under constant pressure to innovate.

Copley's painting – and this is also significant here – is a private commission to record a singular and dramatic event in the life of its patron. Nevertheless, the painting obviously courts the public by its covert allusions to High Art. It therefore comes as no surprise that Copley made two reproductions, and as in the case of West's *Wolfe*, the print after the painting was an enormous success. Later, Copley painted contemporary history directly for the public without an intervening patron, organized his own exhibitions, and became dependent on the income from entrance fees and from the sale of reproductions offered for subscription (since the selling of contemporary history painting was decidedly difficult without the help of a patron). Such painting necessarily implied taking sides in contemporary political debate and thus inevitably became entangled in party politics. But it thrived on the curiosity of the public no matter what position it assumed toward the event it represented.

The particular quality of Copley's *Watson* also relates to the character of the new bourgeois public. In its allusion to established convention and its use of formula, the private subject matter becomes available to collective reception – which is, however, individualized in as much as the private invites individual and subjective interpretation since it cannot claim historical or universal meaning.

The event that occasioned the painting can be told in few words. Brook Watson, a successful London merchant, had been attacked by a shark in 1749 when, at the age of fourteen, he was swimming in the harbor of Havana. He received serious leg injuries and lost his right foot in the shark's second attack. When it attacked for a third time, however, it was driven away by the inmates of the accompanying boat. Copley records this dramatic and decisive moment of the story. The composition is relatively simple: a triangle shifted from the center in accordance with the rules of the golden section. The triangle ascends from the brightest part of Watson's body

(helplessly drifting in the water), to the man on the right bending forward, to the figure holding him, and from there to the black man standing upright behind him; then it leads downward again along the straight line of the harpoon. The basis of this triangle is formed by Watson and the shark. In addition there is a correspondence between the rising line of the oar and the descending line of the monster's back.

For Copley the history painter there is an obvious dilemma. The main protagonist of the painting had to be its patron. But Watson is completely helpless in the water. Because of the passivity of the painting's principal figure, the hero's role is shifted to the young harpooner at the bow of the boat, who, with hair streaming, raises the lancelike boat hook to deal the decisive and saving blow. In contrast to the classical conception of history painting, however, all persons in the boat receive the same attention. Their presence is not dependent on a hero; each one is allowed to react individually. The press praised especially Copley's ability to differentiate physiognomies. The garments of the protagonists appear to be contemporary; it can also be proved that Copley used contemporary views for his silhouette of Havana. Nevertheless, two things seem unusual: first, Watson is almost completely naked, and the extreme paleness of his body had critics remark with some irritation that it made him look as if he were already dead.¹⁰ Second, the white undergarment of the youthful hero falls unusually wide and, in distinctly noncontemporary fashion, well down below the belt; furthermore it is draped above the knee of the left leg, which is raised at a right angle. Here the contemporary is represented in a definitely classical manner.

The motif can be traced to the iconography of Saint Michael, whose iconographical type was firmly established already during the Middle Ages. It found its classical form in the circle of Raphael, and from there it spread over all Europe. Especially famous in England was Guido Reni's version of 1635 (fig. 3), which exists in a great number of copies, one of which was in the possession of Benjamin West. In 1776/1777, just before Copley delineated *Watson*, West had painted, in the manner of Reni, a huge Saint Michael for the chapel of Trinity College in Cambridge. It is very likely that West had familiarized his compatriot and protégé Copley with his copy of Reni, his own painting of Saint Michael, and with the whole Saint Michael iconography. West's painting clearly shows that he had examined this complex iconography in great detail.¹¹ Here, as in many other examples of the



3. Guido Reni (Italian),
Saint Michael (San Michele), 1635,
oil on canvas, 293 x 202 cm.
Rome, Santa Maria della Concezione.

Raphael tradition, Saint Michael is shown in the act of conquering Satan, who is writhing underneath him, often with a huge and gaping mouth and quite frequently, as with Reni, with the long, coiling tail of a serpent. There can be no question that in Copley's painting the incarnation of evil is the shark with its threatening mouth wide open and its tail fin rising out of the water behind the boat. Yet, in his version of the Saint Michael topic Copley goes several steps further.

