

BATTLING FOR REPRESENTATION: IDEOLOGY AND MILITARY IMAGES

Julie-Anne Plax
(Arizona)

How might one depict a Revolution? Here are two images of the American Revolution, representing the Battle at Bunker's Hill and the burning of Charleston, June 17, 1775. The first is an engraving, by Bernard Romans done shortly after the event representing a panoramic view of the battle in the distance, and the second, is a larger oil painting by John Trumbull finished in 1786, eleven years after the event. It represents the heroic death of an officer at close range. These two images represent very different points of view, both visually and ideologically. How the Revolutionary War, or any war for that matter, was to be represented depended upon who was making the image, who was paying for it, who was the intended audience, what was the intended message, or function, of the work, and what was the "mental horizon" that would have shaped the work's meaning.¹

Existing traditions of military representation would have played an important role in defining the contours of that "mental horizon." All images are constructions, not truthful reflections of reality, and all images rely on conventions to convey certain kinds of information. Everyone learns to perceive and understand the world through the visual and verbal codes that are available to them.² Likewise, artists learn to represent their subjects through the vocabulary of existing artistic codes or conventions even if they later try to forge their own way. But whence do the conventions come?

During the Ancien Régime in France, the state institutions established by Louis XIV created what can be considered as the early modern European

¹ For the notion of "mental horizon" see: Roger Chartier, *Cultural History Between Practices and Representations*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988.

² Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, 1977.

canon for military painting. These military images uniformly utilized a particular set of formal and narrative conventions to convey certain kinds of information while suppressing other kinds. These conventions functioned as ideology: they fixed a certain point of view or interpretation of reality – *vis a vis* the subject depicted - and made it accessible to the viewer. Behind any conventionalized form of painting is a commonly understood way of reading the work of art in relation to its point of view, and this point of view becomes encoded within the convention itself.

But, how does one represent a revolution, given this long-standing tradition, for a revolution is, in effect, a rejection of conventions? The artists who chronicled and commemorated the American and French Revolutions were in an unprecedented situation. The existing conventions for military painting could not be employed since they would have conveyed the wrong encoded message and would have been associated with a particular past and a particular position toward it. Artists in this situation had to restructure past pictorial and iconographical conventions to give form to their own ideological exigencies for a new and different society. Before exploring how revolutionary artists represented their struggles, however, it is necessary to discuss the existing traditions they worked through and against.

One of these traditions is a mapping of battle, such as we see in the Plan and Order of the Battle of Malplaquet (a battle fought between the French and allied forces in 1709 during the War of Spanish Succession). What this represents is just what its title states: the plan or logistics of the battle and the ordering, in the table below, of the regiments. This image presents an interesting example of a kind of visual and verbal mapping. The formal arrangements and the names of the units and officers in the table correspond to their actual placement within a military hierarchy. Indeed, the ordering embodies the idea of hierarchy. Above in the plan, or map, of the battle we can quickly see how those units were deployed in the field. The plan and order of battle provided a conventional means for quickly and clearly conveying certain kinds of information. An understanding of this information, however, depended upon a knowledge of military hierarchy and military map-reading. It was also common to include another register of representation; in the lower corners there are portraits of the major allied generals on the left and allegorical personifications on the right. The plan and order show the viewer how the battle was won, the portraits show who was responsible for the victory. The allegorical scenes with their personifications drawn from classical mythology function as commentary glorifying military action and justifying it. It was quite typical in these sorts of

images for different registers of representation to overlap: the map on the lower right extends over the classical tholos. This clash of modes seemed to cause no discomfort; rather, the map and the allegorical accessories complement one another; different sorts of information are presented in different ways.

This type of coding, or mapping, spills over into more "naturalistic" representations of battle. Official battle paintings in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France developed a set of conventions that might be viewed as a "visual translation" of the information provided in the Plan and Order of Battle. Military painting in France was produced almost exclusively under royal auspices, and what is known as the topographical type of military image was institutionalized early on during the personal reign of Louis XIV. Commissioned by the King and for him - at least for his glory - these paintings created an image of the military that was in accord with official and diplomatic policy. Military policy and practice required a specific point of view and informed the conventions artists employed. It is not surprising to note that when policy and/or practice changed, artistic conventions were adapted to conform to the new military image.

