Benjamin west: general wolfe and the art of empire.

Benjamin West: General Wolfe and the Art of Empire

## September 22, 2012 - January 13, 2013

This exhibition is organized around a remarkable version of a painting that was a phenomenon in its time, indeed perhaps the most famous in late eighteenth-century Britain: *The Death of General Wolfe* by Benjamin West (1738-1820). West's painting was created in 1771 at the height of the mania for all things Major-General James Wolfe (1727-1759) following his stunning triumph over the French at the Battle of Québec in 1759. This pivotal victory in the French and Indian War (1754-1763) signaled Britain's ascendency in North America and Wolfe, who died on the battlefield, immediately became a national hero. The fervent excitement surrounding his death coincided with the rise of newspapers and the broad availability of affordable consumer goods; these were complemented by an official interest in publicly exhibiting British art and a burgeoning market in prints after well-known paintings. Depictions of Wolfe's tragic death, particularly Benjamin West's, thus became widely dispersed in many media and helped to shape a nationalism that celebrated Great Britain's transition into a cultural, economic, and military power. *Benjamin West: General Wolfe and the Art of Empire* examines images and objects that created a sense of British imperial

identity, from representations of General Wolfe in paintings, prints, and decorative objects marketed to and consumed by an eager public, to the documentation of Britain's new territories in maps visualizing its vast colonial realm.

Collected here for the first time are forty-one objects from institutions in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the majority from two rich collections that stand as American and Canadian counterparts: the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan and the Webster Canadiana Collection at the New Brunswick Museum. The exhibition is complemented by *Discovering Eighteenth-Century British America: The William L. Clements Library Collection*, presented concurrently in the other half of UMMA's A. Alfred Taubman Gallery I.

Carole McNamara

Senior Curator of Western Art
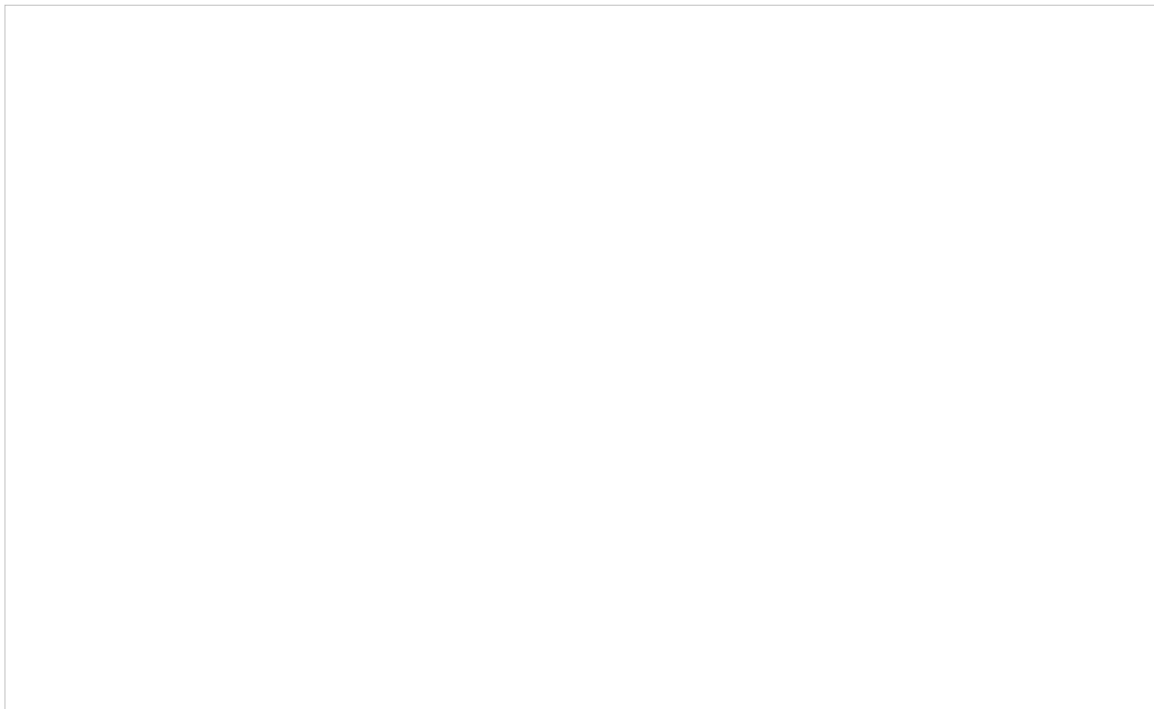
(above: Benjamin West, "The Death of General Wolfe," 1776, Oil on canvas. William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan)

Wall panel texts from the exhibition

Making History

Benjamin West, a colonial subject raised in Pennsylvania, trained in Italy, and settled in England, seized the moment of frenzied admiration of General Wolfe to gain fame, fortune, and immortality by paying homage to the new national hero in paint. In his rendition of the death of Wolfe, he pointedly ignored the long-established convention dictating that figures in history paintings -- even of contemporary subjects -- be shown in Roman dress, instead portraying Wolfe in his military uniform. Though West insisted this was because he wanted to depict the "facts of the transaction," his painting is not a literal account of Wolfe's death, but a poetic invention that propagates a nationalist interpretation of a military victory. The composition includes, for example, many persons who were not present when Wolfe died, but who suggest the ethnic and geographical breadth of the new British Empire (please see carry card for details). To heighten the impact of his painting, West borrowed from another tradition of representation, staging the scene as a Lamentation of Christ. Wolfe, brightly lit as he reclines on the ground, takes the place of the dead Christ while the surrounding officers are in the position of the disciples, their expressions of grief and sorrow cueing the viewer to the appropriate response to Wolfe's sacrifice. West's dramatic composition imbued the subject with a symbolism and emotionalism that set it apart from its predecessors and thrilled his audiences.