The group of Saint Michael and Satan is found in Revelation 20:1–3. In Reni's painting, the chain in Saint Michael's hand refers precisely to this passage. But the iconographical type is taken from a larger scenic context: that of the fall of the angels, Revelation 12:7–9. Lucifer had taken possession of God's throne, from which Michael expelled him, pushing him with his lance into hell along with his whole devilish brood. Theologically, this marks the beginning of the history of salvation. Analogous to this topic is another iconographically related theme that also involves Saint Michael and marks the end of the history of salvation: the Last Judgment. Michael, the weigher of souls, separates the saved from the condemned, who writhe at his feet as did the fallen angels. Quite often, Michael uses his lance to rush the damned into hell a little faster. Seen in this iconographic tradition, the motif of *Watson* and the range of its meaning become a little clearer.

The figuration of *Watson* derives from the group of the resurrected souls at the Last Judgment, who, with writhing and distorted bodies, fearfully await God's judgment and its execution by Saint Michael. Just as Satan has to give up the soul saved by the divine judgment, so the satanic shark, at the last moment, has to let go of *Watson*, whom it was about to tear apart. Thus *Watson* can be said to experience his resurrection already during his lifetime. In addition, the shark also incorporates the gaping mouth of hell – indeed this may help explain the rather strange appearance of its forehead.

The problem inherent in this conception of history becomes apparent in its secularization of the sacred. As such the transfer of the iconographic type to the actual historical event is not yet blasphemy. The use of an iconographical figuration in thematically related contexts was common classical practice and had also been applied to the topos of Saint Michael. Let me mention just one example, which, by the way, is a good illustration of the motif of the left knee intentionally bare of garment. It derives from the Eastern iconography of the ruler and can be traced uninterrupted to Ingres's official representations of Napoleon as emperor.

The print by Egidius Sadeler after Bartholomäus Spranger (fig. 4) shows the victory of science over ignorance and barbarism in the figuration of Saint Michael.¹² Here the transfer of the Michael motif is rather far-reaching. The donkey-eared embodiment of ignorance and barbarism takes Satan's place, and the angel's palm of victory and the flying garment of science optically replace Saint Michael's wings; furthermore, the fetters derive from the chain with which Michael throws Satan into the abyss.

And yet there is a fundamental difference between these two forms of transfer. With Spranger the motif functions exclusively as a formula indicating conquest that was canonically developed in classical picture language in connection with the Saint Michael topos. The meaning of the Christian paradigm from which it originated is by no means called into question. It may be recognized by the connoisseur of art, who will read it as a confirmation of the classic and normative quality of Spranger's work and as a reference to the Christian foundation of all psychomachia. The art public of the eighteenth century, however, for whom the motif had lost its normative meaning, could comprehend its origin only art historically. It could make it an object to prove one's education. But this knowledge had to include not only the meaning of the motif but also the historical and art-historical function of its meaning – and this, indeed, is an important difference. We can see it very clearly in the entire contemporaneity of its new context. For the motif is used, not – as it is by Spranger – as part of an abstract transhistorical allegory but for the real Watson existing beyond the painting and its frame. The timeless motif is radically transplanted into time. Thus it becomes necessary to comprehend the timeless motif from within its new context of contemporary perception and usage. There is a noticeable gap – a discrepancy not solved in or by the painting – between the real private existence of the protagonist and the religious and nonsecular direction of the motif. It seems to transform the Last Judgment into a secular event and its representation, whether intended or not, into blasphemy.

One might ask, of course, whether the allusion to the Last Judgment was not within the range of Puritan religion and mentality. Might not Watson, in retrospect, have considered his accident in the harbor of Havana the central event, the turning point of his life, providing it with new meaning and direction? Despite the physical handicap he had suffered, Watson had again and again been able to start from scratch and to work his way up. Upon returning to Boston after his terrible accident, he learned that his guardian



