

**BENJAMIN WEST'S NELSON MEMORIAL:
NEOCLASSICAL SCULPTURE AND
THE ATLANTIC WORLD CIRCA 1812**

by

Mary Catherine Lee Wood Kirchhoff

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

Fall 2015

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Mary Catherine Lee Wood Kirchhoff

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation closely examines Benjamin West's *Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia*, a significant pediment designed by West, executed in Coade stone, and erected at the Royal Navy's Hospital for Seamen at Greenwich in 1812. My work re-positions West and this work within a local London backdrop of sculpture, architecture, and space, as well as a global, imperial contest for British cultural, industrial, and political power. I argue that West's efforts to realize the Nelson pediment helped him to secure his artistic and pedagogical legacy for posterity while simultaneously positioning London as the preeminent creative center of the modern, industrialized world.

The second chapter of the dissertation explores West's involvement with the project of contemporary British history painting and asks how canvases like *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and *The Death of Nelson* (1806) worked to advance emergent nationalistic ideologies in turn-of-the-century London. The third chapter of the project explores Benjamin West's early nineteenth-century homage to Horatio Nelson, *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* (1810-1812). I contend that West attempted to reconcile the goals of the British project of history painting with an emergent need for an innovative, formal language for public monuments through this pediment. By closely examining the formal components of the pediment, this chapter demonstrates that the visual cues and forms in West's pediment, much like those seen in his well-received history paintings, connected his monument to some of the most

revered artists and artworks of all time. Building from our understanding of the pediment's form and iconography, the fourth chapter of the dissertation investigates how West's choice to use Coade stone as his primary construction material actually made the realization of a project of this magnitude possible.

This project builds upon the work of several key scholars of sculpture and material culture including Joan Coutu, Malcolm Baker, and Douglas Fordham. Linda Colley and John Barrell's work on the reception of art and objects in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain provided an excellent underpinning for investigating themes of British imperialism, economics, and populism. The work of David Solkin and Rosie Dias was especially illuminating for understanding period modes of exhibition and presentation.

This dissertation expands upon existing American and British art historical scholarship by integrating West's designs for heroic sculptures into a scholarly dialogue about transatlantic neoclassicism circa 1812. Broadening the methodological base of American sculpture, it reconciles West's sculpture by positioning the pediment within significant Anglo-American space(s) of reception, remembrance, and nationalistic sentiment. Further, this project considers how an object like *The Grand Model of Neptune* – at once British and American – resisted a static assignment of nationalistic meaning by virtue of its authorship, viewership(s), and fixed location at Greenwich. Ultimately, the dissertation works toward an integration of discussions of the significance of sculpture in the radiating rings of architecture, landscape, spatiality, and the Atlantic world.

PREFACE

In January 2010 I found myself standing in a snowy, cobblestone courtyard at the Old Royal Naval College, one of a constellation of facilities that make up the Maritime Greenwich / UNESCO World Heritage Site just outside London. Located along the south bank of the Thames River just east of the city, Greenwich is home to a collection of important historic buildings including the Queen's House (touted as the first Palladian building in Britain), the Royal Hospital for Seamen (with James Thornhill's baroque "Painted Hall" and James "Athenian" Stuart's neoclassical chapel inspired by the Adam brothers), and the warm, glowing, architectural confection that is the Royal Observatory. The Greenwich complex stands as a testament to English artistic and scientific prowess in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I was there, with classmates from the University of Delaware and Winterthur, to consider the myriad ways that English design had affected and influenced colonial and early national American material culture.

As I stood in the courtyard, listening to John Bold of the University of Westminster share colorful stories about Inigo Jones, Christopher Wren, and the brilliant-yet-tragically-underappreciated Nicholas Hawksmoor, my attention shifted upward to an exuberant pediment under which our group had just passed. Snow had settled on portions of the buff-colored neoclassical sculpted decoration, highlighting in

bright white a scene of lamentation surrounded by mythological denizens of the deep and implements of naval warfare ranging from canons and lead shot to coiled ropes and anchors. There was something familiar about this sculpture, something compelling and unusual. In contrast to the other examples of outdoor sculpture I'd observed at Greenwich, the pediment's forms looked crisp and clean, sharp even.

Ritchie Garrison, the course instructor, tapped me on the shoulder, pointed up to the triangular composition, and whispered in my ear: "That pediment is by Benjamin West. It's really something, isn't it?"

My first thought was one of incredulity. As a historian of American art, I thought that I knew Benjamin West fairly well. I had learned about *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and West's pedagogic role as a founding member and President of London's Royal Academy as an undergraduate, and I had taught West as part of an undergraduate survey of art history during graduate school. West was known and revered as one of the great granddaddies of American painting, but I had never heard of him working as a sculptor. I snapped several photographs of the pediment, adjusted my cap to keep the cold, salty air from my ears, and trailed after my group as we slogged on to the next stop.

When I returned to Delaware I mentioned the pediment to my advisor, Wendy Bellion, and shared Ritchie's comments. Wendy had never heard of West producing sculpture, but she encouraged me to investigate. I culled through catalogues of West's work and found that Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, the reigning authorities on the artist, had indeed credited the pediment to West. Officially titled *The Grand Model of*

Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia, the sculpture had been designed and erected by West between 1810 and 1812. The monument was a tribute to Admiral Horatio Nelson, a much-lauded British naval hero who was martyred after commanding the British fleet to victory at the Battle of Trafalgar via a shot to the spine in 1805. The pediment's high-relief sculptures had been cast in Coade stone, a technologically advanced medium developed in the eighteenth century by industrious businesswoman and entrepreneur Eleanor Coade. Moreover, it turned out that West was responsible for a collection of additional commissions in three dimensions – decorations for bas-reliefs, freestanding figural sculptures, and even several unrealized designs for additional pediments honoring British warrior-heroes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

I had never explored of this side of West's oeuvre – and was intrigued. Why had I not heard about West's sculptures? How did West's three-dimensional endeavors inform and complicate our understanding(s) of his canonical history paintings? Further, how did the addition of these sculptures to West's body of work change our understanding of the artist as a leader in the development of Anglo-American visual culture? It was with these guiding questions that I began researching the project that would become my doctoral dissertation.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia*, a significant (though largely unstudied) sculpted pediment from Benjamin West's oeuvre that lies at the heart of many critical impulses circa 1812. The very energy of West's sculpture hints at the ways in which this object extends outward to engage some of the most pressing political, cultural, and economic concerns of the early nineteenth century.

The pediment's form, narrative, and material composition are central to its meaning. The central vignette depicts Britannia receiving the corpse of Admiral Nelson from Neptune after the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). Holding a trident, she wears the classical aegis and helmet of Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, war, strategy, industry, and justice. Britannia accepts the war-worn Nelson in her arms, his nude, foreshortened body a reference to Michelangelo's iconic *Pietà* (1499). To the left of the central lamentation are the profiles of four horse heads, modeled after those of the horse of the Chariot of Selene from the east pediment of the Parthenon. Lord Elgin brought the sculptures to Britain in 1807, and West referenced the ancient, storied source materials not only through the horses but also through the torso of a river god who reaches his gaze and an outstretched arm towards Britannia. Enlivening the triangular composition are emblems of maritime and military life: a sinking ship,

military shields and artillery, and sailing paraphernalia including an anchor, tiller, and block with tackle. Strikingly, West even included a three-quarter-profile self-portrait. The figures are rendered in high relief, exuding dynamism as they stretch outward from their architectural frame and loom over spectators in the courtyard below. Realized in Coade stone (a high-fire, ceramic material developed and popularized in Britain during the mid-eighteenth century), this monument paid tribute to Nelson while, at the same time, placing Britain at the apex of global military eminence, industrial advancement, and the fine arts.