Though not factually accurate, the painting nevertheless successfully crystallized for Great Britain its military prowess and right of dominion over North America. *The Death of General Wolfe* became a national icon and was such a sensation that following its spectacular public debut at the recently founded Royal Academy, five full-sized versions of it were commissioned by elite patrons such as King

George III (reigned 1760-1820). This version, now in the collection of the William L. Clements Library, was made in 1776.

The Battle of Québec

The struggle between France and Britain for control of North America came to a head as the French army, accompanied by Native American allies, made forays into lands that both claimed. The French had established a fort on Cape Breton Island protecting the entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the gateway to the extensive waterways of the interior. Québec, situated on high cliffs overlooking the river, was the easternmost city guarding the St. Lawrence river and was essential to hold. In 1759, William Pitt (1708-1778), the architect of the military campaign, decided to send James Wolfe, an officer recently made a Major-General, to take the city. Wolfe arrived at Québec on June 28 and tried without success to engage the French troops throughout the summer.

Frustrated and increasingly impatient, Wolfe realized that the advent of winter meant that British vessels must leave or risk becoming ice-bound and in September he devised a bold plan: his troops would move upriver to the less well defended western side of the city and, under cover of darkness, climb the perilous 175-foot cliffs to attack the French garrison defending it. On the morning of September 13 Wolfe and seven battalions stood outside the city walls on the Plains of Abraham. Within little more than an hour, the battle was over. Wolfe, shot through the wrist, lungs, and abdomen, died shortly after hearing that the French had been routed, his last words reportedly that he died contented. The city, which had provisions for only three days, surrendered to the British on September 17.

Following his death, Wolfe was closely associated with both poetry and music; on the eve of the battle he is reported to have sung *How Stands the Glass Around* with his men as well as recited to them Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard*.

Wolfemania: Celebrating a Popular Hero

During the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) (the North American campaign is known as the French and Indian War) the British fought other European powers in far-off lands such as India, the Caribbean, and New France (now Québec province) for dominance in the New World. Perhaps no victory was more important than the Battle of Québec on September 13, 1759, which gave Britain control of the extensive untapped interior of North America. Major-General James Wolfe was the commander who had devised a daring night approach to the fortified city on the cliffs overlooking the St. Lawrence River and led his troops to swift victory before dying on the field. In the period of heightened patriotism that followed, the public had a seemingly insatiable appetite for representations of Wolfe's heroic death. He immediately became a figure of veneration, honored by his King, his Parliament, his countrymen, and the London press and widely celebrated in verse, songs, sermons, and the visual arts. A man who appealed to all segments of the population, Wolfe became the embodiment of the masterful serving officer -- bold, fearless, and confident -- and his death came to symbolize the inevitability of global British rule.

Visualizing a Hero

Immediately following word of the victory at Québec and the death of General Wolfe there was strong popular feeling that his heroism should be commemorated with a memorial in Westminster Abbey, the traditional resting place of British royalty and important personages. King George II (reigned 1727 60) offered to pay for the monument, but William Pitt (1708-1778), the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, quickly announced that Parliament would fund the project on behalf of the British people themselves. The competition brief describing the requirements for the monument is lost but surviving designs suggest it was expected to represent the moment of Wolfe's death and conform to the convention of depicting heroes partially clothed in ancient drapery -- a practice that Benjamin West would flout.

West was not the first to depict Wolfe in contemporary dress in a large-scale history painting. Several years earlier both Edward Penny

(1714-1791) and George Romney (1734-1802) had publically exhibited paintings of the same subject. Romney's *The Death of Wolfe* in particular was severely criticized by academically trained theoreticians who felt that great events of contemporary history were debased if not given the grandeur of a Roman setting. The public did not seem to mind; indeed Romney's painting was an enormous popular success. West was no doubt aware of these prior works as he contemplated creating a painting meant to challenge critics, but above all appeal to the public.

Disseminating Wolfe

The rising nationalism following the Battle of Québec created a ready market for images of Wolfe and particularly his death. His popularity and hold on the public imagination meant that print publishers and engravers could anticipate selling many engravings done after paintings by artists like J. S. C. Schaak (active 1760-1770), Edward Penny (1714-1791), and, of course, Benjamin West that had been exhibited to crowds of eager spectators in London. The proliferation of such prints made these works widely accessible to people who were not in a position to acquire expensive works of art. West -- a pioneer in the new consumer society of eighteenth-century Britain -- personally oversaw the production of an engraving of *The Death of General Wolfe* by William Woollett (1735-1785), the most accomplished printmaker of the time. The print, one of the biggest commercial successes in British printmaking, helped make West's painting one of the most widely recognized images in England and one of the most reproduced works of art. Woollett's print was also popular in Europe, garnering him 5,000-7,000 pounds in foreign sales, and widely copied by engravers in France and Germany. The print was so lucrative that it was even pirated in England. Through prints such as Woollett's, West's painting found its way onto any number of objects, including seals, ceramics, and fabrics -- a true commodification of Wolfe that speaks to his enduring popularity.