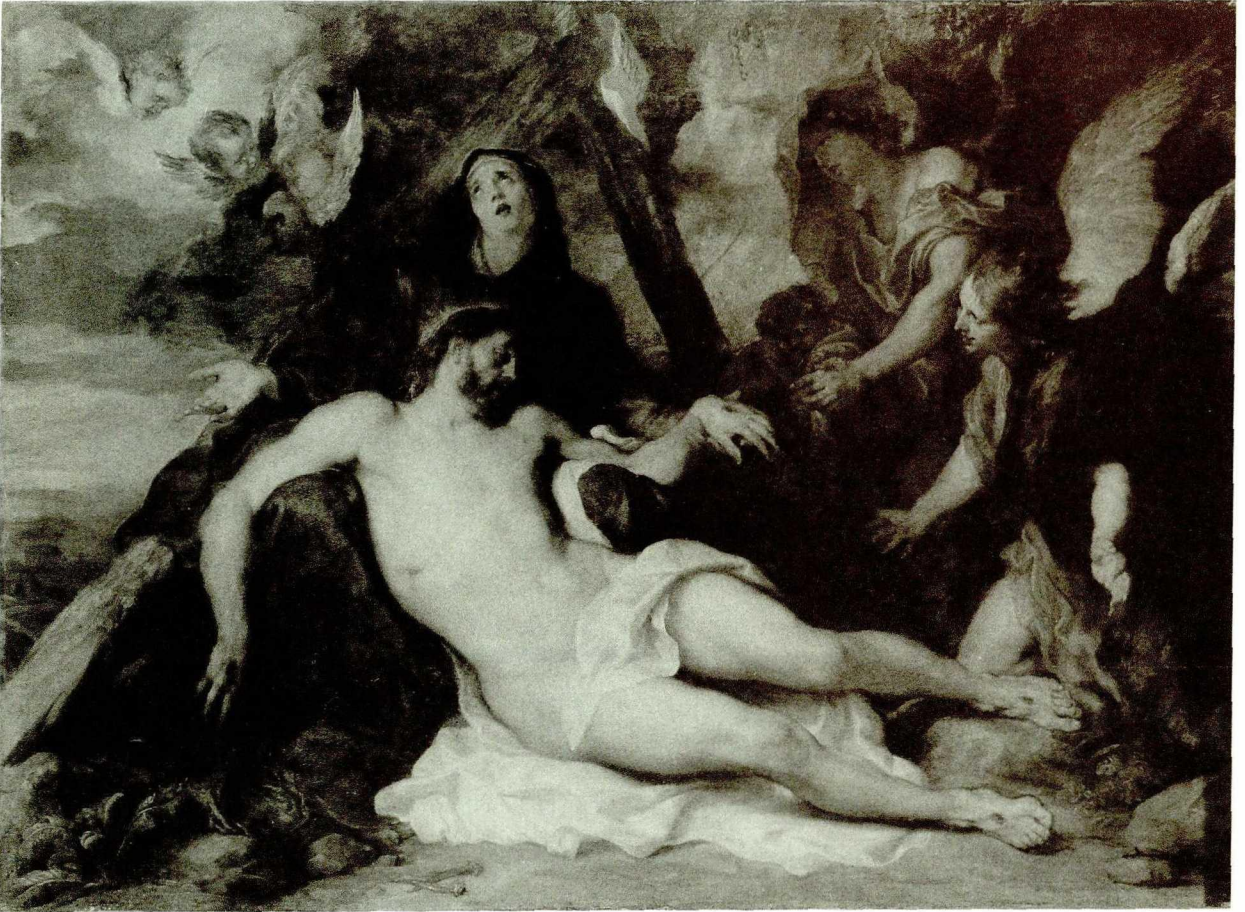
4. Egidius Sadeler (Flemish) after
 Bartholomäus Spranger (Flemish),
*Triumph of Science over Ignorance and
 Barbarism*, after 1595,
 engraving, 49.5 x 35.7 cm.
 Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-
 Museum, no. AB 2.121.
 Photo: B. P. Keiser.

had run away. Through courage and self-confidence Watson had nevertheless been able to make something of himself: he became a highly decorated British agent, an independent and wealthy merchant, and later, in 1796, he was made Lord Mayor of London after he had been, for many years, a member of the British Parliament. Thus, what had happened to him in Havana might later have appeared as a sign of his election, of his salvation from Evil, a sign of God's providence and of his own experience of grace. Such an interpretation would be supported by the fact (of which the critics have been aware for some time) that the two figures leaning out of the boat in the effort to rescue Watson seem to be modeled after the fishermen hauling in their nets in Raphael's *Miraculous Catch*, 1514–1515 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum).¹³ All this may indeed have been part of Copley's (and Watson's) intention – yet the way that intention was put into practice is nevertheless highly problematic.