The innovative material and dynamic compositional qualities of this pediment hint at the complex tapestry of connections that this dissertation will work to illuminate. What can Benjamin West's choice to merge modern-day historical commemoration with the classical world tell us about the implied meaning(s) of this object? What is significant about the fact that this monument was created by an American, executed in Coade stone, and situated in Greenwich? Would the pediment be as problematic or compelling if designed by a native Briton, carved from natural stone, and installed in central London? What can we learn about the function(s) of this monument through its critical reception in both artistic circles and the public press? Further, how does this monument signify meaning for viewers (both art historians and laypeople, as well as American and British nationals) today?

Structure of the Dissertation

Using West's *Grand Model of Neptune giving up the body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* to guide its central themes, this dissertation re-positions Benjamin West and his work within both a local London backdrop of sculpture, architecture, and space, as well as a global, imperial contest for British cultural, industrial, and political power. I argue that West's efforts to realize the Nelson monument helped to secure his artistic and pedagogical legacy for posterity while simultaneously positioning London as the new Venice or Florence of the modern, industrialized world.

The first section of the dissertation explores West's involvement with the project of contemporary British history painting and asks how canvases like *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and *The Death of Nelson* (1806) worked to advance emergent nationalistic ideologies in turn-of-the-century London. A close analysis of West's *Project for a Monument / The Apotheosis of Nelson* (1807) pushes us to reconsider West's role as a sculptor. Since West is today known primarily for his work in painting, how might his practice as a history painter have been related to or complemented by his work as a sculptor?

The second section of the project examines West's early-nineteenth-century homage to Horatio Nelson, *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia*. I contend that West attempted to reconcile the goals of the British project of history painting with an

emergent need for an innovative, formal language for public monuments through this pediment. The monument, which West described as an “Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture,” was installed at Greenwich’s Royal Hospital for Seamen in the fall of 1812.¹ What were the necessary elements for this new type of monument to a British warrior-hero? As commemorative interests shifted from religious to secular tropes, were there new opportunities for siting monumental sculptures in the nineteenth century? Further, what were the most productive, legible ways to convey narrative in sculpture? Significantly, West’s sculptural undertaking strategically avoided many of the pitfalls that negatively affected earlier, similar monument projects. By closely examining its formal components, this chapter demonstrates that the visual cues and forms in West’s pediment, much like those seen in his well-received history paintings, connected his monument to some of the most revered artists and works of art of all time. West also created a dynamically layered narrative for his sculptural project with the publication of an auxiliary pamphlet in 1813. This *Description* animated the buff-colored neoclassicism of West’s transcendent homage to Nelson with emphatic prose and thick descriptions of the pediment’s figures and narrative. Further, by inserting a self-portrait into his composition, West identified *himself* as part and parcel of this substantial project at a very late moment in his professional career.

¹ The *Description* noted, “It has been reserved for the President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, Esq., to form a design expressive and bold in all respects, which may not improperly be termed an Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture...” For the complete quote, see Benjamin West, *Description OF THE GRAND Model of Neptune giving up the Body of NELSON, With the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia*,

Building from our understanding of the pediment's form and iconography, the final chapter of the dissertation investigates how West's choice to use Coade stone as his primary construction material actually made the realization of a project of this magnitude possible. Uniform in appearance and virtually impervious to the weather, this high-fire ceramic medium could be cast in molds and subsequently fired, allowing greater material flexibility in terms of final, realized designs. West's 1813 *Description* of the pediment modestly noted, "We are left with no doubt as to the efficacy of the material and the benefits which it might have brought to the sculptors of the Parthenon. A work which would have taken 10 years in marble was executed in 2."² Marketed as a technological marvel, Eleanor Coade published lists of her Manufactory's works in descriptive catalogues, and she even opened a gallery to display her commissions to a curious public. Through paintings such as *British Manufactory, A Sketch* (1791), it is evident that West was curious about and supportive of the development of new technological methods and their possibilities for application within the sphere of the fine arts. West's unconventional use of artificial stone aligned with his desire to explore, experiment with, and take advantage of new methods and technologies during his late career. But what attracted West to the Coade firm? What were the particular qualities of Coade stone that made it ideal for achieving the formal requirements of neoclassical design? Finally, what can West's use of Coade stone tell us about industrialization, the rise of neoclassical aesthetics,

² West, *Description*, 6-7.

and emergent ideas of modernity, innovation, and labor in early nineteenth-century London?

Methodological Approach

Benjamin West's paradoxical personality has proven difficult for art historians to unpack, in part due to early (and heavily apocryphal) biographies published by John Galt in 1812 and 1820. Key studies by James Flexner (1939), Jonathan Fairbanks (1976), and Dorinda Evans (1980) draw heavily on Galt's work as a foundational text; more recent work by Susan Rather (2004) addresses the constructed nature of Galt's effort and sheds light on West's chameleon-like identity.³ Highlighting his travels and formal sources, Jules Prown's "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity" (1996) effectively brings forward the primacy of exposure to classical statuary in the development of West's oeuvre and its importance for American students who were sent to London for academic training in the fine arts.⁴ In addition to these studies, scholarship on the artist has benefited significantly from the revisionist stance of art

³ James Thomas Flexner, *America's Old Masters: First Artists of the New World* (New York: Viking Press, 1939); Jan Fontein and Jonathan L. Fairbanks, *John Singleton Copley 1738-1815, Gilbert Stuart, 1755-1828, Benjamin West, 1738-1820 in America and England* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976); Dorinda Evans, *Benjamin West and his American Students* (Washington, D.C.: Published for the National Portrait Gallery by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980); Susan Rather, "Benjamin West, John Galt, and the Biography of 1816," *The Art Bulletin* 86:2 (2004): 324-345.

⁴ Jules David Prown, "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity," *American Art* 10:2 (1996): 29-49.

historians ranging from Vivian Green Fryd's discussions of Native American identity in *The Death of General Wolfe* (1995) to Alexander Nemerov's re-assessment of *The Landing of Agrippina at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1998).⁵

Dissertations by Jenny Carson (2000) and Stephen Caffey (2008) have argued for new understandings of West's early history painting, the role of the artist in determining period aesthetics as judgments of sentiment and taste, and the ways that West's work might have acted to unseat traditional Anglo class and social structures.⁶ Most recently, Emily Ballew Neff and Kaylin Weber's exhibition and publication, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World* (2013), has offered new readings of West and Copley's paintings and studio practices in an Atlantic World context, broadening our understanding of the meaning(s) of the artists' most significant professional projects.⁷

Curiously, though, the work of all of these scholars neglects to reference – or even acknowledge the existence of – West's sculptures. Perhaps this is because the

⁵ Vivian Green Fryd, "Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's "Death of General Wolfe," *American Art* 9:1 (1995): 73-85; and Alexander Nemerov, "The Ashes of Germanicus and the Skin of Painting: Sublimation and Money in Benjamin West's Agrippina," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11:1 (1998): 11-27.

⁶ Jenny Carson, *Art Theory and Production in the Studio of Benjamin West* (Ph.D. Dissertation, City University of New York, 2000); Stephen Mark Caffey, *An Heroics of Empire: Benjamin West and Anglophone History Painting 1764-1774* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008).

⁷ Emily Ballew Neff, Martin Postle, and Kaylin Weber, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2013).

field of early American sculpture continues to lag behind the volume of scholarship on other artistic media, namely painting. In some ways this makes sense: images of sculpture, by virtue of the medium's three-dimensional nature, are difficult to objectively reproduce via printed media. Moreover, sculpture is often tied to a particular historical site or context, difficult if not impossible to move. In the early years of the formation of the field of American art history, scholars ranging from Lorado Taft (1930), to Wayne Craven (1968), to William Gerds (1973) centered the basis for a history of American sculpture on certain biographical qualifications that included creation *on* American soil, *by* American artists, often *for* American publics.⁸ These early approaches have been eclipsed by a crop of scholars who have recently begun the work of unpacking nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture in the United States. Kirk Savage's work on monuments provides models for considering public monuments within the larger context of collective memory and identity.⁹ Michelle Bogart's important text, *Public Sculpture and the Civic Ideal in New York City, 1890-1930* (1989), examines modern sculpture and visual culture in dynamic ways.