Forging the Empire

While the British public celebrated their newfound status through

paintings and reproductive engravings portraying the victories of military and naval heroes, the draftsmen and engineers among the corps of British officers in the field provided essential quantitative and qualitative data that contributed to the British understanding of its new empire. Officer training included instruction in draftsmanship and a number of sailors and soldiers among the officer corps made sketches of the city of Québec and the surrounding countryside; these were later engraved and sold, thus allowing the public to visualize the new lands recently put under British control. The public also came to know "their" new lands through the production of maps and plans that codified the rapidly expanding empire, consolidating Britain's gains and ensuring that it would retain control of its new dominions.

Object labels from the exhibition

Lock of hair of General James Wolfe
1759
Hair tied with silk ribbon, in gold frame
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W5234)

Among Wolfe's distinctive features was his red hair. This lock is believed to have been taken from his head by Thomas Bell (died 1755), an aide de camp who attended the return of Wolfe's body from Canada to Portsmouth, England. Bell had it mounted in this gold locket, presented to the vicar of St. Alphese's Church in Greenwich, where Wolfe was buried. This memento of Wolfe's physical life has a literal truth like that of a religious relic and his popularity and place in the pantheon of British generals would have made it a prized possession.

Medal inscribed "Georgivs II" (obverse)/"Perfidia Eversa MDCCLIX"

(reverse)
1759
Bronze
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-2725)

Medals were regularly issued to celebrate important victories; this bronze medal was struck to commemorate 1759, an extraordinary period of military victories called an annus mirabilis -- a miraculous year -- for the nation and the architect of Britain's military strategy in the Seven Years' War, William Pitt (1708-1778). The reverse details the victories won between May and November along with the dates of the battles and the names of the commanding officers: Guadaloupe, Niagara, Crown Point, Lagos, Quiberon, and at the top of the medal, Québec. Under Wolfe's name are those of Robert Monckton (1726-1782) and George Townshend (1724-1807), his brigadiers who assumed command after he died. At the center is an inverted French fleur-de-lis surrounded by the inscription "Perfidia Eversa" -- "treachery overthrown."

On the obverse is a profile portrait of Britain's King George II (reigned 1727 60), an image used in other commemorative medals. Following the custom of Roman coins, it shows the monarch in profile and wearing a victor's wreath of laurel leaves.

P. C. Canot, after Hervey Smyth
England, born France, 1710-1777; England, 1734-1811
A View of the Landing Place above the Town of Quebec
1760
Hand-colored engraving published by Robert Sayer (England, 1725-1794)
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-2748.3)

The broad panoramic vistas in this image show the events of the battle concurrently, from the landing parties rowing ashore to the fighting on the high ground. Such engraved views and plans of the battle site were rapidly produced after the victory for sale to the public. Though printed in black and white, they were frequently augmented with watercolor to enhance their dramatic and pictorial

qualities.

The Battle of Québec

The struggle between France and Britain for control of North America came to a head as the French army, accompanied by Native American allies, made forays into lands that both claimed. The French had established a fort on Cape Breton Island protecting the entrance to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the gateway to the extensive waterways of the interior. Québec, situated on high cliffs overlooking the river, was the easternmost city guarding the St. Lawrence river and was essential to hold. In 1759, William Pitt (1708 1778), the architect of the military campaign, decided to send James Wolfe, an officer recently made a Major-General, to take the city. Wolfe arrived at Québec on June 28 and tried without success to engage the French troops throughout the summer.

Frustrated and increasingly impatient, Wolfe realized that the advent of winter meant that British vessels must leave or risk becoming ice-bound and in September he devised a bold plan: his troops would move upriver to the less well defended western side of the city and, under cover of darkness, climb the perilous 175-foot cliffs to attack the French garrison defending it. On the morning of September 13 Wolfe and seven battalions stood outside the city walls on the Plains of Abraham. Within little more than an hour, the battle was over. Wolfe, shot through the wrist, lungs, and abdomen, died shortly after hearing that the French had been routed, his last words reportedly "Then I, thank God, I die contented." The city, which had provisions for only three days, surrendered to the British on September 17.

Bold General Wolfe
1760-1800
Engraved poem published by Catnach Press
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (F565)

Following his death Wolfe was celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic in poetry and songs in which he was frequently portrayed as a valiant hero. *Bold General Wolfe* was a popular poem that was also set to music. The words present Wolfe as an inspiration to his men, even while mortally wounded. Above the poem is a portrait bust of an idealized commander in a Greco-Roman helmet and armor. Though meant to evoke Wolfe, the features are clearly not based on his, as seen in the drawing of Wolfe from life reproduced nearby.

Such verses were set as ballads and became very popular in both England and America. In small print under the title is an advertisement for ballads and penny songbooks, an example of how the memory of Wolfe and his popularity were employed to further commercial interests.