When Louis XIV began his personal reign in 1661 with the death of Mazarin, one of the first orders of business was to transform the army from a semifeudal form, with regiments belonging to particular noble families, into an effective instrument of the state. The military traditionally functioned in mapping out other relationships, and Louis XIV used the military to define not only the geographical boundaries of the French nation-state, but also the ideological boundaries of crown and state.³ Louis XIV needed to establish an identity as a strong *Roi de Guerre* since kingship was traditionally validated by military prowess.

Louis XIV also needed the reputation of the Warrior King to establish the distinction between *his* wars, legitimated by the state, and other, illegitimate, unauthorized acts of violence. Since the early part of the seventeenth century the "guerre juste," as it was defined in legal terminology, had served to distinguish the professional soldier from the marauder, and a noble, justifiable war from pointless and uncontrolled acts of violence. The authority to legitimate violence, and even to ennoble it, was one of the defining attributes of any sovereign.

³ Joël Cornette, insightfully explores the complex and constant relationship between war, the state and royal power, in *Le Roi de Guerre: Essai sur la Souveraineté dans la France du Grand Siècle*, Editions Payot & Rivages, Paris, 1993.

During the reign of Louis XIV war similarly served as a means of constructing the ideology of civil pacification - actual conflict and soldiers were concentrated on the outskirts of the nation's territory. This was especially the case during the War of Devolution (1667-68) and the Dutch Wars (1672-79), which were wars of annexation on the northern frontiers. In one sense, these wars functioned to validate the idea that violence occurs "over there," in order to preserve a protected civil peace on the interior. Moreover, war was a sign of wealth; during the early modern period war was a luxury that could be undertaken only as a result of general economic prosperity.⁴

Adam François Van Der Meulen is responsible for establishing the official French topographical type of military painting and for fixing its conventions.⁵ Enjoying both financial and institutional support from the state, Van Der Meulen and the workshop he oversaw at the Gobelins manufacture produced an endless stream of images that were intended to document and validate Louis XIV as the great Warrior King.

The formal devices Van Der Meulen, and later his students, employed set the stage, so to speak, for this construction of the King's image.⁶ In the tapestry of *Entry of Louis XIV into Dunquerque* (1665), designed by Lebrun and Van Der Meulen, and in Van Der Meulen's *Siege of Lille, 1677* (1667), it is easy to see how the conventionalized form shapes the content. Among the conventions that were a staple in these images is a bird's-eye view that makes the viewer an omniscient observer of the event. Another staple convention is the foreground rise, usually positioned to one side, which acts as a stage to

⁴ Paul Sonnino, discusses the economic basis of war in the early modern period in "Louis XIV and the Dutch War" in *Louis XIV and Europe*, Macmillan Press, New York, 1976. pp.153-178.

⁵ For Van der Meulen, see *L'Administration générale du Mobilier national des Manufactures nationales des Gobelins, de Beauvais, et de la Savonnerie, La Route du Nord. Van der Meulen. Dessins et soies peintes*, exh. cat., Paris, 1988; Mauicheau-Beaupré, "Un Peintre de Louis XIV aux Armées Van der Meulen, in *Jardin des Arts*, 113, Nov. 1957. p.1-10; Isabelle Richefort, "Nouvelles précisions sur la vie d'Adam François Van der Meulen, peintre historiographe de Louis XIV," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1986; Isabelle Richefort, *Adam François Van der Meulen: l'Homme, l'Oeuvre et l'Art*, unpublished thèse, Ecole des Charres, 1980; Maurice Le Maire, *Adam Frans Van der Meulen et la Guerre de Holland (1672-1678)*, 2 vols. Mémoire, University of Paris IV, Sorbonne, 1992.