⁸ Lorado Taft and Adeline Adams, *The History of American Sculpture* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930); Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America* (New York: Crowell, 1968); and William H. Gerds, *American Neo-Classic Sculpture: The Marble Resurrection* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

⁹ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monuments in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); idem, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

The trend towards studying objects in three dimensions, I would argue, is only getting stronger. Sally Webster's recent publication, *Liberty Enshrined: The Nation's First Monument and the Origins of the American Memorial Tradition* (2015), works to codify an early history of the carved symbols and narratives of American liberty and independence. Wendy Bellion's forthcoming work, *What Statues Remember: Art and Iconoclasm in New York City*, will address the performative dimensions of sculpture in lower Manhattan from the late eighteenth century to the present. This wave of recent scholarship has moved away from the biographical and nationalistic modes favored by historians like Taft, Craven, and Gerdt, and instead broadens our understanding of American sculpture through social-historical and material and visual culture approaches.

Using the Nelson pediment as a point of departure, this dissertation uses these social-historical, material, and visual culture approaches to enliven the conversation surrounding the creation of a transatlantic sculptural aesthetic in the early years of the nineteenth century. Complicating our understanding(s) of Benjamin West as a painter, this project recasts the artist as a practitioner who tested the traditional bounds of painterly, sculptural, and architectural practice. In so doing, this research integrates our understandings of West's paintings as part and parcel to understanding his work in three dimensions.

When I embarked on this project, I approached West as an American artist – but quickly came to realize that a thorough understanding of West's pediment also required grappling with the field of British sculptural history. Thus, while three-

dimensional objects like the Nelson pediment are significant as part of a re-evaluation of West's body of work, they also function dialogically to assist in the re-writing of the histories of British *and* American sculpture.

Accordingly, this dissertation closely engages research by several key scholars of British art and material culture. Joan Coutu's landmark text *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-century British Empire* (2006) examines the relationship between art and memory and art and politics, with a particular emphasis on sculpture.¹⁰ Malcolm Baker's significant contributions to British sculptural studies have also been tremendously important for providing alternative methods and approaches in the study of British sculpture.¹¹ In addition, I owe a great debt to Douglas Fordham's erudite exploration of British colonial visual culture during the Seven Years' War (2010). Fordham's tight re-evaluations of history paintings like West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and elegiac monuments like Joseph Wilton's homage to James Wolfe at Westminster Abbey (1773) provided models for

¹⁰ Joan Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Malcolm Baker and David Bindman, *Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument: Sculpture as Theatre* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1995), and Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000).

thinking outside the traditional bounds of British versus American art, recasting these objects in a dynamic, transatlantic conversation about form, place, and meaning.¹²

Having new models for considering British colonial objects was one requirement for properly addressing the Nelson pediment, but I also required a better grasp of the conversation surrounding British imperialism, economics, and populism. Linda Colley and John Barrell's work on the reception of art and objects in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain provided an excellent introduction to these themes.¹³ David Solkin's work was especially crucial for understanding eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century modes of exhibition and presentation. In addition to his significant contributions to understandings of British economic history and art, Solkin's exhibition and accompanying catalog, *Art on The Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780-1836* (2001), provided a foundation for thinking about both the accepted and rogue forms of artistic presentation that West took advantage of over the course of his long career in London.¹⁴ Finally, Rosie Dias's

¹² Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War: Allegiance and Autonomy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

¹³ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1993); idem, *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001).

tremendously smart work on John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery was essential for understanding how British artists took advantage of new modes of exhibition and innovative print technologies during the period.¹⁵

This dissertation expands upon existing American and British art historical scholarship by integrating West's designs for heroic sculptures into a canonical dialogue about transatlantic neoclassicism circa 1812. West's pediment is troublesome: the object itself was a monumental public sculpture created by an artist who is remembered primarily as a history painter. It was a tribute to Britain's greatest naval hero as the British Navy was becoming the most powerful military force in the western world, yet it was executed by an expatriate American painter and a sympathizer of the American Revolution at a time when English-American tensions were once again rising prior to the War of 1812. The pediment's design was reliant upon sculptures from the Parthenon and Renaissance motifs, yet the physical realization of the project engaged the most technologically advanced materials available. The object simultaneously qualifies as sculpture, monument, and architecture – three genres whose practitioners rarely bridged theoretical boundaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of factors ranging from patronage to economics to culturally created, ingrained, and accepted academic frames. The

¹⁵ Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness: John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

pediment qualifies both as high art, with its references to the greatest sculptures of antiquity, and as applied design, with its innovative, industrial ceramic body.

Broadening the methodological base of American sculpture, this dissertation reconciles West's sculpture by positioning the pediment within significant Anglo-American space(s) of reception, remembrance, and nationalistic sentiment. Further, this project considers how an object like the Nelson pediment was at once British *and* American yet resisted a static assignment of nationalistic meaning by virtue of its authorship, viewership(s), and fixed location at Greenwich. In so doing, it works toward an integration of discussions of the significance of sculpture into the radiating rings of architecture, landscape, spatiality, and the Atlantic world.

Chapter 2

BENJAMIN WEST AND THE PROJECT OF BRITISH HISTORY PAINTING

In the historiography of western art, Benjamin West wears many hats. He was born in the American colonies but also claimed as a Briton. He spent most of his career in London but remained alive in the minds of American artists and consumers through engravings, transfer-printed ware, and newspaper accounts of his success. Scholarship never fails to mention West's mentorship of artists who traveled to London to study under him, including Matthew Pratt, John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, and Gilbert Stuart. This transatlanticism has led to a variety of compelling investigations of West's slippery national identity. He is remembered for his formative role as the successor to Sir Joshua Reynolds as the second President of the Royal Academy and for his close affiliation with the court of George III as historical painter to the King. West is perhaps known best for his grand historical paintings: moralistic interpretations of stories from the bible and classical antiquity as well as "Epic Compositions" relaying stories of contemporary historical events.¹⁶

¹⁶ West first used the term "Epic Composition" in the catalog text for *The Death of Lord Nelson* (first displayed at West's studio in 1806, and subsequently at the Royal Academy (RA) in 1811). "The Death of Lord Nelson, or the Naval Victory off Trafalgar; being one of the most distinguished that ever occurred in the annals of Great Britain, for heroism and national importance. Mr. West, conceiving that such an

What Benjamin West is decidedly *not* known for are his forays into sculpture, and in many ways *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* (1810-1812) seems like an outlier within his extensive body of work (fig. 2.1). I argue that *The Grand Model of Neptune*, however, was the final manifestation of a much larger issue that West had been fiddling with since his earliest years in London: the project of contemporary history painting. Like West's most lauded history paintings, the pediment's design was grounded in the humanistic texts of theorists like Anthony Ashley Cooper (Third Earl of Shaftesbury), George Turnbull, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Moreover, it engaged in a formal dialogue with Poussin's French neoclassical style; history paintings (and prints) like West's own *Death of Wolfe* (1770/1776) and *The Death of Nelson* (1806/1811); and new memorials to warrior-heroes, like Joseph Wilton's monument to James Wolfe at Westminster Abbey. These paintings and sculptures helped viewers engage with a new variety of nationalistic visual culture, and in doing so stretched the traditional bounds of what was acceptable for new memorial sculpture in early-nineteenth-century Britain.

event demanded a composition every way appropriate to its dignity and high importance, formed it into an Epic Composition. This enabled him to give it that character and interest which the subject demanded." For the complete text see Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 220-221.