On the Death of General Wolfe, as Sung at the Anacreontic Society by Mr. Sedgwick
circa 1790
Engraved music published by Jonathan Fentum (England, 1763-circa 1784)
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1985)

Shortly after Wolfe's death, the American revolutionary Thomas Paine (1737-1809), then still in England, wrote an ode that was set to music by Thomas Smart (died 1826) as *The Death of General Wolfe*. The song, which features the gods of Olympus and the figure of Britannia, was published on both sides of the Atlantic and remained popular in America despite the growing friction with Britain.

This version of the song was performed at the Anacreontic Society in London, an association of amateur music enthusiasts that gave concerts. It was their society's drinking song, the Anacreontic Song, to which in 1814 Francis Scott Key (1780-1843) set the lyrics that became the national anthem of the United States.

General Wolfe: A New Song Engraved for the Pennsylvania Magazine
March 1775
Engraved music published by Robert Aitken (United States, born Scotland, 1734 -1802)
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1985a)

Even while moving towards rupture with Britain, Thomas Paine's (1737-1809) *Death of General Wolfe* remained a popular song in the colonies. In 1774 Paine left England for Philadelphia, where he became the editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine,* which began publication in January of 1775 and printed his poem as a song soon after.

The publisher, Robert Aitken, was a "respectable bookseller of that town" who, like Paine, was sympathetic with the separatists; Aitken became known as the printer for the Continental Congress. The engraver, James Smither (1741-1797) was of different allegiance. Born in England, he remained a faithful loyalist; his name was included in a listing published in June 1778 of men from Pennsylvania who had enlisted in the British Army.

Benjamin West
United States, 1738-1820
Study for *The Death of General Wolfe*
circa 1769
Pen and ink and oil paint on laid paper
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased with the assistance of a grant from the Government of Canada under the terms of the Cultural Property Export and Import Act (no. 28524).

Though Benjamin West normally used a fairly loose pen and ink technique, this preparatory drawing is a carefully executed, fully realized small-scale version of the painting. There are some differences from the canvas: the battle itself, for example, is missing, allowing West to concentrate on the massing and lighting of the central composition, highlighting Wolfe at the center. As with the final painting, dark areas draw attention to Wolfe's white shirt and

the bandages covering his wounds and the lightening sky that silhouettes the figures standing to the left.

Benjamin West
United States, 1738-1820
The Death of General Wolfe
1776
Oil on canvas
Gift of William L. Clements, acquired 1928, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-2750)

Joseph Wilton
England, 1722-1803
General James Wolfe
circa 1760
Marble
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Bequest of the 6th Earl of Rosebery, Dalmeny House, West Lothian, Scotland, 1975 (no. 18376).

When General Wolfe's body was returned to Portsmouth, England, in mid-November of 1759, the Duke of Richmond (1735-1806) sent Joseph Wilton to the port to take a likeness of Wolfe's features for use in a portrait. When the cistern in which Wolfe's body was transported was opened, Wilton discovered the body was not sufficiently preserved to make a plaster cast. Instead he modeled a clay head based on a servant who reportedly bore a resemblance to Wolfe, which was then corrected by Lord Edgcumbe (1716-1761), who had known Wolfe in life.

Here Wolfe is shown with long hair tied back in the modern style, looking forward in a pose that suggests action and captures the essence of a visionary commander. He is dressed, however, as a Roman soldier, with wolves' heads as epaulets making a visual pun on his name. The success of this hybrid work helped Wilton win the commission for the monument to General Wolfe in Westminster

Abbey.

E. W. Thompson
England, 18th century
Wolfe's Monument by Wilton in Westminster Abbey
1798
Engraving
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick
Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1927)

This engraving of the memorial at Westminster Abbey indicates that
General Wolfe's popularity extended well beyond the Seven Years'
War (1756-1763) and remained a potent touchstone to the British
decades after the memorial was dedicated.

Nathaniel Smith, after Louis-François Roubiliac
England, circa 1741-after 1800; France, active England,
1695-1762
Project for a Monument to General Wolfe
circa 1760-1771
Pen and brown ink with grey and brown wash and graphite on laid
paper, mounted on heavy wove paper
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1954 (no. 6228).

T. Cook, after Nathaniel Smith
England, 18th century; England, circa 1741-after 1800
*Model of an Original Design for a Monument to the Memory of Genl.
Wolfe*
1789
Etching and engraving published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick
Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1926)

Because of the prestige of both the subject and the proposed location
of the memorial, many prominent sculptors submitted designs,

including the French sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac. His proposal, seen here in a drawing by Nathaniel Smith and an engraving published many years later, depicts an illusionistic curtain drawn back to reveal the fallen general supported by a personification of Fame; at their feet a woman who is both Britannia and Minerva holds a laurel wreath and a lion above a fallen figure of a Native American man with a map of Québec. Joseph Wilton's (1722-1803) design shows, in contrast, Wolfe still alive to hear the glorious news and receive the honors that Fame brings him.

Anonymous, after Hervey Smyth
England, 18th century; England, 1734-1811
Major General James Wolfe
n.d.
Engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-1640.57)

Early engraved portraits of General Wolfe were not based on visual records from his lifetime but were fairly generic military types; eventually a more individualized representation of his features, based on works supposedly executed from life, became more widely known. Though this portrait is a generalized view of a military leader, it is still recognizable as James Wolfe. This profile view is distantly based on a small painting of Wolfe in command by J. S. C. Schaak (active 1760-1770) exhibited at the Free Society of Artists in 1762 -- one of the first to appear in a public venue. Because it was a portrait rather than a history painting, Schaak's depiction of Wolfe in contemporary dress was not considered improper.

