

Topic Page: [West, Benjamin, 1738–1820](#)

Definition: **West, Benjamin** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1738-1820

British painter

Born in Springfield, Pennsylvania, USA, he showed early promise as a portraitist and was sent on a sponsored visit to Italy, and on his return was induced to settle in London in 1763. George III was his patron for 40 years. The representation of modern instead of classical costume in his best-known picture, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1771), was an innovation in English historical painting.

Summary Article: **West, Benjamin**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1738–1820, American historical painter who worked in England. He was born in Springfield, Pa., in a house that is now a memorial museum at Swarthmore College. After some instruction from a local artist named William Williams, he set up as a portrait painter in Philadelphia at 18, subsequently moving to New York City. In 1760 he went to Europe, where he remained for the rest of his life. For three years he studied in Italy. Working under the tutelage of Anton Mengs, he was also inspired by the classical research of Johann Winckelmann. He then settled in London, becoming a leader of the neoclassical movement. Under the patronage of George III, commissions came to him in great numbers, and in 1772 he was appointed historical painter to the king. A founder of the Royal Academy, he succeeded Sir Joshua Reynolds as its president in 1792. West executed more than 400 canvases, chiefly historical, mythological, and religious subjects painted on a heroic scale. He had many pupils and was a generous friend and adviser to younger artists, particularly American painters studying in England, among whom were Washington Allston, Samuel Morse, Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, and John Singleton Copley. His influence on American painting of the period was predominant. Among West's best-known works are *Death of General Wolfe* (Grosvenor Gall., London) and *Penn's Treaty with the Indians* (Pa. Acad. of the Fine Arts). In these paintings he created a new departure in historical painting by clothing his figures in the costume of their period instead of the traditional classical garb. At the same time, he maintained the balanced compositional elements of the neoclassical painters. Sometimes his paintings were more turbulent and colorful and indeed prefigured romanticism, such as *Death on a Pale Horse* (Pa. Acad. of the Fine Arts).

See study by H. Von Erffa and A. Staley (1986).

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West, Benjamin. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from



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Chicago

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