Copley evidently tried to reconcile classical form and individual particularity. The highest objectivity and the highest subjectivity were to be brought together in a coherent form of representation. One may doubt, however, whether such reconciliation was indeed possible. The appropriateness of applying the traditional language of iconography to the private event depended on the audience – and the audience decided according to personal taste or political opinion. Seen aesthetically, however, there is a discrepancy between form and content; at least we are aware of their rather tentative connection. The Christian image and motif become mere formula, in Reynolds's sense, a mere word in the vocabulary of High Art, whose main function now consists of ennobling its secular and prosaic subject. Such ennobling seemed indeed necessary since reportage had no artistic value in the eyes of the public. In other words, the public's conception of art remained conventional, that is, the public demanded more from art than what it was consciously willing to allow.

Let me test this assertion by briefly looking at West's *Death of General Wolfe*. West's strategy is the same as Copley's: not only is the main figure modeled after a Christian prototype but in its composition the whole painting is an imitation of a complete iconographical scheme. In a Christian context this method of transference is the method of typology, of prefiguration. In West's case, it has obviously been secularized, to say the least. In ennobling his theme, West actually returns to one of the most elevated formulas of Christian art – the type of the Lamentation of Christ. Just as Saint John

or the Marys assemble around Christ, so the soldiers surround Wolfe, who is rendered entirely in the pose of the dying Christ, a pose that was well known in England through the tradition of Anthony van Dyck (fig. 5): the body elegantly swerved, the left arm hanging down in a curve and supported by an angel or by one of the Marys, the eyes raised in transfiguration upward toward the sky, which has opened after the battle, announcing a new day. In the Baroque tradition, this is the locus of divine self-revelation – in West’s painting the dissolving smoke of the battle reveals a steeple as the sign and promise of salvation. (This, by the way, is a motif that can be traced to the iconography of the Prodigal Son, who experiences conversion at the sight of a steeple.) Likewise, West does not stop here but demonstrates his downright art-historical awareness and iconographical finesse. The mourning Native American not only supplies an exotic element of local color but evokes a specific type of the traditional scene of lamentation: the isolated figure of the mourning Saint John.¹⁴ The painting’s second figure of importance, Brigadier General Robert Monckton – who was Wolfe’s deputy and like him was severely wounded in the battle – equally evokes a very specific type, namely, that of the fainting Mary in the scene of Christ’s Descent from the Cross. This is apparent in the curious rendering of Monckton’s limp left arm, which hangs loosely over the arm of the figure supporting him. In this case we can name the source from which West borrowed the motif: Rembrandt’s *Deposition*, 1634 (Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum), of which there existed at least one copy or variant in eighteenth-century England, which is now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Rembrandt’s fainting Mary is supported by her companions in precisely the same way that, in West’s painting, the wounded Monckton is held upright by his officers. Here, too, the adaptation of a Christian type reaches extremely far, and it is just as complex as in Copley’s case. We may even assume that Copley and West discussed this method of image formation. A small detail would seem to confirm this. In West’s *Wolfe*, the assisting figure to the right – a grenadier meant to represent the mourning of the common soldier – is modeled, as Charles Mitchell observed some time ago,¹⁵ after the facial expression of Charles Le Brun’s *Compassion*, down to the inclination of the head and the cascading hair. No wonder West resorted to a classical type of the passions, especially for the representation of a figure that did not need the particularity of portraiture. This tall figure standing in the foreground strikes the psychic note required here,

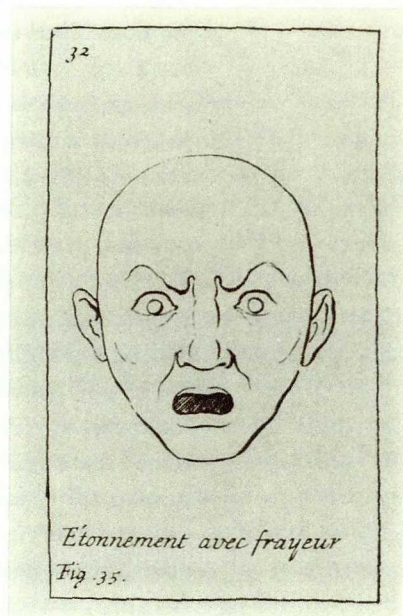


5. Anthony van Dyck (Dutch),
The Lamentation of Christ (Pietà), 1634,
oil on wood, 108.7 x 149.3 cm.
Munich, Alte Pinakothek, no. 606.