⁶ Joël Cornette insightfully explores the complex and constant relationship between war, the state and royal power in *Le Roi de Guerre: Essai sur la Souveraineté dans la France du Grand Siècle*, Editions Payot & Rivages, Paris, 1993. Peter Burke more specifically discusses the making of the King's image in, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992.

showcase the presence of the King and other important military commanders; the rise tends to create a bowl-shaped foreground through which we see a topographically accurate panorama of the conquered territory in the distance.⁷ This generic geographical configuration is a convention that is imposed over the natural terrain, which in most cases was the flat terrain of Holland and Flanders. Moreover, it is a convention that creates a formal link between the figures in the foreground and the conquered territory in the background. Here we can clearly see what is important: the figure of authority and his territory. The transitional space between foreground and background is often "glossed over" by presenting it in the shadows. It does, however, provide an opportunity to present troop movements, or the "plan of battle," or incidental activities, such as the troops practicing drills, or a camp. Nevertheless, the soldiers in the center ground are merely staffage that support the image of the King as the great *Roi De Guerre*.

The realistic rendering of figures and costume in the foreground, the exacting topographical landscape in the background, and the seemingly candid scenes of military life, create a documentary realism that spills over onto the image as a whole; the "realistic" detail masks the underlying conventional frame. The image is contrived to convey an illusion of transparent reality, thereby reinforcing the ideological assumptions encoded within the use of certain representational conventions. It is as much an ideological shaping as factual reporting.

Another example of this ideological shaping can be seen in the avoidance of actual battle and bloodshed. It is the spectacle of a well-shod professional army and not the miseries of war *à la Callot* that Van Der Meulen represents. Officers are cool and collected, and the army is neat and orderly. In Van Der Meulen's paintings the army is an instrument of royal order that confirms the King's power. When actual combat is depicted, it is a puff of smoke on the horizon, literally "over there."

The French topographical tradition was well established as the official mode for military painting by the early 1670s, with Van Der Meulen and his atelier at the Gobelins as its foremost practitioners; it became as well the standard formula throughout Europe for representing military conflict. The

⁷ Van Der Meulen made eight trips with the King on military campaigns. He was very careful to record the topography of conquered territory with great detail. His sketches of backgrounds were later worked into the larger images he constructed in his studio

topographic tradition *as forms*, came to signify "documentary truth," independent of the latent subject; their generic conventions became as much a part of the official rhetoric as certain types of literary forms. These images were officially commissioned for the decoration of Royal houses; they were reproduced, in painted and engraved forms, as gifts for important dignitaries. The engravings, moreover, were part of an ongoing collection of prints called the *cabinet du Roi*, which functioned as a visual inventory of the vastness and richness of Louis XIV's domain, his great deeds, and the fruits of paternal largess.⁸ The larger public had access to these prints since Louis XIV granted Van Der Meulen reproduction privileges, and they were distributed through various print dealers.⁹

The official topographical tradition in military images held sway in France until the Revolution, although military painting in general decreased as periods of peace prevailed. During the years of revolution from 1789 until 1795, deadly conflict was not represented directly, except in popular prints. The official tradition quite obviously would not work either in documenting the events of the Revolution, or in ideologically framing the Revolution. The revolutionary events were inchoate, spontaneous, and not the vast choreographed military sieges of Van Der Meulen's paintings. The *citoyen* or the people became the protagonists in the drama, and not the King or general embodying a single locus of power. Artists during the revolutionary period (whether revolutionary themselves or not) avoided the conventions of traditional military painting. Moreover, the financial support for the production of such images was no longer there; the instability of the government did not favor commissions. Financial support aside, *what* would artists represent? The events themselves, the speed at which they occurred, and the constant shifting of significances prohibited their representation.¹⁰ To represent the conflict of the Revolution was one thing, but to present it the wrong way, to suggest the wrong

⁸ Two interesting works on the Cabinet du Roi are: Georges Duplessis, "Le Cabinet du Roi: Collection d'Estampes Commandées par Louis XIV", in *Le Bibliophile Français* 4, 1869. pp.87-105 and Andre "Jammes, Louis XIV, sa Bibliotheque et le Cabinet du Roi", *The Library* 20 #1, March, 1965. pp. 1-11.