The Project of Contemporary History Painting

The conceptual and operational basis for *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* (1810-1812) was dependent on the development of the genre to which Benjamin West would become inextricably linked in his lifetime: contemporary history painting. The atmosphere that fostered eighteenth-century British history painting was the same climate that conditioned the design and narrative of West's pediment.

Emergent nationalistic ideologies and rapid economic expansion during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries went hand in hand with the establishment of public venues for the display and reception of artworks. Institutions like the Italian Academy of the Arts of Drawing, founded in Florence in 1563, and the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture, founded in Paris in 1648, had long existed to foster the training and promotion of artists and thus the development of national schools. These academies encouraged an active dialogue centered on artistic issues while also functioning as important support mechanisms for artists who were vulnerable to economic shifts in patronage and fashion.

The widespread discussion of methods and theories fostered by institutions like these was central to the development of a new English school of art during the eighteenth century. One of the earliest writers to comment on the potential of this new English art was Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's influential *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) argued for a

“moralistic” development of history painting that employed a unity of design, the use of emblems, and a conservative approach to composition and color. Shaftesbury posited that this straightforward aesthetic would be readily legible to viewers, spurring them on to become responsible members of the British body politic. Jonathan Richardson’s *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715) argued that painting was an intellectual (rather than a mechanical) art and raised painters to the elevated status of poets. His subsequent *Account of Some of the Statues, Bas-Reliefs, Drawings, and Pictures in Italy* (1722) was so popular that it served as a virtual checklist for educated Britons on the Grand Tour who wanted to assemble private collections of antiquities back in England. George Turnbull’s *Treatise on Ancient Painting* (1740) went further by building on the ideas espoused by Shaftesbury and Richardson and arguing for the educational usefulness of the fine arts.¹⁷

The ideas espoused by theorists like Shaftesbury, Richardson, and Turnbull looked “confidently forward to the migration of the Great Style to a newly Great Britain” and underpinned the formation of London’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts

¹⁷ For a discussion of English aesthetic theorists from the period, see John Barrell, “Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting,” *Oxford Art Journal* 9:2 (1986): 36-41; idem, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: ‘The Body of the Public’* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

(RA) in 1768.¹⁸ Patronized by George III and administered by a group of eminent painters, sculptors, and architects known as “academicians,” London’s RA was a nascent British counterpoint to the established continental art schools. Like the French and Italian academies, London’s RA served to financially bolster and raise the professional status of young artists who needed support. It also provided a forum for the critical reception of art. Moreover, the RA fostered both private patronage and the public appreciation of art at large.¹⁹ Beyond these social functions, the RA was a symbolic ornament in Britain’s crown that helped to create, confirm, and project a collective public spirit of civic humanism and British national pride.

While privately commissioned portraits had been the bread and butter of many English painters prior to 1768, annual exhibitions at the RA fostered the growth and consumption of a new segment of the trade: history paintings. Depicting stories from classical antiquity, the Bible, allegorical myth, and contemporary history, these large-scale pictures painted in the “grand style” were designed explicitly for public reception. The most successful history paintings subordinated the idea of the individual in favor of the interests of the public. They attempted to extract the essential

¹⁸ For a discussion of the “Great Style” see John Barrell, “The Functions of Art in a Commercial Society: The Writings of James Barry,” *The Eighteenth Century* 25:2 (1984): 119.

¹⁹ For an overview of these issues see David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 157-213.

truth of life and appeal to a common sense of humanity.²⁰ The broad moral and ethical messages proffered by history paintings were meant to inspire what David Hume referred to as “a cultivated taste for the polite arts,” inspiring such “agreeable passions” as generosity, humanity, compassion, gratitude, friendship, fidelity, zeal, disinterestedness, liberality, and “all those other qualities, which form the character of good and benevolent.”²¹

What the inspiration for these “agreeable passions” *looked* like was set out by the RA’s academicians. Its first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, codified many of the early aims of history painting in his annual *Discourses*, which were delivered to students and fellow academicians between 1769 and 1790.²² The fourth *Discourse* (which included a segment addressing the “two distinct styles in history painting; the Grand, and the ornamental”) provided a roadmap for the execution of paintings that fit Reynolds’ definition of the “Grand style.” Reynolds argued that history painting’s first goal was to be lucid in message and tone. Its subjects should be “either some eminent instance of heroick [sic] action, or heroic suffering. There must be something either in

²⁰ Barrell, “Sir Joshua Reynolds,” 38.

²¹ On David Hume’s “agreeable passions” see Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 169.

²² Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1975).

the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the public sympathy.”²³ He warned artists against the inclusion of too many “peculiarities” – details that were tied to a specific time or place – in favor of the ideal or general. John Barrell has noted that too many individualistic details would either “divide the attention of the individual spectator, in such a way as to leave him at a loss as to how to respond to it” or else they would “divide one spectator from another, by permitting each to interpret it as he wishes.”²⁴ Echoing Shaftesbury, Reynolds also issued formal advice on color, composition, and form. The ninth *Discourse* (which addressed “the advantages to society from cultivating intellectual pleasure”) was reminiscent of Turnbull’s ideas and implored painters and sculptors to move beyond mere beauty in favor of depicting “that which cannot be seen” and “that which resides in the artist’s breast.”²⁵ Both the fourth *Discourse* and the ninth *Discourse* stressed the importance of morality and message over mere confection.

²³ Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 57.

²⁴ John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: ‘The Body of the Public’* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 101.

²⁵ Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 169-171.

Reynolds' *Discourses* were influential for British artists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in part because they dovetailed well with continental art theory and allowed British artists to enter into critical dialogue with classical theorists like Johann Joachim Winckelmann and preeminent artists like Nicholas Poussin. Winckelmann's *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1756) and *History of Ancient Art* (1764) celebrated the formal qualities of antiquities. Winckelmann's works were widely published and well received, and provided a model for contemporary responses to classical art. The formal qualities of Poussin's history paintings were rooted in Winckelmann's aesthetics. Arguably the most powerful progenitor of history paintings in the French classical style, Poussin's works were viewed by Reynolds and his fellow academicians as the pinnacle of what history painting could aspire to in terms of a national, moral art. Poussin's formal geometry, clear coloration, stringent use of line, and legible, universally moralizing narratives were held up over and over again as models in the *Discourses*. Like Winckelmann's texts, Poussin's history paintings served as important touchstones for Reynolds' students.²⁶

²⁶ To understand the political influence of Reynolds' *Discourses* see Barrell, "Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting," 36-41. Alex Potts offers an in-depth study of Winckelmann's influence in *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

The classical forms that Winckelmann, Poussin, and Reynolds favored were more than just visually appealing to artists like West. The language that the new history paintings encouraged – large scale, somber narratives of death and sacrifice drawn from well-known texts and contemporary histories, the incorporation of visual quotations, and meditations on the struggle between wickedness and virtue – could be easily “read” by experts and laypeople alike.²⁷ Historical compositions created common social and political ground for audiences who were capable of the intellectual labor of abstraction – in other words, “everyone other than women, children, and the vulgar.”²⁸

Benjamin West’s *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768) was an early success in the arena of British history painting (fig. 2.2). Commissioned in 1767 by Robert Hay Drummond, Archbishop of York, the painting tells the story of the widowed Agrippina returning to Rome with the ashes of her assassinated husband, Germanicus. Agrippina’s children, Caligula and Agrippina the younger, are at her side. The purpose of the widow’s trip to Rome (via the port city of Brundisium) was to confront the Emperor Tiberius, thought to be complicit in the

²⁷ For the formal qualities of neoclassicism, see Angela L. Miller et. al, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 126.

