Class 6: Two Revolutions

A. How is History Told?

0. Osher Info slide
1. Class title 1 (Delaware and Bastille)
2. Class title 2 (2 explosions)
3. Timeline

Here is a timeline of the history I hope to touch on in this class: the **American and French Revolutions**, framed by the **French and Indian War** on this continent and the various **Napoleonic Wars** in Europe. It is a lot of history, but I am going to tie it down to artworks as far as possible.

At various times in the class, we are going to be looking into the question here: **When it comes to art, how is history told?** Let's throw a dart at the wall and start more or less at random. I'll zoom in on the central picture; tell me what you see in it.

4. Section title A (collage of pictures)
5. Section title A (zoom in on *The Death of Major Pierson*)

If you happen to know what this is, please don't say; I want to see how people work it out. Who are the belligerents? The British, obviously, but their antagonists are hard to make out. Which side are you meant to sympatize with? Equally obviously, the British; someone has been killed, and his body is clearly the point of focus. Where is this? That's hard: the houses don't quite look American, and there is clearly an enormous redoubt to one side.

6. John Singleton Copley: *The Death of Major Pierson, 6 January, 1781* (Tate, 1783)
7. Jersey and Mont Orgueil

In fact, this represents a very minor sideline of the American War of Independence, a failed French attack on **Jersey in the Channel Islands**, in which 24-year-old **Major Francis Pierson**, temporarily in command of the garrison in the island capital, **Saint Helier**, refused to surrender and drove the attackers off. He was killed, but became a national hero. *Why did the French undertake this in the first place*? Because the Channel Islands, which are closer to France than England but came to Britain with the Normans, were being used as a base for **privateers**, who disrupted French shipping. A successful attack would also have siphoned British forces away from the American front.

8. John Singleton Copley: *The Death of Major Pierson, 6 January, 1781* (repeat)
9. John Singleton Copley

There are two more interesting things about this: it was painted **only two years after** the event it represents, and the artist was **American**. Nowadays, we are used to seeing history unfold in newspaper photographs or on television, but commissioning and painting pictures took time; how long a time is a question we will return to later. painting was intended to raise British spirits when the war against the American colonists was going badly. And as I said, the artist, **John Singleton Copley** (1738–1815), was himself American. But he moved to London in 1774 and never returned. If the British wanted to commission paintings exalting their own victories, he was prepared to undertake them. I don't believe he ever painted anything where those victories were at the expense of his own people, though. I found a rather good video on YouTube by a man calling himself **The History Guy** that tells you just about all that I've already said, but in more detail. I am also showing it because it starts with an excellent summary of earlier and contemporary events on the American contintent.

10. The History Guy: *The Battle of Jersey*

B. The Man Who Lost Canada

11. Section title B

Louis-Joseph de Montcalm-Gozon, **Marquis de Montcalm** de Saint-Veran (1712–59), along with Ben Franklin and the Marquis de Lafayette, is the first of three men I will use as pivots for the next part of my story: the French involvement in American Wars. In starting with Montcalm—actually with the *death* of Montcalm—I am continuing my exploration of how great events were commemorated in art.

12. Map of *Nouvelle France,* 1750
13. Montcalm and Wolfe

The Seven Years' War in Europe metastisized in this continent as the French and Indian War (1754–63). The French were attempting to protect their considerable American holdings, in what they called *Nouvelle France,* and sent over Montcalm to command the army defending it. The British forces were commanded by General **James Wolfe** (1727–59). Both lost their lives in the crucial battle of that war, the **Capture of Quebec** in 1759. Wolfe became a hero in Britain; the inscription on this posthumous portrait, probably by **Joseph Highmore**, reads: "*Major General James Wolfe, who, at the Expence of his Life, purchased immortal Honour for his Country, and planted, with his own Hand, the British Laurel, in the inhospitable Wilds of North America, By the Reduction of Quebec, Septr. 13th. 1759*." I want us to compare three paintings of their deaths: *The Death of General Wolfe* painted by the now-forgotten artist **Edward Penny** (1714–91) **four** years after the event; the very famous painting by the **Benjamin West** (1738–1820)—an American artist who spent most of his life in London—**eleven** years after, and this monochrome version of *The Death of General Montcalm* prepared for engraving **twenty-four** years after the battle, and atributed to **François Watteau** (1758–1823), the great-nephew of the famous Antoine Watteau.

