



Western Civilization from 1650 to the Present

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TOPIC 6.3. PRIMARY SOURCES: REVOLUTIONARY VALUES AND THE PROPAGANDA VALUE OF ART

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| REVOLUTIONARY VALUES | <p>During the years just before, during, and after the American Revolution, a number of significant American artists emerged. Among the most prominent of these were John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, and Charles Wilson Peale.</p> <p>Take a look at Copley's portraits of Paul Revere (1770) and John Adams (after 1783), and at his famous work Watson and the Shark (1778). Examine as well West's history paintings, The Death of Wolfe (1770) and Penn's Treaty with the Indians (1771). Finally, consider Peale's Washington and His Generals at Yorktown (1781) and George Washington (1779-81).</p> |
| PROPAGANDA VALUE OF ART | <p>How do these artists portray important Americans and events from American history?</p> <p>To what extent do these works represent the values that contributed to the American and French revolutions?</p> <p>Like rulers before him, Napoleon understood the propaganda value of art. Consequently, like so many other rulers, he supported artists who represented him to the world in ways in which he approved. One of the most famous of Napoleon's artists was the great Neoclassicist, Jacques-Louis David. Take a look at David's Napoleon in His Study and Napoleon Crossing the Alps.</p> <p>What sort of man do these works portray? What do they suggest about how David viewed Napoleon? What do they suggest about how Napoleon wished to be seen?</p> <p>Another member of Napoleon's stable of artists was Antoine-Jean Gros, who portrayed the general at several important moments in his military career. Examine, for example, Napoleon on Arcole Bridge, Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau, and Napoleon Visiting the Plague-Stricken.</p> <p>How do these portraits resemble and differ from those painted by David? How did Gros envision Napoleon as a military leader?</p> <p>A third great artist of the Napoleonic Age was Théodore Gericault. Although Gericault did not portray the emperor himself, he did paint some memorable pictures of Napoleon's soldiers. For example, take a look at Officer of the Imperial Guard, Trumpeters of the Imperial Guard, and Wounded Cuirassier.</p> <p>How does the artist represent the soldiers? What do these representations suggest about Gericault's attitude toward Napoleon's army? Do you think Napoleon would have approved or disapproved of these paintings?</p> |
| <p>Adapted from Humanities in the Western Tradition by Marvin Perry</p> | |