²⁸ For a summary of the audience who read history paintings see Barrell, “Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Political Theory of Painting,” 40.

murder of Germanicus. West displayed *Agrippina* at the Society of Artists exhibition in 1768. While he had executed history paintings prior to *Agrippina*, none had been as well received. The painting conformed to the classical, academic ideals espoused by Reynolds, Poussin, and Winckelmann. The subject of the painting complemented and created a dialogue with Poussin's *Death of Germanicus* (1628), a painting West saw while traveling in Rome in the early 1760s (fig. 2.3).²⁹ West borrowed its central, frieze-like arrangement from a relief known as the *Imperial Procession* from the *Ara Pacis*, another object he saw while traveling in Italy. Similarities between West's painting and the frieze include the layering of figures to create the illusion of space as well as the delicate drapes and folds of the subjects' classical clothing. Further, West borrowed the background architectural details from Robert Adam's measured drawings of the palace of the emperor Diocletian at Spalato.³⁰ Agrippina's feminine and civic virtue, dignity, and quiet courage were meant to inspire similar attributes in potential viewers. Considered one of the great moments of the convergence of British history painting and neoclassicism because of its use of classical sources, emphasis on

²⁹ For more about the commission of *Agrippina*, see Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War: Allegiance and Autonomy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 209-218.

³⁰ Jules Prown, "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity," *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 268.

linearity, subdued color, and uplifting thematic content, this painting eventually led to West's instatement as historical painter to the court of George III.³¹

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was a critical time for the development of contemporary British history painting. Prior to the establishment of the RA, the vast majority of history paintings took their cues from classical and biblical narratives. Paintings like West's *Agrippina* (1768) can be seen as a continuance of that tradition. Times, however, were changing. While *Agrippina's* story was derived from classical literature and occupied one very traditional end of the genre's spectrum, new subjects – *contemporary* historical subjects – were working their way onto the walls of the RA's annual exhibitions. *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) is perhaps the most obvious visual manifestation of these new interests in modern-day historical representation. It would have been difficult to critically share or promote these new visual culture(s) had it not been for the RA's annual exhibitions.

These annual exhibitions were not the only way that viewers experienced the new British history painting. Some of the most popular history paintings would be translated into inexpensive prints, thus extending the reach of this new visual culture to new audiences throughout the Atlantic world. William Woollett's 1776 print after

³¹ For a more thorough investigation of *Agrippina*, see Prown, "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity;" and Alexander Nemerov, "The Ashes of Germanicus and the Skin of Painting: Sublimation and Money in Benjamin West's *Agrippina*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11:1 (1998): 11-27.

Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* is a perfect example of this phenomenon.³² Advances in printing technology allowed artists to draw on a virtually infinite bounty of textual and printed media when conceptualizing literary, religious, theatrical, or military subjects. When artists paired classical visual forms with contemporary events and personalities, the effect was powerful: British artists and subjects could be seen as part of a visual continuum that couched British national historical events (as well as British sentiment) alongside great civilizations of the past, like Greece and Rome, and cosmopolitan cities of the present, like Paris.

The challenge for history painting's proponents was how to foster the production of a timeless art worthy of national honor that was simultaneously representative of evolving imperial ideologies.³³ One of the aims of the project of British history painting, then, was to combine the visual transcription of contemporary British historical events with the gravitas of Poussin's high classicism. By presenting contemporary events in the guise of classical forms, artists couched their narratives within an established visual tradition while simultaneously providing an "Aha!" moment that beckoned to educated viewers, pulling them in for a closer look. For example, Reynolds' parodic *Garrick Between Comedy and Tragedy* (1762) looked

³² For more on Woollett's engraving, see Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness: John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 19.

³³ Prown, "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity," 1.

back to Poussin's *The Choice of Hercules* (1636-37) and referenced sculptures like the *Farnese Hercules* and the *Meleager* (figs. 2.4-2.7).³⁴ The juxtaposition of these familiar characters, however, infused each with a wealth of new meanings and associations.

British artists were afforded a perfect opportunity to fuse contemporary military history with that of the classical past in September 1759 with the death of General James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham in colonial North America. A decisive moment for England's conflict with French forces during the Seven Years War, the Battle of Quebec effectively secured England's colonial interests in New France and allowed further territorial expansion for the British at a particularly tumultuous time in their colonial story. While Wolfe was mortally wounded early in the battle, he is credited with the tactical decisions that ultimately afforded Britain this important victory. Wolfe proved to be the perfect contemporary subject for testing these evolving notions of nationalistic identity. As the young son of a military family, Wolfe was not a royal or even a member of the landed gentry. He was a commoner – a personality that the middling classes could easily identify with. Wolfe's death galvanized the imagination of an aspiring British public.

³⁴ See von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 36.

Alongside the outpouring of public sentiment following Wolfe's death, ranging from popular newspaper prose to laudatory poetic accounts of the event, William Pitt called for a monument to

... be erected in the Collegiate Church of St. Peter, Westminster, to the memory of the ever-lamented, late Commander-in-Chief of his Majesty's Land Forces on an Expedition against Quebec, Major General Wolfe, who, surmounting by Ability and Valour, all Obstacles of Art and Nature, was slain in the arduous and decisive Battle against the French Army, near Quebec, fighting for their Capital of Canada, in the Year 1759, and to assure his Majesty, this House [of Commons] will make good the Expence of erecting the said Monument.³⁵

Monuments commissioned by Parliament were rare in Britain (the Wolfe monument, as it happened, would only be the third such commission).³⁶ A call for designs was issued in the *Public Advertiser*, and the *London Chronicle* offered the following unsolicited advice to prospective sculptors:

I will not enumerate the various ways by which men have endeavoured to eternize memorable actions, or to retain the remembrance of persons who have been dear to them. It will be sufficient to inform such as are not conversant in such matters that amongst those practiced by the Greeks, the masters of all mankind in the fine arts, that which was in most general estimation was a simple statue of the hero, in some action or attitude according to the fancy or genius of the artist, and on the

³⁵ *Journals of the House of Commons*, November 22, 1759, vol. 28: 643.

³⁶ For an overview of the commission of the Wolfe monument, see Joan Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000); and Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War*.

pedestal of which, some of his most memorable exploits were engraven in basso relievo.³⁷

By the end of 1759 at least ten artists had submitted potential models for the commission.³⁸ Joseph Wilton, a young sculptor full of promise, won the competition.³⁹ It seems he did not think much of the commentator who recommended a “simple statue of the hero.”

Wilton’s monument was finally unveiled in 1773 and reflects the sculptor’s struggle to adapt new codes of British history painting to the conservative genre of the funeral monument (figs. 2.8-2.9). The central portion of the pyramidal design presented viewers with Wolfe’s outstretched, nude body, supported by two Highland grenadiers in contemporary military uniform. A figure of Victory descends toward Wolfe bearing a laurel wreath and a palm branch. A tomahawk and scalping knife hang ominously from the eaves of a large oak tree. Several standards are scattered about the base of the upper plinth, below which two recombinant lions frame an inscription. A cast lead relief panel on the huge plinth below the monument, designed

³⁷ *Scots Magazine* 21 (1759): 641-643.

³⁸ Joseph Wilton’s winning bid joined designs by Henry Cheere, Michael Rysbrack, Peter Scheemakers, Louis-Francois Roubiliac, William Tyler, Agostino Carlini, William Chambers, James Athenian Stuart, and Robert Adam. For more information see Coutu, 118.

³⁹ Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda*, 118.

by Giovanni Battista Cappezoldi, illustrated the battle on the Plains of Abraham (fig. 2.10).