14. — the three pictures below
15. Edward Penny: *The Death of General Wolfe at Quebec, 1759* (1763, Ashmolean)
16. Benjamin West: *The Death of General Wolfe at Quebec, 1759* (1770, NG Canada)
17. F. Watteau (attrib.): *The Death of General Montcalm at Québec, 1759* (c.1783, NGC)

So three questions. Does it matter how long after the battle each was painted? Why did West feel the need to make a second version after Penny's, and what qualities did he add that made it so famous? And why did whoever-it-was commission François Watteau to produce a similar picture of Montcalm so long after? One answer is that West was a celebrity; though American, he was a leading member of the Royal Academy and would eventually become its President. Copley was only one of numerous American artists who came over to London to work with West. The Penny picture is a simple statement of what happened; by contrast, there is something mythic about the West, more like a picture of a Christian martyr. Almost certainly the fame of the West led Watteau's patrons to commission a French equivalent. Besides, the French were still smarting at the loss of their American possessions; it may have been one of the reasons they came into the Revolutionary War against the British.

18. Cooper: *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)

Montcalm makes one other appearance in American arts. He makes an appearance in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) by **James Fenimore Cooper** (1789–1851), which is set in the Fench and Indian Wars. Although the book is fictional, this seems to be based on fact. Montcalm is besieging a fort occupied by an English force under Colonel Munro. He offers Munro the chance to withdraw with his men unharmed, which Munro ultimately accepts. I like the scene for the courtesy of the exchange, despite the bloodshed all around. **Patrice Chéreau** (whom I know primarily as an opera director) plays Montcalm, and **Maurice Roëves** appears as Colonel Munro.

19. *The Last of the Mohicans,* Montcalm and Munro
20. Montcalm tries to stop the Algonquins from killing Munro's men

Unfortunately, in the real occasion on which the scene is based, Montcalm's guarantee of safe passage did not hold, and Munro's party was attacked by native Americans. So Montcalm had to go in and kill some of his own allies to stop the slaughter.

C. The Polymath

21. Section title C (Franklin facts)

I'm pretty sure you already know these facts about **Benjamin Franklin** (1696–1790), a man whom the word "polymath" doesn't even begin to describe! What you may not know is that he was also a musician. The snatch for string quartet you have just heard may not be the greatest, but it was composed by him. And he also invented a musical instrument that inspired Mozart in a distant part of a distant continent. I'll let **Ken Burns** explain from the PBS series he produced in 2022.

22. Ken Burns: *Benjamin Franklin,* the glass harmonica
23. Franklin and science

Despite being almost entirely self-educated, one facet of Franklin's reputation was as a scientist, not least for his experiments with electricity, which gained him worldwide fame. Which is the subject of my next how-is-history-painted? example, a posthumous painting of him by—who else?—**Benjamin West**. I have made it into a video, starting with a picture that West *didn't* paint and ending with the one he *did.* So my question is: <u>why the difference</u>?

24. West: *Franklin Drawing Energy from the Sky* (1816, Philadelphia)

The central part of the painting, which I showed first, is quite realistic, isn't it? West has been around scientists and knows the equipment. <u>So why add all the *putti*</u>? I think because he wants to take science and mythologize it—something we saw already in the *Death of Wolfe*. Anyway, it is with that background, a reputation almost superhuman, that he goes to France to ask for help in the Revolution. I'll turn back to **Ken Burns** to explain how he was received.