⁹ Isabelle Richefort, *Nouvelles précisions sur Van der Meulen*, p. 61; and Marianne Grivel, *Le Commerce de l'Estampe à Paris au XVIIe Siècle*, Librairie Droz, Geneva, 1986.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of artistic trends from 1789-1799 see: Philippe Bordes and Régis Michel eds., *Aux Armes & Aux Arts!*, Les Arts de la Révolution 1789-1799.

message (in a period when the message itself was in the process of change), was an act that could have unfortunate consequences.

Until around 1795 images of revolutionary conflict - I hesitate to use the word battle because of its association with the older tradition of siege warfare - were absent. The conventional form of official military painting was supplanted by another equally conventional mode of representation during the Revolution: caricature.¹¹ As James Cuno has pointed out, "caricatures embody the violent disregard for authority that came to characterize the revolutionary spirit itself."¹² Caricature was not considered high art and was associated with a more popular tradition that was often more earthy in its references. As a popular art form, something that did not "count," caricature was not subject to the same rules of representation or propriety of content. Cuno, in his article, "Obscene Humor in French Revolutionary Caricature: Jacques-Louis David's *The Army of Jugs* and *The English Government*", points out that the Committee of Public Safety capitalized on the freedom caricature allowed when it commissioned a series of eighteen prints, two by David. The committee had two standards for censorship - one for high art, and one for popular art - and obviously the committee knew what it was up to when it adopted the more popular form of caricature for images that were intended for exhibition in "official" and public spaces, because they avoided the restraints of censorship usually associated with art destined for such spaces. In *The Army of Jugs* we see the English army represented as "jugheads" (to use an English slang equivalent) led by a turkey, which carried the same connotations of stupidity in eighteenth-century France as it does in English usage today. *The English Government* presents a devil, whose rump is the likeness of King George III, violently excreting taxes on his British subjects. Albert Boime, and Cuno after him, have explicated caricature's traditional use of visual and verbal puns based on street language in these two images. The "popular" meaning underscores the direct message presented in the

¹¹ The most recent and insightful work on caricature in the French Revolution is James Cuno, ed., *French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789-1799*, exhibition catalog, Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1988.

¹² James Cuno, "Obscene Humor in French Revolutionary Caricature: Jacques-Louis David's *The Army of Jugs* and the *English Government*," in *Representing the French Revolution: literature, Historiography, and Art*, James Heffernan, ed., University Press of New England, Hanover. p 192.

detailed verbal description that appeared below the image on the two prints.¹³ That message, according to Cuno, is a simple one: "the English government is foolish, weak, unnatural, and evil, an enemy against which all Frenchmen can and should defend the Republic at this moment, 1793-94."¹⁴ Here we have the conventions of unofficial, popular art covertly/subversively adopted by the Committee of Public Safety in order to convey an official party line - unofficially, that is.

I would argue that the anonymous author of another caricature, *The Great Army of the Ci-devant Prince de Condé*, produced around 1791, counted upon the audience's understanding of the conventions and encoded meanings of official military painting as one of its ironic points of reference. The print is a lampoon of the émigré army threatening to invade France and restore the monarchy. Here we see a true "*Roi de Cabinet*" - a term for a king or general who commands the army from a safe distance and in the abstract. Condé and his "commanding" cohorts are placed in the background, while a woman arranges a group of tiny toy soldiers in the foreground. This reverses the traditional ordering of official military imagery with leaders in the foreground and conquered territory in the background. The toy soldiers recall the ant-like troops that swarm in the mid ground of many military images. The panoramic vista of military paintings finds its ironic twin in the image of the storming of the Bastille on the wall behind the Condé and his ruling notables. Condé rules, but only within the sanctuary of his salon. The message is quite clear: the past ideal of military glory and the function of military hierarchy, as it constituted the political state under the monarchy, is only a pipe dream. The smoke from Condé's metaphorical pipe furthers the irony; it harbors the mental doodling of a psychotic adolescent - guns and knives along with honorary insignia, now devoured by smoke. On the left, a group of unsavory revolutionaries delivers a fresh box of toy soldiers to the prince's daughter and grandson. I would argue the implied inversions and derisions of the official topographical tradition of military painting are one of the references to underscore the theme of the emasculation of royal power.