While the Wolfe monument appeared disjointed to mid-eighteenth-century eyes, Malcolm Baker has argued that its diverse range of imagery was actually a result of Wilton's effort to merge elements from baroque sculpture and the new British history painting.⁴⁰ Wolfe's wounded body is timelessly nude and references classical sculpture, while the uniforms of the two attending Highland grenadiers situate the composition firmly in the eighteenth century. The oak tree, tent, and weapons ground the location of the event in colonial North America. Unlike the majority of funerary monuments in Westminster Abbey, the figures in Wilton's composition *interact*, creating a nexus of sympathetic reflection. Further, Westminster had recently been associated with the funeral of George II and the coronation of George III, and it was the resting place of poets and royalty. This grand, publicly funded monument to a lowborn commoner made martyr was indeed an anomaly.

While Wilton was laboring on the Westminster monument, Edward Penny devised the first painted depiction of Wolfe's death in 1763 (fig. 2.11). Arguably the first historical composition integrating modern costume, Wolfe is supported by two soldiers while a messenger (dressed in a brown field coat with green cuffs) relays the news of victory to the dying general. Penny's composition integrated many of the key

⁴⁰ Baker, *Figured in Marble*, 12. For a period response to the monument, see J.T. Smith, *Nollekins and his Times II*:107.

elements of history painting that the RA espoused: it employed a subdued color palette; it engaged with classical and Renaissance models through a geometrically balanced, triangular lamentation scene which focused the viewer's attention on the young general; and it espoused ideals of virtue and self-sacrifice in the service of the crown's interests.

Penny's composition, however, did not succeed critically as a history painting. It measured just over three feet by four feet; while the subject may have had grand aspirations, Penny's choice of an unimpressive, medium-sized format read more like a conversation piece. According to David Solkin, Penny had "infused what had come to be regarded as a quintessentially private pictorial genre with an unprecedented degree of public significance."⁴¹ Wolfe's pale body and pathetic, unfocused gaze did not help matters, either; rather than appearing as a victorious hero, Wolfe looked like he was suffering and miserable.

Penny's painting would not be the last word with regard to Wolfe's death. In 1770, Benjamin West would rework the same heroic theme to great critical acclaim (fig. 2.12). Like Penny, West engaged heavily with classical and northern Renaissance forms; the tattooed body of the "noble savage" derives from the *Belvedere Torso*, while Wolfe's outstretched figure echoes lamentations like Rubens' *Deposition* (1602)

⁴¹ Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 200.

and Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1435).⁴² West also painted Wolfe and his grenadiers in contemporary military uniforms. That said, West's painting was much grander in scale (measuring nearly five by seven feet). West's painting also provided viewers with more narrative details. The St. Lawrence River, filled with warships, can be seen in the background. Wolfe's body is surrounded by soldiers and overshadowed by the British standard. The kneeling Native American situates the event in colonial North America. Just as important, a messenger runs in from the left background to share news of victory with Wolfe; this is an important detail, as the general's last words were reportedly, "Now, God be praised, I die contented."⁴³ Details like these granted West's work a greater degree of narrative independence than Penny's earlier painting, and they may be why so many art

⁴² For a discussion of the Native American presence in *The Death of General Wolfe* see Vivian Green Fryd, "Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's 'Death of General Wolfe,'" *American Art* 9:1 (1995): 73-85. See also Emily Ballew Neff, "At the Wood's Edge: Benjamin West's Death of Wolfe and the Middle Ground," in Neff and Kaylin H. Weber, *American Adversaries: West and Copley in a Transatlantic World* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2013), 64-103.

⁴³ For more information on the importance of the last minute notification of victory, see Holger Hooock, "Nelson Entombed: The Military and Naval Pantheon in St. Paul's Cathedral," ed. D. Cannadine, *Admiral Lord Nelson: Context and Legacy* (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 121.

historians credit West – rather than Penny – with the creation of the first “true” British history painting to integrate modern dress.⁴⁴

While contemporary costume would become one of the distinguishing characteristics of eighteenth-century British history painting, it was not so readily accepted when West premiered his painting in 1771. Several of West’s colleagues from the RA – including Reynolds – objected to his use of this modern device. Even the king was initially skeptical. John Barrell has suggested that these anxieties stemmed from the idea that Wolfe’s costume fixed his heroism to a point in time too specifically, thereby obstructing the general’s ideal, universal form.⁴⁵ West, however, held his ground and argued that “the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist,” and that Wolfe’s death “took place in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans, and at a period of time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costume, any longer existed.”⁴⁶ Emily Neff has argued that the painter’s use of contemporary costume in *The Death of Wolfe* was not only key for buttressing West’s authority as a leader in the London art community, but that these

⁴⁴ For a discussion of narrative independence within history painting see Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 202.

⁴⁵ Barrell, “The Functions of Art in a Commercial Society,” 125-126.

⁴⁶ For a thorough discussion of the reception of *The Death of General Wolfe*, see von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 211-214.

sartorial choices also worked to validate and reinforce the British colonial project in North America. Neff notes that the subjects in West's paintings "had to be clothed in contemporary garb, otherwise [West] could not have populated the painting with references to his colonial knowledge and background. These carefully deployed local elements inevitably led viewers back to the artist and his painting as sources of authority and of national glory by association."⁴⁷ Despite contemporary objections to the costume, the painting was both a critical and popular success. West unveiled the finished work to Reynolds, who retracted his initial concerns by stating, "I foresee that this picture will not only become one of the most popular, but occasion a revolution in the art."⁴⁸

One more point about this painting bears upon the broader project of history painting in Britain during the late eighteenth century – and, more specifically, West's role in the development of the genre. There was such a demand for copies of *Wolfe* that West completed at least six painted replicas of the composition. This is important because British artists like West, unlike their counterparts in European countries with established systems of state patronage, were denied the luxury of broad aristocratic support that kept many Continental artists afloat in lean times. As a result, British

⁴⁷ Neff, "At the Wood's Edge," 70.

⁴⁸ John Galt, *The Life and Works of Benjamin West, Esq. Part II* (London: Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1820), 49-50.

painters occupied with historical subjects often created works while keeping an eye trained on speculative profits that might be gained from the production and sale of reproductive prints.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, West capitalized on the popularity of his paintings of Wolfe by contracting with engraver William Woollett and publisher John Boydell to produce engravings of the work in 1776.

Profitable collaborations like these grew in popularity, and eventually lead to the opening of John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery on Pall Mall in 1788. Boydell's space functioned both as a proper gallery where well-heeled patrons like Sophie von la Roche could contemplate paintings by artists like James Barry and Henry Fuseli, and as a retail shop where customers could purchase engravings of the paintings that lined the gallery's walls.⁵⁰ An early supporter noted that the Gallery "tend[ed] to the advancement of the Grandest branch of Painting, and promote[d] every essentially the dependent art of Engraving."⁵¹ Art historian Rosie Dias has even argued that Boydell's Gallery "offered to redeem English painting and place it on an equal footing with its

⁴⁹ For an excellent discussion of eighteenth-century British print culture see Cynthia Roman, "Art and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to the Present*, eds. Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 201-219.

⁵⁰ For a recent assessment of Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, see Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*. Period comments on Sophie von la Roche's visit(s) to the Gallery can be found in Sophie von la Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786, Being the Diary of Sophie von la Roche*, trans. Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), 237-238.

⁵¹ *Whitehall Evening Post* (London), May 5-7, 1789: 3, quoted in Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*, 8.

Continental counterparts, confronting the nation's sense of cultural inferiority and proving that British history painting could be both aesthetically and financially successful."⁵²

Copies of *The Death of Wolfe* engraving were available for sale in Boydell's retail space. The engraving that emerged in 1776 as a collaborative venture between West, Boydell, and Woollett was, in fact, one of the most commercially successful prints ever published (fig. 2.13). Woollett earned between six and seven thousand pounds for sales of the engraving on the continent alone; by 1790, Boydell's total receipts amounted to approximately fifteen thousand pounds.⁵³ Even in the period, the collaboration between West, Woollett, and Boydell on the Wolfe print was seen as the turning point in establishing a national school of engraving in England.⁵⁴

Constructing a Hero

Perhaps the reason for General James Wolfe's meteoric rise to fame – and the reason that Admiral Horatio Nelson's untimely demise would spur a similar preponderance of memorialization in the early years of the nineteenth century – was

⁵² Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*, 8.