Anonymous, after Edward Penny
England, 18th century; England, 1714-1791
The Death of General Wolfe
1779
Mezzotint
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1990)

This reproductive mezzotint engraving after Edward Penny's *Death of General Wolfe* (adjacent) was published and sold by Robert Sayer (1725-1794), one of the first fine art printmakers to successfully exploit the market for Wolfe imagery. In 1772, Sayer worked with Richard Houston (1721/22-1775), one of the best known engravers in Britain, to produce a mezzotint that reportedly earned him ?500 in sales. The later version seen here was commissioned by Sayer from another artist at the end of the 1770s and is less fine than Houston's.

Edward Penny
England, 1714-1791
The Death of General Wolfe
1763
Oil on canvas
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Presented by Edward Penny, the artist, 1787 (WA 1845.38)

Edward Penny's portrayal of the death of Wolfe dates to around the year 1763, produced perhaps in anticipation of or immediately following the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which formally ended hostilities in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). A consequence of the treaty was the French withdrawal from Canada and the formal acquisition of the province by the British; this was a moment to proudly invoke Wolfe's accomplishments at Québec several years earlier. The painting, which rejects classical dress, was exhibited at the Free Society of Artists.

While Penny's painting is more historically accurate than West's, it lacks its heroism and epic stature and the mood is less one of valiant self-sacrifice than melancholy.

George Romney
England, 1734-1802
Study of General Wolfe, for *The Death of Wolfe*
circa 1763

Oil on canvas
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick
Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1842)

Ultimately the depiction of Wolfe's death was favored over images of
him in command. Romney's life-size depiction of the subject was
exhibited at the Society of Arts in 1763, where it was "universally
admired for its sentiment and nature by crouds of spectators." It was
not, however, a critical success. This was because Romney had
defied the conventions of academic history painting, considered the
most prestigious genre of painting, by showing Wolfe in
contemporary dress rather classical drapery. The writer Edward
Edwards (1738-1806) reflected the official position when he wrote,
"Romney's was a coat and waistcoat subject, with no more accuracy
of representation that what might be acquired by reading in the
Gazette an account of the death of any General." Romney's painting,
in other words, was mere reportage and lacked the elevated and
heroic elements that would make it a work of great art. Though the
painting was initially awarded a prize, disagreements behind the
scenes involving objections to the prosaic interpretation of the event
caused it to be awarded to another artist.

Romney's painting was purchased and sent the same year to
decorate the Council Chamber in Calcutta and has been
subsequently lost; it is only known by this and one other study of
heads. A friend of Romney's indicated that it was still in London,
however, when Benjamin arrived from Italy and that it may have
been seen by him. If West did see Romney's *Death of Wolfe* then it
had a significant impact on painting in Britain even though it ended
up in India, far removed from British artistic circles.

P. Somebody, after Benjamin West
England, 18th century; United States, 1738-1820
The Death of General Wolfe
circa 1780
Engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-177.1)

P. Somebody, after Benjamin West
England, 18th century; United States, 1738-1820
The Death of General Wolfe
circa 1780
Engraving
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick
Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W2009)

The proliferation of prints based on Benjamin West's painting may be seen in these two pirated images by "P. Somebody." That the death of Wolfe has been debased through the dissemination of images of lesser quality than William Woollett's engraving (on view nearby) is underscored by the inscription that connects it with the "Lovers of Little things and Cheap-buyers."

Robert de Launay, after Benjamin West
France, 1749-1814; United States, 1738-1820
La Mort du Général Wolf à Québec
1776-1800
Hand-colored engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-2748.2)

De Launay was one of the best-known printmakers in France and came from a family of important engravers. It is possible that the vigorous print market in Britain drew foreign competitors and this engraving may have been meant to provide competition to William Woollett's engraving after Benjamin West's painting (on view nearby).

William Woollett, after Benjamin West
England, 1735-1785; United States, 1738-1820
The Death of General Wolfe
1775
Engraving published 1776 by Wollett, Boydell, and Ryland, London

William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-1405.1)

The popularity of Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* meant that an engraving after it would be profitable to everyone involved with its production. John Boydell (1720-1804), who was trained as an engraver, worked with West and Woollett, the most accomplished engraver in London, to produce this landmark print.

West collaborated closely with Woollett, checking the engraver's proofs to ensure an accurate translation of the painting into a black and white print. In early 1773 Boydell advertised the production of the engraving in the press, taking advance orders and expecting to print 1200 impressions. After two events delayed delivery, the print was finally issued on January 1, 1776. It proved wildly popular -- and profitable -- for Woollett, West, and Boydell. By 1790 an estimated 10,000 impressions had been pulled. By then Woollett had died and Boydell had total legal ownership of the plate, which he continued to print.

Carl Guttenberg, after Benjamin West
Germany, 1743-1790; United States, 1738-1820
Der General Wolf
circa 1789
Steel engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-70)

This richly nuanced version of William Woollett's engraving was drawn by a German printmaker who studied in Nuremberg before moving to Paris in 1767 to work under the engraver Jean Georges Wille (1715-1808). Guttenberg had also studied calligraphic engraving in Germany, evident in the inscription below the image.