Apart from caricature, when artists referred to revolutionary themes and issues it was most often indirectly, through allegory or history paintings with

¹³ Albert Boime, "Jacques-Louis David, Scatological Discourse in the French Revolution and the Art of Caricature," in *French Caricature*, ed. Cuno. pp.67-82.

¹⁴ Cuno, "Obscene Humor in Caricature". p. 193.

subjects that had a topical relevance in the present. In spite of a call for an art celebrating military might and victory in 1792, the representation of contemporary battle, remained for the most part outside the realm of important painting until around 1800.¹⁵

Susan Siegfried's important article, "Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Post-revolutionary France," examines why there was a great explosion of military paintings that celebrated contemporary battles.¹⁶ According to Siegfried, by 1800 the Revolution had created a new kind of militarized state. Within this militarized state the individual interests and the state's interest were one and the same. Citizens were obliged to defend the nation in exchange for the freedom guaranteed by the state. Although this ideology was engaged during the Revolution, the lack of official patronage and the shifting political situation inhibited the scale of production of military images that had been produced during the *Ancien Régime*. Napoleon Bonaparte changed all this when he seized power in 1800. He increased funding for paintings and commissioned battle paintings.

Siegfried discerns two modes of military painting produced under Napoleon, a documentary mode and an affective one. Both these modes validated and visualized a new ideology of the individual and the militarized state and responded to the demands of republican propaganda that painting become both more documentary and more celebratory.¹⁷

The artist Louis-François Lejeune's work, such as *Battle of Marengo* (1801), represents the documentary mode. The idea of documentation became important in representing battles since, for the first time since the beginning of the Revolution, there was now a single institutional authority. Lejeune and others turned to the past precedent of the official topographical military scenes and reworked its conventions to fit their needs. This past tradition still carried the connotations of truthfulness, of an eyewitness account in its form. In *Battle of Marengo*, we see a topographical rendering of the territory in the background from a high, bird's eye point of view. The middle ground is filled with details of battle to a much greater degree, and with a much greater specificity than in

¹⁵ William Olander, *Pour Transmettre à la Postérité: French Painting and Revolution, 1774-1795*, Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983.

¹⁶ Susan Siegfried, "Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Post-revolutionary France," *Art Bulletin*, 75, June, 1993. pp. 235-258

¹⁷ Susan Siegfried, *op.cit.*, pp. 235-236.

images in the earlier topographical tradition. Previously treated as staffage in a glossed-over middle ground, the soldiers are now the stars in a much expanded field. What is completely missing, however, is the foreground setting for the King and his commanders. Siegfried argues that Lejeune has rearranged the conventions of the past topographical tradition to better articulate a more democratic ideal.

While the vantage point remains that of the all-knowing, all-seeing commander, Lejeune effected the key shift of imputing this privileged viewpoint to us, the spectators. . . . this unobstructed vantage becomes radically democratic; with the Revolution it belongs to the ideal citizen, newly empowered to view the world unhindered by any obstacles, including generals and kings.¹⁸

Lejeune shifts the viewer's attention from the monarch to the army as a collective unit of citizens.

Antoine-Jean Gros also sought to emphasize the new, democratic emphasis on the individual in his military paintings, which Siegfried categorizes in the "affective" mode. Gros, however, broke with the past tradition in a way that Lejeune never did. In Gros's *Battle of Nazareth*, the viewer's vantage point has changed. On the one hand, rather than a distant vantage point, analogous to the foreground rise position of King and commanders in the previous topographical tradition, the viewer has been brought into the battle. This close point of view precludes an omniscient survey of the entire "plan of battle"; on the other hand, it allows for the close observation of individuals' actions. Siegfried has pointed out that this radical departure from past conventions and traditions in military painting was in response to an official discourse that represented and glorified the common soldier. The military, here, is represented as constituted of the people, of individuals from all walks of life. Gros's image elevates the individual heroic act, as did revolutionary propaganda.

¹⁸ Susan Siegfried, *op.cit.*, p. 240.