6. Detail of figure 1. Photo: Markus Hilbich.

7. Charles Le Brun (French),
Dread (La Crainte), 1698,
engraving, 9 x 5.5 cm.
From Charles Le Brun, *Méthode pour
apprendre a dessiner les passions* (Amsterdam:
François van der Plaats, 1702), fig. 18.
Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the
History of Art and the Humanities.



8. Detail of figure 1. Photo: Markus Hilbich.
9. Charles Le Brun (French),
Astonishment with Fright
(*Etonnement avec Frayeur*), 1698,
engraving, 9.1 x 5.3 cm.
From Charles Le Brun, *Méthode pour
apprendre a dessiner les passions* (Amsterdam:
François van der Plaats, 1702), fig. 35.
Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the
History of Art and the Humanities.

true to Leon Battista Alberti's ancient recommendation.¹⁶

Copley applies this method of guiding the viewer's reaction to the painting by way of the classical typology of the passions to his *Watson*, making use of the same source that West had used: Le Brun's treatise on the passions. This may explain the very positive reaction of the newspapers to Copley's representation of emotion in the different faces of the figures in the boat. Thus the London *Morning Chronicle* wrote that the face of the black man "is a fine index of concern and horror."¹⁷ Hence, Copley would seem to have reached the highest level in the classical representation of the passions, namely, the representation of the so-called mixed passions. If we examine this in more detail, we see that the facial expressions of the boat's crew largely follow Le Brun's prototypes. Thus the figure on the left half-standing in the boat (fig. 6), is modeled on Le Brun's *Dread* (fig. 7); the old man holding by the shirt one of the two figures leaning out of the boat (fig. 8) is clearly an imitation of Le Brun's *Astonishment with Fright* (fig. 9), as evidenced especially in his round, open mouth. This differentiation between *Dread* and *Astonishment with Fright* is quite logical. The man on the left looks only at Watson and fears for him, while the old man stares at the monstrous shark that emerges directly in front of him, his fright mixed with wonder at its huge dimension. Within the frame of contemporary thought this may have suggested to the viewer the experience of the sublime, which, according to Edmund Burke's famous treatise of 1757, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, is a category of high aesthetic value. In contrast to the beautiful, it results from our reaction to something dangerously powerful that is yet distant enough for us to feel safe from its energy of destruction.

Copley had learned his lesson in the language of European classical art. He seems to have known its complex iconography, its repertoire of formal conventions, and its typology of the passions. He appears to have been so fully aware of contemporary aesthetics that his work may be considered a conscious exercise "in sublimity." That he also quoted well-known formulas and consulted Le Brun like a dictionary, may be shown by two completely literal renditions. In *Watson*, the sad oarsman staring through the legs of the Saint Michael-type is placed so that his right eye remains concealed. The face of Le Brun's *Sadness (Tristesse)*, in the illustration of his treatise, is in large part completely hidden — just as it is in Copley's oarsman — by the shadow of the nose. Le Brun's illustrations seem to have been sacrosanct to Copley even in their smallest detail. The same holds true for the hero with

the lance (fig. 10): his profile with its wide-open eye – which is not completely logical in the context of the picture – duplicates, in fact, Le Brun's *Contempt* (fig. 11). *Contempt vis-à-vis* the monster shark may be the suitable response of a hero, yet on the aesthetic level these painfully exact repetitions from Le Brun seem evidence almost of the consciousness of a historicist – as if a book of samples had been opened. Apparently Reynolds was right: European art had become “a dead language,” which – as Copley also seems to have believed – had to be revived.¹⁸