Luigi Schiavonetti, after Nathaniel Marchant
Italy, circa 1765-1810; England, 1739-1816
The Death of General Wolfe
circa 1790-1800

Stipple engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-1396.7)

Schiavonetti's stipple engraving after an intaglio engraved gem by Nathaniel Marchant shows how even on a small scale Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* could be an impressive work. Marchant was a well-known English gem carver and a hardstone intaglio carving of West's painting was commissioned from him by Sir Richard Worsley (1751-1805) at the end of the eighteenth century for his collection of Renaissance carved gems. This highly distilled composition combines elements from both West's and Edward Penny's (1714-1791) depictions of the death of Wolfe in the figures of the Native American and kneeling soldier; the reclining figure of Wolfe, however, is derived from James Barry's (1741-1806) *Death of General Wolfe* from 1776, which showed him semi-nude and reclining on the ground.

Seal Matrix with *The Death of General Wolfe*
Possibly England
Eighteenth century
Intaglio engraved carnelian in gold mount
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W5231)

This carnelian seal in a gold mount shows the central composition from Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* carved in reverse so that when inked it prints with the proper orientation. The group of attendants surrounding the figure of Wolfe, as well as the soldier holding the flag behind him, have been adjusted slightly to better fit the oval format of the seal.

Jacques Barbié
France, active 1735-1779
General James Wolfe (1727-1759)
circa 1770 79
Engraving and mezzotint

John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W1860)

This unusual print combines the profile portrait of Wolfe by J. S. C. Schaak in a trompe l'oeil oval frame in the upper portion of the image and an equally illusionistic relief, complete with faux attaching hardware in the corners, that shows the essentials of Benjamin West's painting. Produced in Paris, this print exhibits a striking error: in the inscription below the image it assigns the original design of the painting to Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) rather than to West.

Attributed to François-Louis-Joseph Watteau
France, 1758-1823
The Death of Montcalm
circa 1783
Brush and brown and grey wash over black and red chalk, heightened with white, on laid paper
The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of W. A. Mather, Montréal, 1953 (no. 6172).

The French commander at Québec, the Marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759), was also fatally injured during the battle. In Watteau's scene the dying French general is surrounded by his anxious officers, some of whose anguished poses are reminiscent of figures from Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*. Pierre Pouchot (1712-1769) reported that a number of Montcalm's officers provided Watteau with details of their commander's death for use in this drawing. He was said, for example, to have been buried in a shell-hole created during the battle by British artillery and in the lower right corner two men are removing the shell. Unlike West, however, Watteau had no direct knowledge of the topography and native peoples of North America. Instead, the three semi-nude men are derived from antique sources and traditional European depictions of unknown peoples that are more fantastical than accurate.

Remarkably, Watteau actually quotes the central composition of West's painting in the landscape in the distance, thus linking the deaths of the two commanding officers.

Juste Chevillet, after François-Louis-Joseph Watteau
Germany, active in France, 1729-before 1791;
France, 1758-1823
Death of Montcalm
circa 1783
Engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-2748.1)

Juste Chevillet's large-scale engraving, in reverse, after Watteau's drawing of the death of the Marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759) includes a number of changes that lend an air of exoticism to the scene and help to situate the action outside of Europe: the palm tree, for example, hardly native to Canada, and alterations to the dress of the two men at the lower right to indicate that they are Native Americans.

Without the evocation of a dead Christ that made Benjamin West's painting so powerful, Watteau's drawing and Chevillet's engraving lack its focus and emotional power. As with the original drawing, a very small grouping based on West's painting may be seen in the distance at the left. The inscription below the image describes General Wolfe and Montcalm as dying "à peu prè au même instant"? at nearly the same time; this was not the case, but it is a symbolic gesture that equates their deaths.

Josiah Wedgwood
England, 1730-1795
Jug with *The Death of General Wolfe*
circa 1778-80
Transfer-printed earthenware
John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection, New Brunswick Museum, St. John, New Brunswick (W2024A)

This jug, decorated on one side with the central figures from Benajmin West's painting, is an example of Wedgwood's creamware

-- also known as "Queensware" after Britain's Queen Charlotte (1744-1818) -- consisting of a cream-colored clay body covered with a lead glaze. Intended to compete with porcelain, creamware was durable and less expensive, making it well suited to the transfer of images from prints inked with special ceramic ink. Thus an image based on William Woollett's engraving could be incorporated into production ware that, like an engraving, was easily affordable to a large clientele. These transfer works were not done at Wedgwood's Staffordshire facility, but through the Liverpool printers of John Sadler (1720-1789) and Guy Green (active 1756-1803).

An interesting aspect of Wedgwood's creamware is that it can be straight production ware or combined with special commission requests. This jug has a romantic, but somewhat generic, pastoral scene with classical ruins on the opposite side?also based on a print? while other jugs showing the death of Wolfe carried specialized inscriptions that were completely unrelated to the battle at Québec.