Siegfried points out an interesting correlation between the structure of *Battle of Nazareth* - multiple centers of interest, and lack of a dominant subject-- and the revolutionary *traits de courage et d' humanit *, which were written reports from officers to insure that the names and great deeds of ordinary soldiers would not be forgotten.¹⁹ Seen in this light, Gros's composition is not chaotic, but episodic. It is a kind of painting meant to document individual actions that are commonly overlooked within a more topographically oriented view of war.

Gros's *Battle of Nazareth* was not well received, in contrast to Lejeune's *Battle of Marengo*. Gros's painting was too unprecedented; it lacked the conventional framework associated with past "documentary" images. Lejeune, on the other hand, retained enough of the conventional framework from the past to fulfill the viewer's expectations for documentary truth in military painting. Siegfried, I would argue, provides a convincing demonstration of the ideological nature of the representation of military subjects. Her work also illustrates how conventional ways of seeing inform artists' and viewers' "mental horizons."

The long-established tradition of official topographical military painting provided French Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary artists a conceptual framework to work through, or against, in producing a new kind of image for a new age. This was not the case in the American colonies during the Revolutionary War. There was no art establishment or institution, and visual traditions with particular encoded meaning were still in the process of forming.²⁰

The earliest works representing the American Revolution were historical prints that were used for propaganda purposes. One of the most famous in its time was Paul Revere's *The Bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5, 1770*,²¹ By March 26th 1770, this image was being sold as an instrument for inflaming Massachusetts's public opinion. The existing copies are hand colored and emphasize the scarlet of uniforms and Yankee blood. Although the image was considered "accurate," certain elements accord with the image's propagandistic function. The soldiers are lined up like

¹⁹ Susan Siegfried, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-254.

²⁰ The New York Academy of Art was founded in 1803.

²¹ For a brief discussion of this image see: Washington D.C., Exhibition, Library of Congress, *An Album of American Battle Art 1755-1918*, The U. S. Printing Office, Washington D.C, 1947. pp. 24-25.

so many automatic killing machines heartlessly firing on a group of innocent, unarmed civilians. The dog in the front suggests the idea that these soldiers would even kill a dog!

The artists who produced these early propaganda pieces were for the most part not highly skilled artists. Amos Doolittle's series of four images engraved after paintings by Ralph Earle were not very sophisticated, and people made fun of them. Rev. William Beardsly said, "We are told that Doolittle was entirely self taught as an engraver. That is charitable, since there is not use in incriminating anyone else." The prints documented the Battles of Lexington and Concord; and Earle saw the sites, but not the action and relied on descriptions. In both *The Battle of Lexington, April 19, 1775*, and *A View of the Town of Concord, April 19, 1775*, the artist employs a bird's eye view to create a panorama effect, which is a practical and traditional solution for conveying a battle or troop formation. The "Regular" troops are represented in both works as numerous and well regimented. This creates a contrast to the sparse, and rather less well-disciplined provincial company who are being ruthlessly fired upon in *The Battle of Lexington*. This kind of untutored attempt to document events functioned as a kind of reportage. Nevertheless it provided the first steps at charting what would become a history of the American Revolution marked by significant events. These images, moreover, cannot yet reflect an official point of view, for the institutions that provide that view had not yet been formed.

The artist who gave ideological form to the Revolution was John Trumbull, who is often called the patriot painter, although some scholars have attributed his production of revolutionary works to motives that are less than patriotic.²² Trumbull was born into a privileged, conservative family of merchants and shipbuilders. He graduated from Harvard and served with the Connecticut First Regiment during the beginning of the Revolution. At the height of the Revolution, however, Trumbull went to England to study with another American artist, Benjamin West, who was a favored court painter of George III and the second president of the Royal Academy. Trumbull made

²² The classic works on John Trumbull are: Theododre Sizer, *The Works of Colonel John Trumbull, Artist of the American Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1950 and Irma Jaffe, *John Trumbull Patriot-Artist of the American Revolution*, New York Graphic Society, Boston, 1975. For a revisionist view of Trumbull and his work see: Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Revolution: 1750-1800*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987. pp. 433-40

several extended trips to England, one of which lasted ten years from 1794 to 1804, and he continued his close association with Benjamin West.