25. Ken Burns on Franklin in Paris
26. Surrender at Yorktown

Franklin was successful, as we know, and French land forces (in numbers almost as large as those of the colonists) and French ships (in much greater numbers) joined the war for the final push, which came with the surrender at **Yorktown in 1781**. That roughly contemporary picture, incidentally, shows another way in which history can be told; it is the rough equivalent of newspaper reports, with information about the various forced involved, but very little sense of place and absolutely no feeling for how it was to be a human participant in the event. Peripheral parts of the war continued for some time, but eventually representatives from both Britain and America met in Paris in 1783 to draw up a treaty. Here is the stamp issued by the US government to mark the bicentenary of the occasion. **Franklin**, as you see, is in the middle; **John Jay** is leaning over him, **John Adams** sits to his right, and facing them across the table is **David Hartley**, signing for the British Crown. So yet another way of depicting history.

27. Treaty of Paris bicentennial stamps
28. West: *The Treaty of Paris* (1783, Winterthur Museum, Delaware)

Except that it is by no means the original. It is based on this painting made on the spot by our friend **Benjamin West**, which shows, in addition to Adams, Franklin, and Jay, two other American delegates: **Henry Laurens** and Ben's grandson **William Temple Franklin**. <u>Can you guess why the stamp designer chose to make the alterations he did</u>? <u>And why did West not finish it</u>? The answer to the second question is mundane, but easy: the British were not keen on having their faces on a memorial to their defeat, and refused to sit. But the stamp had to show *somebody* signing the treaty. And only three of the American delegates signed the document, so the stamp designer omitted the two who didn't. <u>But which picture would you say is the more true to history</u>?

29. Class title 3 (Truth?)
30. Osher title slide (repeat)

D. Man in the Shadows

31. Section title D (Lafayette)

One person I absolutely have to include in this class is Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de **La Fayette** (1757–1834). At the age of 19, he paid for a ship out of his own pocket to take him, some weapons, and a few men to America, where he voluteered to join the Continental Army without pay. He became a close friend of Washington, who gave him the rank of Major General. Lafayette accompanied him at **Valley Forge** and **Brandywine**, where he was wounded.

32. Lafayette wounded at Brandywine
33. Trumbull: *Surrender at Yorktown, 1781* (1820, US Capitol)

He returned to France and lent his voice to that of Benajim Franklin in urging French aid for the Revolution. He came back to America in advance of the large French force that won the day at Yorktown, but it was Lafayette himself that made the victory possible, leading American soldiers to capture one of the two redoubts blocking their access to the city. Yet I cannot use my normal method of analyzing paintings, since if he is shown at all, it is always as a supporting figure in the shadows, as in the celebrated picture in the US Capitol by **John Trumbull** (1756–1843).

34. Lafayette's Oath (1790) and *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789)

Lafayette is equally important, furthermore, to the second hour of this class, which deals with the French Revolution. With the advice of **Thomas Jefferson**, he drew up the *Declaration of the Rights of Man,* a foundation document of the still-emergent Republic. He designed the tricolor cockade. He was appointed commander of the **National Guard**, and did a remarkable job of steering a middle course, even at the expense of being vilified by the more extreme factions on either side whom he would not join. He swore an **oath of loyalty to France**, rather than to any person. He served **Napoleon** while he was still First Consul, but refused honors from him once he crowned himself Emperor. After the **1830 Revolution**, he was invited to lead the country as its Dictator, but declined in favor of the "Citizen-King" **Louis Philippe**. The French call him "**The Hero of Two Worlds**." I may not be able to show much of Lafayette in pictures, but I can throw in a couple of videos. First, from the 1961 film *La Fayette*, when he arrives in Philadelphia and presents himself to the Continental Congress. It was made in French, then dubbed into English, but the French has been put back but in this copy with big subtitles; excuse them!

35. *La Fayette:* Lafayette before the Continental Congress

The second clip comes from the 1989 film *The French Revolution*. I have chosen the scene where Lafayette reads his *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, and the King rejects it.

36. *The French Revolution:* Lafayette reads the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*

E. Eyewitness to History

37. Section title E (David)
38. David: various depictions of Napoleon

We think of **Jacques-Louis David** (1748–1825) as the painter of at least three iconic depictions of Napoleon, but in fact he was in there from the first stirrings of the Revolution—he was even elected a deputy—and remained for a full decade after Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo; his pupils dominated French art for a least a quarter-century more. But let's start with a painting that, on the surface, seems to have nothing to do with contemporary events at all.