Toile de Jouy panel depicting *The Death of General Wolfe*, after Benjamin West
1774-1811
Printed cotton
Quebec House, Westerham, Kent (The National Trust, United Kingdom) (90594)

This printed cotton toile de Jouy, named for the French producers who popularized copperplate-printed cottons and linens, was made in England. Such printed fabrics were used in upholstery and bed hangings and typically had repeating patterns, here the version of West's painting known via William Woollett's engraving. Aspects of the composition also share elements with Joseph Wilton's (1722-1803) memorial to Wolfe unveiled in Westminster Abbey in 1773, suggesting that it was produced sometime after. Although the central portion of the composition shows (in reverse) the essentials of West's painting, its soaring vantage point, the winged victory carrying a standard and laurel wreath, and the pyramidal composition link it to the memorial. In the toile, however, the winged victory soars above, accompanied by a trumpeting figure representing Fame.

Bow Porcelain Factory
London, England
Statuette - General Wolfe
circa 1760
Porcelain painted with enamels and slightly gilded
Given by Lady Charlotte Schreiber, Victoria and Albert Museum,
London (414:5-1885)

J. S. C. Schaak's small canvas, the composition of which may be seen in the adjacent print, was clearly the model for this porcelain figurine of General Wolfe. Whereas in the painting Wolfe makes a commanding gesture to his men, here he has been domesticated into to a rococo-inspired decorative object. Although charming, this work is not heroic and is more akin to the shepherds, musicians, and other ornamental works produced by porcelain manufacturers in England and Europe. As was often the case with eighteenth-century ceramic figurines, this statuette was one of a pair. Its mate depicted the Marquis of Granby (1721-1770), also important in the military victories of 1759 and the subject of a painting by Edward Penny meant to be paired with his *Death of General Wolfe.*

Begun in 1747 to provide a domestic ware that could compete with porcelain imports from Asia, Bow ceramic body was a soft-paste that included bone ash; this was later to be developed by Spode and other British porcelain producers into what is known as bone china. The addition of bone to the clay body gave Bow works their characteristic translucent white color, as well as greater strength against breakage.

Samuel Freeman
England, 1773-1857
Major-General James Wolfe
Possibly 19th century
Hand-colored engraving
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (P-1640.60)

J. S. C. Schaak's victorious depiction of Wolfe prior to being shot was copied by many different printmakers; portraits of Wolfe appeared in books and as free-standing prints well into the following century.

Samuel Johannes Holland
Netherlands, 1728-1801
Three repetition plans of Québec from the *Murray Atlas of Canada*:
1. *Plan of Quebec with the positions of the British and French army's on the Heights of Abraham, 13th of Sept., 1759*
2. *Plan of the Battle and Situation of the Brittish and French armys on the Heights of Abraham the 28th of April 1760*
3. *Plan of Quebec and the heights of Abraham, shewing in particular the French Encampment after the battle of the 28th April*

Key to Repetition Plans of Quebec
1761-63
Pen and ink and watercolor
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (M-675)

Following General Wolfe's death, James Murray (1721-1794), the most junior of the three brigadier generals under Wolfe, was given the task of governing the province of Québec. Murray had the difficult job of holding together the province and maintaining the loyalty of his troops through a winter of shortages of both food and wood, a situation greatly exacerbated by Wolfe's destruction of local crops during the summer of 1759.

In the autumn of 1760, Murray directed his engineers to conduct a detailed survey of British-held portions of French Canada. This set of plans, which was not intended to be published, constituted a comprehensive assessment of the colony, detailing in pen and ink and watercolor the distribution of towns, farms, roads, and rivers in the settlements along the St. Lawrence and its tributaries. Only seven versions were produced, of which five remain?the copy in the Clements Library is the only one in the United States. Several army

engineers worked on the plans that comprise the *Murray Atlas*, including John Montresor (1736-1799) and Samuel Holland, who was responsible for drawing the three repetition plans of Québec, completed in November 1761. Such precise and detailed information about the province would ensure competent governance of the new lands acquired by Great Britain.

John Singleton Copley
United States, 1738-1815
Colonel John Montresor (1736-99)
circa 1771
Oil on canvas
Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Gibbs-Williams Fund, 41.37

John Singleton Copley was, like Benjamin West, an American-born painter greatly acclaimed in the English art market. While his portraits appear to be straightforward depictions of successful colonial women and men, they also provide very adroit insights into the characters of his subjects. This is certainly true of his portrait of John Montresor, a captain under the command of James Wolfe at Québec who was involved in building harbors and other fortifications during both the French and Indian War (1754-63) and the American Revolutionary War (1775-83). Here he is portrayed at a later date as Chief Engineer of British forces in America -- a thoughtful and dignified professional soldier shown in uniform holding a volume on field engineering. Montresor was one of the engineers assigned by General James Murray (1721-1794) to survey the new British territories for the *Murray Atlas of Canada*, on view nearby (Montresor's work from the *Murray Atlas* may be seen in the adjacent exhibition).

A View of the Taking of Quebec September 13th 1759
1795
Hand-colored engraving published by John Bowles (England, 1701-1779)

In addition to the printed images showing the death of General Wolfe at Québec, both maps and prints were produced of the battlefield of this and other notable conflicts. As with many such images, the sequence of events is conflated so that the night landing of troops and their ascent to the top of the cliffs is combined with the fighting on the Plains of Abraham the following morning. The panoramic view provides the breadth of field that allows the events to be presented simultaneously.