West caused a sensation in the British art world when he painted *The Death of General Wolfe* in 1771. The painting represents the dying moments of British General Wolfe just after his defeat of the French at the Battle of Quebec, which gave Canada to England. What the painting represented to the art establishment in the late eighteenth century was quite revolutionary, a "modern" history painting in the grand manner. In Britain there was no officially sanctioned military art, in part because war never took place in England, and in part because of the different conception of the monarchy than in France.²³ Moreover, military painting was not viewed as a "high art." The Royal Academy of Painting viewed West's plan for the painting with skepticism; the finished project, however, convinced them. *The Death of General Wolfe* established not only a new type of history painting, but also a new type of battle painting - what might be called the heroic death type.

This type of painting drew crowds of viewers; in fact, West painted four versions of the scene and made a handsome profit from the engraving by William Woollett. The work appealed because of its exotic, operatic drama at a time when "sublime" experiences were highly sought after. The painting reversed the usual ordering of traditional history painting. As Ann Uhry Abrams points out: "Instead of using a classical setting to comment on a contemporary social or political issue, he used a recent event to preach a sermon on universal moral values."²⁴ Moreover, the painting treats the hero's demise as a personification of national loyalty and selfless sacrifice, typologically comparable to images of the death of Epaminondas or of the lamentation of Christ.

After the runaway success of *Death of General Wolfe*, West planned a series of monumental paintings depicting the great events of the American Revolution. West envisioned a great market for the prints after the series in the United States. However, it would not have been appropriate for West, in his

²³ Peter Harrington, *British Artists and War: The Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints, 1700-1914*, Green Hill Books and Mechanicsburg, London. PA: Stackpole Books, in association with The Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, 1993.

²⁴ Ann Uhry Abrams, *The Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand-Style History Painting*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1985. p. 180. Abrams's book provides a detailed examination of West's death of General Wolfe within the larger social and artistic context.

position as court painter to George III, to glorify a war Britain lost, and the project was more or less turned over to Trumbull.

Trumbull began the series in 1785 with *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill*. In 1786 he finished *The Death of General Montgomery in an Attack on Quebec*, which was followed by the *Surrender at Yorktown*, *The Capture of the Hessians at the Battle of Trenton*, and *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton*. All of these paintings are clearly in the mode of the "heroic death" as fashioned by Benjamin West. Trumbull arranged for prints to be made; he opened subscriptions for *Bunker Hill* and *The Death of General Montgomery* shortly after they were finished. The actual engravings were not ready for sale in the United States until 1799, and they were not successful. Irma Jaffe argues that bad timing was the key reason for their failure; had they been sold ten years earlier, before the country was divided into bitter opposition between Federalists and Republicans, they would have done well. In 1799, however:

They were offered at a moment when America was too involved in its present to be nostalgic, too conscious of its heroic future to need to invoke the memory of its heroic past. Furthermore, the earlier attraction of republicanism and revolution had lost its bloom for many, in the wake of the French Terror.²⁵

Albert Boime has argued that Trumbull's own political allegiances colored his interpretation of the American Revolution.²⁶ Boime views Trumbull's patriotism as a facade, pointing out that many of his contemporaries perceived distinctly pro-British attitudes.²⁷ It is well known that Trumbull cultivated West's aristocratic friends and patrons, and affected their lifestyle. Trumbull was, in a sense, playing to both hands, hence his works lack real conviction. A work that so clearly follows the conventions of the "heroic death,"

²⁵ Irma Jaffe, *Trumbull: The Declaration of Independence*, Viking Press, New York, 1976. p.58-59.

²⁶ Albert Boime, *Art in the Age of Revolution*, p. 433.

²⁷ Albert Boime, *op.cit.*, p. 434.

such as *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill*, also implies the same encoded meanings. Hence, *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill* is an image that is as much a lesson about universal moral values as it is an image that commemorates a specific revolutionary event. Trumbull neutralizes the Revolution by the conventional framework in which it is represented. Both the American and British Officers exhibit high moral conduct; American Warren, and British Pitcairn have each sacrificed their lives. The British Major John Small exhibits self-sacrifice and generosity as he protects the dying Warren from one of his own soldier's bayonet attack.