39. David: *Brutus* (1789, Louvre)

You can guess what is going on here if you want to, but I don't think you'll get the point unless you know your classical history. The full title, as printed in the guidebook to the 1789 *Salon* where it was exhibited, reads (in translation): *Brutus, first consul, returned to his house after having condemned his two sons who had allied themselves with the Tarquins and conspired against Roman liberty; the lictors return their bodies so that they may be entombed.* The pro-Republican sentiment is obvious in this first year of the Revolution. In fact, the picture was not accepted by the *Salon*, which of course is a state art show, because it was considered too divisive, but the jury bowed to public pressure.

40. Engraving after David: *The Tennis Court Oath, June 20, 1789*

But in the same year, 1789, David began a painting that very much dealt with contemporary events. Earlier in the year, **King Louis XVI**, seeking some relief from debts, summoned to Versailles a traditional but seldom-invoked assembly known as the **Estates General**, in which representatives from the three estates (clergy, nobility, and commoners) would meet, hopefully to suggest new taxation schemes. The Third Estate, the commoners, refused to meet without the other two, but when an emissary from the King tried to get them to go off to their designated halls, the members of the First and Second Estates left the room, but the commoners remained sitting, in absolute silence. The emissary said quietly to the President of the session, "Sir, did you not hear the orders of the King?" The President, an astronomer called **Jean Sylvain Bailly**, replied "It seems to me that the nation assembled cannot take orders." *This* was the real revolution, the quiet assertion of democracy versus monarchy, far more than the assault on the Bastille some days later. Anyway, when the Third Estate returned to Versailles the nexy day, they found the hall locked. So they adjourned to a nearby indoor tennis court, a ***jeu de paume,*** and there swore an oath not to continue to meet as a **National Assembly**, and not to separate until a new Constitution has been established."

41. David: *The Tennis Court Oath, June 20, 1789*

David made a detailed drawing for what would obviously become a large-scale painting, but he never finished it; the colored version I just showed you is a print made by some other hand. So here's my question: Why was it left unfinished? It takes a considerable time to work up a picture of this size, and

therefore a lot of money. And before David has even come close to raising the sum required, the revolutionary movement had broken up into various extreme factions. So some of the heroes of these early days had become enemies of the state well before the painting would have been finished.

42. David, Robespierre, Marat

David aligned himself with the radical **Jacobins**, and was close friends with their leader **Maximilien Robespierre** (1758–94) and principal apologist, the writer **Jean-Paul Marat** (1743–93). Robespierre would eventually be guillotined in the reaction to the **Reign of Terror** (roughly 1792–94), of which he was the chief architect, and Marat was assassinated a year earlier by a young woman called **Charlotte Corday**. Marat had a skin condition which he relieved by taking long baths. Disguising her political affiliation, Corday got an appointment to see him, then stabbed him in his bath. She made no attempt to flee, and was guillotined four days later.

43. David: *The Death of Marat* (1893, Brussels)
44. Guillaume-Joseph Roques: *The Death of Marat* (1893, Toulouse)

David solved the problem of painting current events in real time by a similar approach to what we have seen with Benjamin West—by mythologizing, taking the event out of time, freezing the moment in what becomes almost a painted tombstone. Compare it to the very similar portrayal of the same year by the minor artist **Guillaume-Joseph Roques** (1757–1847), who I think copied the David, but added his own touches. I think you will see that it is the restraint of the David that makes it so powerful; it is actually a very detailed picture, but he eliminates every detail that is not strictly relevant.