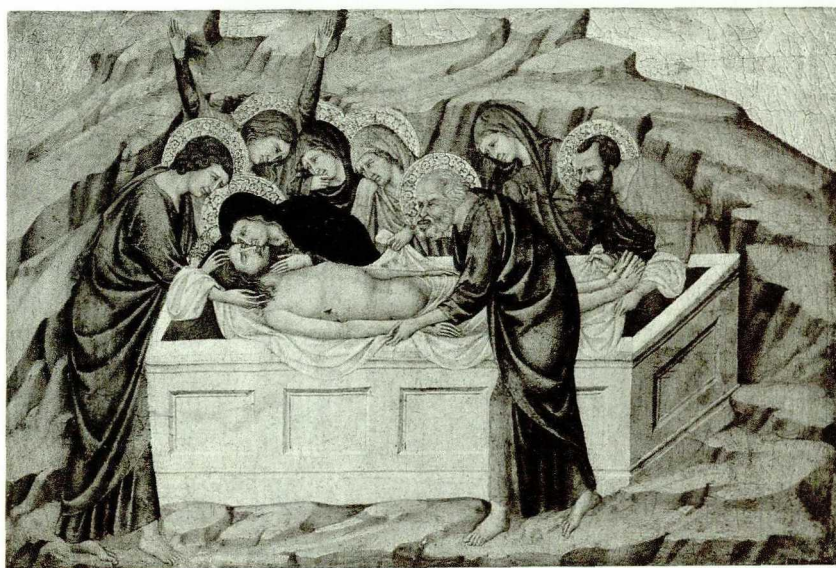
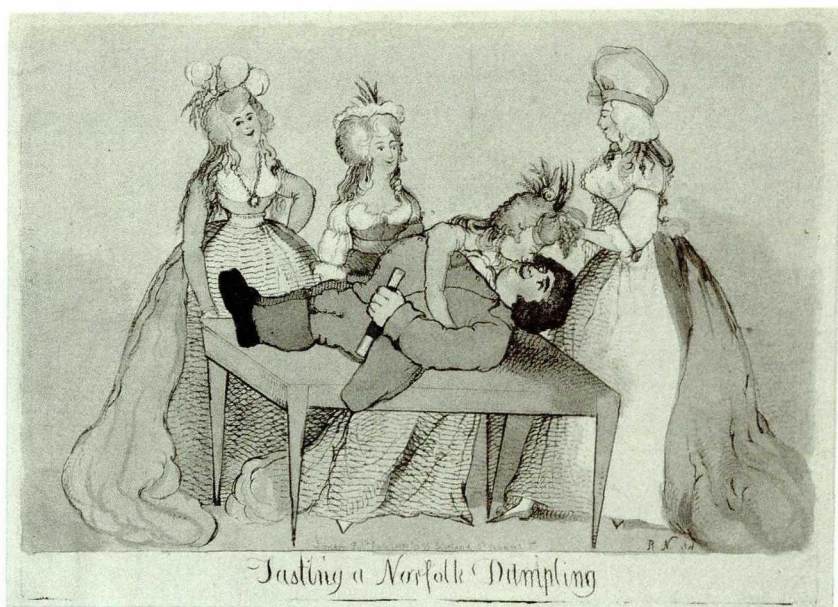
Contemporaries, however, noticed the discrepancy between the traditional types and the new context of their application. West's *Wolfe* – which already had its predecessors – produced a flood of representations of heroic deaths, all of them more or less following the type of the *Pietà*. As a reaction to this specifically English inflation there is a rather malicious caricature of 1792 by Richard Newton entitled *Tasting a Norfolk Dumpling* (fig. 12). In it the duke of Norfolk is shown lying on a table tasting (or rather, testing) the three daughters of the duchess of Gordon in order to find the one who kisses best and is best qualified for marriage. Newton's satire uses the complete scheme of the Byzantine type of the Entombment of Christ (fig. 13), with the dead Christ on the stone of ointment and Mary embracing and kissing him (as one of the duchess's daughters kisses the duke) while the other Marys stand about. The target of Newton's wit is a fashion of historical painting that mechanically cloaked its representation of dying heroes with the Christian prototype. Newton makes fun of its hollow idealism and the presumptuousness of its ennobling formulas. The role of the contemporary hero is exposed to public debate and thus thrown into doubt. In the case of West's *Wolfe*, we can see this in the controversy over Wolfe's monument and in the fact that West's figuration was caricatured repeatedly.