West, and his aristocratic friends praised the painting because it embodied those ideals associated with classical tragedy. As Boime argues:

In stressing the sacrifices endured on both sides, Trumbull pitched the paintings to a pro-British audience. He viewed the war of Independence as a tragic civil war rather than as a revolution, the position of the American Loyalists who fled to England shortly after the Revolution erupted.²⁸

Trumbull switched to religious and literary subjects after the lukewarm reception of his battle pieces. However, in 1817, Trumbull began another series of battle paintings for the Rotunda at the Capitol. Congress passed a resolution allowing James Madison to commission a series of four paintings to commemorate the history of American independence; this was the first federal commission for the arts. Trumbull originally envisioned the Rotunda as a great Hall of Revolution showcasing eight of his paintings. The plan was never realized, much to Trumbull's perpetual dismay. Trumbull did the first four paintings, while other artists including John Wier, Vanderlyn, James Powell and John Chapman, did the last four paintings. Relief sculptures by a group of Italian artists illustrated landmark events of the country's discovery, colonization, and federation, and Horatio Greenough's famous (or infamous) statue of George Washington rounded out the scheme. As Vivien Fryd has

²⁸ Albert Boime, *op.cit.*, p. 435.

argued, the rotunda's decoration was intended to create a national mythology that legitimized national expansion and appropriation of Indian lands.²⁹

The scenes Trumbull selected included two military subjects, *The Surrender of Burgoyne* (1822), and *The Surrender of Cornwallis* (1820), and two civil subjects, *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* (1819), and *The Resignation of Washington* (1824).³⁰ The military scenes commemorated turning points in the war; they also illustrated, as Trumbull explained to the President that:

We had in the course of the Revolution made prisoners of two entire armies, a circumstance almost without parallel.³¹

It would seem that enough time had lapsed since the Revolution for battle scenes to be "safe" subjects. Indeed, the resurgence of patriotism after the war of 1812 may have contributed to the revival of revolutionary battle scenes.

The two military paintings are quite different from his earlier "heroic death" pieces such as *The Battle of Bunker Hill*. We see none of the drama and dynamic diagonals that mark the composition of the "heroic death" type. Rather, Trumbull presents a rectangular format and a balanced, symmetrical composition. These rather static images remind us more of the earlier topographical type, with, however, a greater emphasis on the foreground staging area. The panorama in the background is reduced to a mere glimpse. This is logical since the defeat of the enemy army was not linked to the conquest of new territory and the power of a monarch. What is emphasized in both is the diplomatic act of surrender and the establishment of an independent governance. These rational, orderly, and even "classical" images, moreover, were better

²⁹ Vivien Fryd, *Art & Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992. pp. 5-105 provides an in-depth discussion of the decoration of the rotunda and its meaning.

³⁰ Irma Jaffe, Trumbull, *op.cit.*, discusses the production and meaning of these paintings emphasizing the Signing of the Declaration of Independence.

³¹ Irma Jaffe, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

suited to the dignified setting of the rotunda and to the evocation of the ceremonial timelessness of the events.

Albert Boime states that *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence* perfectly reflects the class to which Trumbull belonged; that is, a wealthy group of middle-class, land owners. ". . .they were less concerned with overthrowing the monarchical system than with the prospect of paying burdensome taxes."³² These sentiments could certainly be applied to an interpretation of the two military scenes; in neither do we see unruly revolutionaries, rather we see the seemingly logical claim of power.

This ideology of the American War of Independence, (rather than the American Revolution) is constructed through the conventions that Trumbull employs, and in relation to the encoded meanings those conventions carried from the past.

Images of military subjects are in general highly conventionalized and more patently ideological than other types of subjects. An understanding of the traditions of military representation and how they are confirmed, rejected, or altered, makes us more acutely aware of how ideologies are constructed.

³² Albert Boime, *op.cit.*, p. 437