⁵³ Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's 'Death of General Wolfe' and the Popular History Piece," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7 (1944), 33.

⁵⁴ *Public Advertiser* (London), April 28, 1784: 2, quoted in Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness*, 19.

that Britons were ready for a new kind of hero. The century leading up to Wolfe's death had witnessed extensive social and cultural shifts ranging from the expansion of Britain's colonial empire, to advances in technology, manufacturing, and trade, to the unprecedented growth of a new middle class. These shifts had altered traditional British cultural hegemony; birth was no longer the only factor that determined one's destiny. In addition, news reports from the Seven Years' War (and later, in the case of Nelson, the Napoleonic Wars) focused Britons' attention on the lives of warriors in addition to monarchs.⁵⁵ Moreover, the visual culture of the warrior-hero meshed well with the new British taste for neoclassicism. Jonathan Richardson's *Account of Some of the Statues, Bas-reliefs, Drawings and Pictures in Italy* listed busts, bas-reliefs, and freestanding sculptures of Roman leaders like Alexander the Great, Marcus Aurelius, and Julius Caesar alongside well-known monuments like the Column of Trajan.⁵⁶ Winckelmann wrote of these historical warrior-heroes beside mythical personalities like Theseus, Achilles, and Bacchus in his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works*

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the rise of the nineteenth-century hero in Britain see Marianne Czisnik, "Representations of a Hero: Monuments to Admiral Nelson," *Reactions to Revolutions: The 1790s and their Aftermath* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 263-288.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Richardson, *An Account of Some of the Statues, Bas-reliefs, Drawings and Pictures in Italy, &c. with Remarks* (London: Printed for J. Knapton at the Crown in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1722).

in Painting and Sculpture.⁵⁷ Finally, new eighteenth-century practices of exhibition and display systematically divested classical sculptures from their original contexts, often placing ancient sculptures of Venus or Hercules in the same spaces as contemporary works by Antonio Canova or John Flaxman. These new display practices primed period viewers to expect sculpted representations of their own contemporary heroes and effectively drew parallels between the ancient Greek and Roman cultures and the ever-expanding British Empire.⁵⁸

Opportunities to represent contemporary heroes like Wolfe did not come along every day, but British artists were afforded just such an opportunity on October 21, 1805 with the death of British naval officer Horatio Nelson. Nelson met an unfortunate end while commanding the HMS Victory to conquest over French and Spanish forces at the Battle of Trafalgar – dying, not quite so heroically, in the bowels of the ship’s cockpit. Nelson was the most identifiable national hero since Wolfe had expired at Quebec, and he would provide British painters and sculptors with a new heroic archetype capable of gripping the hearts and minds of England’s citizenry.

⁵⁷ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, complete German text with a new English translation by Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1987).

⁵⁸ For a summary of shifts in sculptural production and display, see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 38-39.

Nelson's story was strikingly similar to Wolfe's. He was the quintessential everyman: born into a middling family, Nelson worked his way up through the ranks of the Royal Navy and finally obtained his own command in 1778.⁵⁹ Like Wolfe, Nelson maintained an excellent report with the men under his command and was credited with the tactical decisions that afforded Britain its important naval victory at Trafalgar. Nelson also provided a compelling subject for contemporary historical commemoration by virtue of the displacement of his acts of heroism: he met his untimely end while combating enemy forces off Cape Trafalgar, the southernmost part of western continental Europe. Edgar Wind's theory of "mitigated realism" – the rendering of a scene that was at once actual and remote – contends that one of the devices that made West's *Death of General Wolfe* so successful was its faraway setting, and particularly the inclusion of details that situated the scene along the banks of the Saint Lawrence river in colonial North America.⁶⁰ Wind's theory applies equally well to Nelson's heroic narrative.

⁵⁹ Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990). The original edition of Southey's text was published in 1813; this edition is based on the 1830 edition published by John Murray of London.

⁶⁰ Edgar Wind, "The Revolution in History Painting," *Hume and the Heroic Portrait* (Oxford, 1986), 89; first published in *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 2 (1938).

The official account of Nelson's death – a “dearly bought” triumph – reached the press on November 7, 1805.⁶¹ Efforts to commemorate Britain's most recent martyr followed swiftly. December 7, 1805 was declared a national day of “general thanksgiving.”⁶² Nelson's corpse was brought to the Painted Hall at Greenwich's Royal Naval Hospital on January 4, 1806. The hero lay in state for four days, over the course of which thousands of pilgrims came to pay their respects.⁶³ This space was directly adjacent to the courtyard where West's *Grand Model of Neptune* would be installed just six years later, and it is probable that the memory of Nelson's lying-in-state inflected the experiences of those who would see the pediment from 1812 onward. On January 8, 1806 a river procession carried Nelson's body from Greenwich to an elaborate state funeral (and his final resting place) upriver at Saint Paul's Cathedral. Newspapers offered helpful hints for how to best experience these events. When Nelson's body was deposited at Greenwich on January 4, 1806, for example, *The Times* printed the day's schedule, described what would occur during the river procession and state funeral scheduled to occur four days later, and posted listings for seats and rooms within boarding houses that could be let by mourners who were

⁶¹ *The Times* (London), November 7, 1805.

⁶² *The Times* (London), December 5, 1805.

⁶³ *The Times* (London), January 4, 1806.

willing to pay for a superior vantage point.⁶⁴ Elegiac poems, grief-stricken songs, and melancholic theatrical productions proliferated. Advertisements for mourning jewelry punctuated newspaper columns usually dedicated to the sale of more standard goods like furniture, textiles, and tea.⁶⁵

Amid all of this mourning – and not even a month after the official public dispatch of Nelson’s death and before his body was laid to rest under the dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral – plans were being laid to visually commemorate Nelson for posterity. Josiah Boydell, a member of the family of publishers who had issued West’s 1776 *Death of Wolfe* print, had been appointed chairman of a committee to manage the business of a monument competition honoring Nelson’s legacy.⁶⁶ Boydell also placed a call for artists in *The Times* to create a history painting of Nelson’s death that would be turned into a print:

A PROPOSAL at once calculated to encourage the Fine Arts in this Country, and celebrate the greatest event that ever adorned its History, the BATTLE of TRAFALGAR, and the DEATH of LORD VISCOUNT NELSON. -Messrs. BOYDELL and Co. offer FIVE HUNDRED GUINEAS to any BRITISH ARTIST who shall paint the BEST PICTURE on that subject, from which a PRINT shall be engraved in the first style of excellency, the size of, and in the manner

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Neff and Weber, *American Adversaries*, 66.

⁶⁶ Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kathryn Cave (New Haven: published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1982), December 4, 1805.

of the Death of General Wolfe, at present their property; and the Original Picture will afterwards be presented to the Admiralty, or some such appropriate public body.⁶⁷

Boydell's terms were specific. The call for artists requested a finished painting, noted that entries would be judged by the RA, proposed a payment plan for subscribers ("half to be paid at the time of subscribing, and the remainder on it's delivery"), and set forth the final prices of the finished prints and proofs: prints would be sold at a rate of two guineas, while the higher-quality proofs would be five guineas each. In essence, Boydell was hoping to capitalize on Nelson's death – as his uncle had with the 1776 *Death of Wolfe* print – by producing a history print for the masses that was both didactically accessible and affordable. Arthur William Devis won the competition with his painting *The Death of Nelson, 21 October 1805* (1807) (fig. 2.14).⁶⁸

Boydell was not the only industrious publisher prepared take a chance on the profitability of Nelson's storied demise. Just one week before Boydell's advertisement appeared in *The Times*, West called on Joseph Farington to discuss his new collaboration with publisher James Heath.⁶⁹ West relayed to Farington that Heath had

⁶⁷ *The Times* (London), December 5, 1805 and November 22, 1805.