The existence of a caricature paraphrasing the Byzantine type of the Lamentation proves once more to what an extent the late eighteenth century was indeed able to see and reflect in an art-historical way. This reflection on the tradition of art in England began with William Hogarth, and it is possible that Benjamin West knew this. West's recourse to Christian iconography in his representation of the painting's central figure (and of one of its minor ones) has its precedent in Hogarth. The final scene of *The Rake's Progress*, 1735 (fig. 14), enacts to the last detail a Lamentation of Christ (fig. 15); even Christ's pot of ointment reappears in the soup bowl of the rake. The fifth scene of *Marriage à la Mode*, 1745 (fig. 16), uses, to an even greater extent than



10. Detail of figure 1.

11. Charles Le Brun (French),
Contempt (Le Mépris), 1698,
engraving, 8.8 x 5 cm.
From Charles Le Brun, *Méthode pour
apprendre à dessiner les passions* (Amsterdam:
François van der Plaats, 1702), fig. 9.
Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the
History of Art and the Humanities.



12. Richard Newton (English),
Tasting a Norfolk Dumpling, 1792,
etching with some burin, 25.5 x 35.2 cm.
London, Collection of Andrew Edmunds.
13. Ugolino di Neri (Italian),
Entombment (Deposizione), ca. 1325,
oil on wood, 40.8 x 58.4 cm.
Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, no. 1635B.



14. William Hogarth (English),
The Rake's Progress, Scene 8,
Scene in Bedlam, 1735,
etching and engraving.
From *The Complete Works of William Hogarth*
(London: The London Printing and Pub-
lishing Co., 1861-1862?), vol. 1, pl. 29.
Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the
History of Art and the Humanities.

15. Lucas van Leyden (Dutch),
The Lamentation of Christ (Pietà), 1521,
engraving, 11.5 x 7.4 cm.
Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Kupferstichkabinett.



does West's painting, the type of the Deposition, especially Rembrandt's version, as can be seen in the pose of the dying protagonist.¹⁹

One further example of Hogarth should be mentioned. His *Cruelty in Perfection* from the third scene of *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, 1751, in which the murderer Tom Nero – who has killed his mistress in a beastly manner – is taken prisoner in the churchyard by a crowd of infuriated citizens, is modeled on the capture of Christ. Even the disciple of Christ, mentioned in the Bible, who loses his garments reappears in a somewhat different form: he has become a citizen approaching in great haste.²⁰

What do we have here? The blasphemous transformation of an iconographic tradition or its total loss of meaning? I would maintain that it is neither one nor the other. Since the method of transfer is a rather complex one, I shall have to focus on one aspect. Religious art had no place in eighteenth-century England, even if Hogarth painted an altarpiece once and Reynolds tried to revive it from an academic point of view, with West following in his footsteps. On the other hand religious art poured into the country – collected by aristocratic connoisseurs. The religious became almost exclusively an aesthetic object – cult, as Hogarth remarked, was “out of date.” In developing its repertoire of forms, classical art had made ample use of religious art with its canonical themes and figurations. Hogarth had revealed its syntax and applied it to contemporary themes and objects. The connoisseur was able to see the sacred subtext within the contemporary text. This strategy provided aesthetic pleasure and raised the contemporary subject to the level of art in the classical sense. This, however, is only one side of the problem, for it seems hardly possible not to realize that aesthetic pleasure gave way to an awareness of the discrepancy between the traditional meaning of the religious scheme and its contemporary application. Contemporary experience increasingly undermined the value of Christian convictions as example and as norm of action. Thus they became objects of historic or aesthetic contemplation. Let me emphasize again that this had radical consequences for history painting. Form and meaning were drifting farther and farther apart throughout the eighteenth century. Indeed, art was well on its way toward what we now call aesthetic autonomy. After all, this is not only a gain but a loss, too.



16. William Hogarth (English),
*Marriage à la Mode, Scene 5,
Death of the Earl*, 1745,
etching and engraving.
From *The Complete Works of William Hogarth*
(London: The London Printing and Pub-
lishing Co., 1861–1862?), vol. 1, pl. 8.
Santa Monica, The Getty Center for the
History of Art and the Humanities.

