

Benjamin West (1738-1820) was an Anglo-American painter of historical, religious, and mythological subjects who had a profound influence on the development of historical painting in Britain. He was working around and after the time of the American War of Independence and was the second president of the Royal Academy in London, serving from 1792 to 1805 and 1806 to 1820. Despite living in England, West also had a profound influence on American painting.



West was born in Pennsylvania and remained there painting portraits until the age of twenty-one. After a successful painting of the *Death of Socrates*, West was approached by the provost of the College of Philadelphia and offered education and connections with the wealthy and political elite.

In 1760 West travelled to Italy where he copied works of Italian painters such as Raphael and Titian and was influenced by the neoclassical style of British artists Anton Rafael Mengs and Gavin Hamilton.

In 1763 West arrived in England, intending to stop over on his return to America but he moved to London and remained there until his death in 1820, living for a while in the Parish of St. Marylebone. In London, West was introduced to many prominent artists and philosophers and continued to embrace classical subjects in his paintings, becoming known as the 'American Raphael'.



In 1772, King George appointed him historical painter to the court and completed many commissions in this role. The position offer was partly owed to his painting "The Death of General Wolfe, from the year before, which is one of his best-known and most controversial works. The piece made a noteworthy concession to realism in its use of modern dress rather than antique drapery to depict a contemporary historical event within a classical composition. In all

his history paintings the expressive figures, colours and compositional schemes help the spectator to identify with the scene represented and the artist called this 'epic representation'. West was Surveyor of the King's Pictures from 1791 until his death.

Shortly before his death, West painted two works that constituted the major altar decorations of St. Marylebone Parish Church. The larger painting was *The Angels Announcing to the Shepherds the Birth of Our Saviour* (1816-1817) and hung behind the altar and *The Nativity of Our Saviour* (1817-1818) stood behind it. This commission was important because it was carried out in and for the artist's home parish and therefore involved a personal commitment not often associated with his works.



West died at his house in Newman Street, London, on 11 March 1820, and was buried in St Paul's Cathedral.