Antoine Benoist, after a drawing by Richard Short
France, 1721-1770; England, 1719-1771
A View of the Church of Notre Dame de la Victoire; Built in Commemoration of the Raising of the Siege in 1695, and Destroyed in 1759, from *Twelve Views of the Principal Buildings in Quebec*
1761
Hand-colored engraving published by Thomas Jefferys (England, 1719-1771)

Richard Short was a naval officer under Admiral Charles Saunders (circa 1715-1775) and was, like Hervey Smyth (1734-1811), a military-trained draftsman. In this series of engravings he recorded the state of the City of Québec after it fell to the British in September of 1759. The church of Notre-Dame de la Victoire, built in 1687, stood in the lower town of Québec. Originally dedicated to the infant Jesus, it was rededicated to the Virgin following lifting of the Siege of Québec by a force from Massachusetts in 1690. As can be seen in this engraving, the historic church and the surrounding lower town were devastated by the British naval bombardment undertaken by General Wolfe during the summer prior to the decisive battle on September 13, 1759.

At least eight different engravers worked on the dozen plates in this series; it is possible that the publisher Thomas Jefferys hoped to exploit the deep interest in the battle of Québec and employed multiple engravers working concurrently to ensure a rapid production of the plates to satisfy public demand.

Peter Paul Benazech, after Hervey Smyth
England, circa 1744-after 1783; England, 1735-1811
A View of the City of Quebec, from the *Scenographia Americana*
1760
Engraving published 1768 by John Bowles (England, 1701-1779),
Robert Sayer (England, 1725-1794), Thomas Jefferys (England, 1719-
1771), Carington Bowles (England, 1724-1793), and Henry Parker
(England, circa 1725-1809)
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (12128)

William Elliot, after Hervey Smyth
England, 1727-1766; England, 1734-1811
A View of the Fall of Montmorenci, from the *Scenographia Americana*
1760
Engraving published 1768 by John Bowles (England, 1701-1779),
Robert Sayer (England, 1725-1794), Thomas Jefferys (England, 1719-
1771), Carington Bowles (England, 1724-1793), and Henry Parker
(England, circa 1725-1809)
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (12128)

Hervey Smyth served as General Wolfe's aide de camp at Québec and
executed a number of sketches of the St. Lawrence River surrounding
the city of Québec. These sweeping panoramas showing the lush and
verdant Canadian countryside were originally published in 1760 as
*Six Elegant VIEWS of the most remarkable Places in the River and
Gulph of St. Lawrence.* Eight years later, Smyth's engravings, along
with engravings after other "drawings taken on the spot by several
officers of the British Army and Navy," were offered as a survey of
British-held territories in the Americas ranging from Canada to the
Caribbean and West Indies. This massive set, sold for four guineas to
affluent collectors, would have made visible to the British public
back home how extensive and varied were the territories held in the
Americas.

A Correct Plan of the Environs of Quebec
1768
Hand-colored engraving published by Thomas Jefferys (England, 1719-1771)
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (M-469)

Thomas Jefferys was the leading cartographic publisher in London during the eighteenth century. This plan of Québec includes an overlay flap indicating the location of troops during the battle for the city on September 13, 1759 and is a more detailed expansion of the one that Jefferys published shortly after word of the victory at Québec reached London (adjacent).

An Authentic Plan of the River St. Laurence from Sillery
to the Fall of Montmorenci
1759
Engraving published by Thomas Jefferys (England, 1719-1771)
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan (M-145)

Within days of news reaching London of the victory at Québec, Thomas Jefferys, Geographer to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, capitalized on the fervent interest in the events in Canada by advertising the publication of a new map that would incorporate the latest information regarding the battle. Hervey Smyth (1734-1811), Wolfe's aide de camp and a capable draftsman, had returned with the early ships to England and it is likely that it was his knowledge of events that gave this new map its cachet.

Jefferys included an elaborate inscription dedicating the map to William Pitt (1708-1778), the Secretary of State for the Southern Department. The victory at Québec was an important affirmation for Pitt, who had personally chosen James Wolfe, a relatively untested but articulate and enthusiastic officer, to lead the campaign.

Attributed to Maarten de Vos

Flanders, 1532-1603
Allegorical Representation of America
circa 1594-1600
Pen and black ink with ink wash
University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 1960/2.24

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Americas were a largely unknown land with a powerful allure for Europeans wanting to expand their colonial territories and exploit its natural resources. This allegorical depiction of America shows it personified as a female figure seated on a tree stump, adorned with a feather girdle and headdress, armbands, and a necklace of shells over her shoulder. Around her are emblems of America's fecundity: a rhinoceros (often confused with an armadillo), a jaguar with the head of a lion, a fantastic parrot, and a fruit-laden tree. Staff in hand she faces the European ship at the upper left while her left arm, draped with strands of beads, holds a bowl as if to offer the newcomers the wealth of her lands.

De Vos made numerous drawings intended for translation into prints by some of the leading engravers in Europe. This image showing how Europeans perceived the Americas may have been intended as a decorative plaquette or even a stained glass.

Catalogue for the exhibition

To view the catalogue for the exhibiution please [click here](.).

Editor's note:

Resource Library wishes to extend appreciation to Joe Rosa and Stephanie Miller of the University of Michigan Museum of Art for their help concerning permission for publishing online the exhibition catalogue containing Carole McNamara's original essay.

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