NOTES

1. Thomas W. Gaetgens, ed., *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt: Amerikanische Malerei des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 1988).
2. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), 244 (Discourse 15, 10 December 1790).
3. Jules D. Prown, *John Singleton Copley* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), 2:267, no. 371; Alfred Neumeyer, *Geschichte der amerikanischen Malerei* (Munich: Prestel, 1974), 72-73; Roger Stein, "Copley's *Watson and the Shark* and the Aesthetics in the 1770's," in Calvin Israel, ed., *Discoveries and Considerations: Essays on Early American Literature and Aesthetics, Presented to Harold Janta* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1976), 85-130; Irma B. Jaffe, "John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *The American Art Journal* 9 (May 1977): 15-25; Ann Uhry Abrams, "Politics, Prints, and John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *The Art Bulletin* 61 (1979): 265-76.
4. To mention only the most important: Edgar Wind, "The Revolution in History Painting," *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 2 (1938/1939): 116-27; Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe* and the Popular History Piece," *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7 (1944): 20-33; Werner Busch, *Nachahmung als bürgerliches Kunstprinzip: Ikonographische Zitate bei Hogarth und in seiner Nachfolge*, Studien zur Kunstgeschichte, vol. 7 (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1977), 68-70; Dennis Montagna, "Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*: A Nationalist Narrative," *The American Art Journal* 13 (Spring 1981): 72-88; Ann Uhry Abrams, "The Apotheosis of General Wolfe," in idem, *The Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand Style History Painting* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), chap. 8, 161-84; Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), cat. nos. 93-100.
5. Prown (see note 3), 2:267-74.
6. Von Erffa and Staley (see note 4), 57, 62.
7. Werner Busch, "Die englische Kunst des 18. Jahrhunderts," in Werner Busch and Peter Schmoock, eds., *Kunst: Die Geschichte ihrer Funktionen* (Weinheim and Berlin: Quadriga/Beltz, 1987), 651-52.
8. Horst Woldemar Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1963), 465; and Jan Białostocki, *Stil und Ikonographie: Studien zur Kunstwissenschaft* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1966), 163.
9. On this aspect of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, see Wolfgang Kemp, "Kunst wird gesammelt - Kunst kommt ins Museum," in Busch and Schmoock (see note 7), 167-70.
10. Prown (see note 3), 7, on contemporary press reaction.
11. Von Erffa and Staley (see note 4), cat. nos. 406-408.
12. Gerhard Langemeyer and Reinhart Schleier, *Bilder nach Bildern: Druckgrafik und die*

Vermittlung von Kunst, exh. cat. (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 1976), cat. no. 77. See also R. J. W. Evans and Joaneath Spicer, *Prag um 1600: Kunst und Kultur am Hofe Rudolfs II*, trans. Petra Kruse, exh. cat. (Frehen: Luca, 1988), cat. no. 159.

13. Neumeyer (see note 3), 72–73. The painting also produced different iconographical associations: J. Richard Judson, “Marine Symbols of Salvation in the Sixteenth Century,” in Lucy Freeman Sandler, ed., *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehmann* (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, New York Univ., 1964), 136–52, saw the group in the water as imitating the iconography of Jonas and thus as alluding to the theme of the Resurrection. Even if the reference is not convincing, the fact that it has been produced by Copley’s painting is in itself a case in point. In combining classical form, a classical claim for validity, and modern subject matter the painting creates a need for endless iconographical exegesis and a search for profound meaning.

14. This type had already been used by Hogarth, see Busch (note 4), 5.

15. Mitchell (see note 4), 31.

16. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (1436), trans. with introduction and notes by John R. Spencer (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press 1966), 78.

17. See Prown (note 3), 2:267.

18. See Reynolds (note 2).

19. Busch (see note 4), 3–6, 9–10.

20. *Ibid.*, 11–12; also, *idem*, “Die Akademie zwischen autonomer Zeichnung und Handwerkerdesign – Zur Auffassung der Linie und der Zeichen im 18. Jahrhundert,” in Herbert Beck, Peter C. Bol, and Eva Maek-Gérard, eds., *Ideal und Wirklichkeit der bildenden Kunst im späten 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurter Forschungen zur Kunst, vol. 11 (Berlin: Mann, 1984), 183–87.