45. Tony Robert-Fleury: *Charlotte Corday in Caen* (Bayonne)

We have been looking at how history can be told through paintings. For David, Marat was a friend and political ally, so he depicts him as a martyr. Later generations, however, have seen Charlotte Corday as the heroine. She saw it that way herself also, and with an eye to posterity, commissioned an artist, **Jean-Jacques Hauer**, to paint her in her cell shortly before her execution. So I want to give you a short montage of paintings that focus on her. Most of them are much later, but it begins with Hauer's portrait, then a picture from a century later showing him watching her being led out of the cell. Three mid-19th-century depictions follow, all showing Corday in the room just after the murder; the hysteria of the last one contrasts markedly with the remarkable restraint of the David. It is only just over half a minute, so I can show it again if anyone wants to stop and discuss.

46. Montage of depictions of Charlotte Corday

F. The G-Men

47. Section title F (Gros and Géricault)

Calling this section "The G-Men" is just my little joke, but I wanted to use whatever remaining time we have to continue our exploration of how-history-is-told with two artists working during the Napoleonic era. It was too nice a coincidence that both begin with the letter G!

48. Gros: *Napoleon at Arcole* (1796, Versailles)
49. Vernet: *Napoleon at Arcole* (1826, pc.)

Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835), later made the Baron Gros, was a pupil of David's who was introduced to Napoleon by his wife, whose portrait he had painted. The two hit it off, and Gros accompanied the young general on several of his campaigns. This one of the first victories that brought Napoleon to fame, defeating the Austrian forces at the **Bridge of Arcole**, just south of Verona, in 1796. He was only 25. What makes it so effective? I think, as with David's *Marat,* it is because of its extreme compression; while there is a lot of detail there, it is only the detail that you need. If you compare it to the later depiction of the same event by **Horace Vernet** (1789–1863), you can see what I mean. What I don't understand is what Vernet might have had in mind when he painted his version.

50. Gros: *Napoleon Visits the Pesthouse at Jaffa* (1804, Louvre)

A history painting tells a story, but it can also slant or sanitize a story. In 1799, on his campaign to Egypt, Napoleon conquered the city of **Jaffa**, now just south of Tel Aviv in Israel. There is good evidence that his forces were particularly brutal in their conquest, "slaughtering Christians, Jews and Muslims indiscriminately […and…] ordering the mass killing of 3,000 Ottoman prisoners in French captivity." Several dozen French soldiers had contracted the plague, and Napoleon apparently ordered that they be euthanized with opium so that the army could move on. In 1804, Napoleon had just declared himself Emperor, and such rumors—true or not—did no good to his reputation. So he commissioned this painting from Gros. Can you see how it might have worked as a piece of propaganda? It shows, of course, Napoleon taking a personal interest in the welfare of his men. The detail of him touching the running sores of one of them may also be a reference to "the **King's touch**," the idea going back to medieval times that the divinely anointed monarch could cure certain diseases simply by touching them. And right now, Napoleon desperately needed to establish himself as the divinely annointed monarch.

51. Théodore Géricault: *Officer of the Chasseurs Leading a Charge* (1812, Louvre)

Ignore the monklike appearance of **Théodore Géricault** (1791–1824); the man was the **James Dean** of his day, loving wild women, spirited horses, and flamboyant color. He died young from a throw from a horse. This picture of an officer in the Napoleonic wars riding into battle perfectly captures his spirit. It also has much the same spirit of compressed energy that I noted in Gros' *Napoleon at Arcole.* Unlike Gros, though, Géricault never had an official position, so his depictions of the era are more obliwue, but by the same token more objective. I show this particular painting, however, in order to have you set it

beside a later one of much the same subject, painted just two years later. What do you get from comparing the two? What has happened in between one and the other?

52. Géricault: *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field* (1814, Louvre)

What has happened in the Moscow débacle of 1812. It was not strictly a defeat; Napoleon had reached Moscow, only to find that its inhabitants had set fire to it. What caused the gigantic loss of life was not the Russian army but, as Napoleon put it, "General Winter." My closing slide is by a German artist, **Adolph Northen**, 33 years later. No French artist would have been able to paint such a thing at the time. In the context of which, Géricault's portrait of defeat is quite remarkable.

53. Class title 4 (Northen: *Retreat from Moscow*)