⁶⁸ For more information see Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's Death of Nelson," *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, ed. Douglas Fraser, Howard Hibbard, and Milton J. Lewine (London: Phaidon Press, 1967), 268.

⁶⁹ Heath had long been a member of the London engraving world, and by 1794 had succeeded William Woollett as Historical Engraver to His Majesty George III. This appointment would have been a natural boon for business and by 1796 Heath's

“called upon him to paint a picture of Lord Nelson’s Victory & Death, and that [Heath] would engrave a Plate from it, and that they should make it a partnership concern. The picture to be considered as a companion to that of the Death of General Wolfe.” West and Heath settled the terms and West began the design.⁷⁰ According to their agreement, West would retain the finished painting and pay Heath a flat rate of twelve hundred guineas to engrave the plate. They would then publish the print, sharing expenses and profits equally.⁷¹

West may have already been thinking for some time about memorializing Nelson. Ten years after Nelson’s death, George Ticknor visited the artist at the Newman Street studio where West had

...Arranged all the pictures that he still owns... [West] told us a singular anecdote of Nelson, while we were looking at the picture of his death. Just before [Nelson] went to sea for the last time, West sat next to him at a large entertainment given to him [in London], and in the course of the dinner Nelson expressed to Sir William Hamilton his regret, that in his youth he had not acquired some taste for art and some power of discrimination. “But,” said [Nelson], turning to West, “there is one picture whose power I do feel. I never pass a paint-shop where your *Death of Wolfe* is in the window, without being stopped by it.”

enterprise was so profitable that he expanded from the sole role of engraver to publishing in his own name. For information on the Heath family see John Heath, *The Heath Family Engravers 1779-1878*, vol. 1 (Aldershop England: Scholar Press, 1992), 21.

⁷⁰ Farington, *Diary*, Nov. 29, 1805.

⁷¹ There is a draft copy of the agreement between West and Heath that laid out the terms of the business arrangement. Charles Mitchell notes that it is included in Arthur Marks’ unpublished MA thesis from Columbia.

West, of course, made his acknowledgements, and Nelson went on to ask why he had painted no more like it. “Because, my lord, there are no more subjects.” “D-n it,” said the sailor, “I didn’t think of that,” and asked [West] to take a glass of champagne. “But, my lord, I fear your intrepidity will yet furnish me such another scene; and, if it should, I shall certainly avail myself to it.” “Will you?” said Nelson, pouring out bumpers, and touching his glass violently against West’s,- “will you, Mr. West? Then I hope that I shall die in the next battle.”⁷²

This story is compelling for several reasons. West was known for having a steady hand when it came to influencing the written record of his artistic career. One has only to glance through the first few pages of John Galt’s 1816 biography – published the year following West’s encounter with Ticknor – to grasp that the young artist probably did not learn to paint with a brush consisting of hairs from his cat Grimalkin’s tail, and that the oft-repeated story of the fever that led to his “discovery” of the camera obscura was at least a little embellished. When we consider just how loosely West stuck to the truth in terms of his personal mythology, it is tempting to slough off Ticknor’s story of

⁷² George Hillard, *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, vol. 1 (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1876), 63. Von Erffa and Staley remind researchers that this anecdote is probably apocryphal as Sir William Hamilton passed away in 1803. They do suggest, however, that all three men could have made acquaintance at a holiday fete hosted by William Beckford at Fonthill Abbey on December 23, 1800. For more information, see von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 220-222.

West's chance meeting with Nelson as nothing more than a convenient manipulation of history.⁷³

This anecdote does, however, point to a sizable body of visual material related to Nelson's legacy developed by West. Between 1806 and 1812, West would complete four sprawling history paintings, two imminently reproducible prints, and one grand monument to serve as reminders of Nelson's naval legacy. The naval hero was a pragmatic choice of subject for an artist like West. A print depicting Nelson's death, if the 1776 *Death of Wolfe* print was any indication, could rake in substantial profits. Further, as West would retain his original painting, proceeds could be made through private exhibition. As the bulk of the aging painter's experience lay in the speedy conceptualization and execution of history paintings, this was a venture at which West knew he could succeed.

West needed a heroic subject to thrust him back into the public eye and highlight his abilities as a capable, talented progenitor of new work. It had been nearly thirty years since *The Death of General Wolfe* had impressed British audiences. Despite his advancing age (the artist was nearly seventy when he painted *The Death of Nelson* in 1806), West found himself at a tenuous juncture in his career. In December 1805 West had temporarily resigned – not wholly of his own volition – as President of

⁷³ Galt, *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West* (1816); Susan Rather, "Benjamin West, John Galt, and the Biography of 1816," *The Art Bulletin* 86:2 (2004): 324-345.

the RA.⁷⁴ His recent fall from favor with the English Court, subsequent loss of royal commissions, and the divestment of his annual stipend of one thousand pounds from George III further strained matters.⁷⁵ A new national hero – a warrior-hero like Wolfe – would again position West in the public’s field of reference. Horatio Nelson fit the bill.

Painting *The Death of Nelson*, 1806

Joseph Farington visited West’s studio in March 1806 and reported that the artist was well on his way to a completed history painting: “Before dinner I saw West’s picture of the death of Lord Nelson. It was all painted in & would employ him a month more to harmonize and give effect to it.”⁷⁶ West revealed the finished painting to Farington in May and added a revealing footnote:

[West] said it had been a great motive to induce Him to paint that picture “The Death of Lord Nelson” to shew the Academy what they had done in causing the Author of it to withdraw himself, and an Architect to be placed in his room... West had placed Copies of his

⁷⁴ Farington, *Diary*, November 29, 1805. West indicated to Farington that he was resolved to resign: “During this conversation I perceived that West’s mind was fully made up to resign the Chair, and under all circumstances, I could not advise him against it.”

⁷⁵ Von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 51.

⁷⁶ Farington, *Diary*, March 15, 1806.

“Death of General Wolfe” and “the battle off La Hogue” adjoining his “Death of Lord Nelson.”⁷⁷

West’s comment to Farington reveals that the *Death of Nelson* was more than just another commission. From West’s perspective, this project provided an opportunity to demonstrate just how indispensable he was to the RA at a time when his peers were actively pushing him out of the organization.⁷⁸

The imposing painting, almost six by eight feet, looks less like the cramped deck of a warship and more like the theatrical space of the stage (fig. 2.15).⁷⁹ The painting depicts Nelson in the last moments of his life on the deck of the HMS Victory. French and Spanish warships float (and sink) in the background: their broken masts, torn sails, orange flames, and billowing black smoke indicate that British forces have triumphed. The middle ground consists of an elevated stern deck filled with figures in British naval uniforms. The foreground is the most dynamic portion of the scene: officers and seamen focus their pointed, concerned gazes toward Nelson at the

⁷⁷ Ibid, May 11, 1806.

⁷⁸ For more information on the exhibition of *The Death of Nelson* at West’s studio in 1806, see Kaylin H. Weber, “A Temple of History Painting: West’s Newman Street Studio and Art Collection,” in Neff and Weber, *American Adversaries*, 14-49.

⁷⁹ Despite the theatricality of Nelson’s funeral, there are no significant early nineteenth-century plays about Nelson’s death. The subject of Nelson’s life was picked up in the twentieth century, but the majority of these plays focused on the sentimental aspects of Nelson’s love life (and specifically his scandalous affair with Lady Hamilton). For a brief discussion of twentieth-century productions see *The Nelson Companion*, ed. Colin White (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 26-27.

center of the composition. Several onlookers grieve and look surprised, while others reflect stoically and respectfully clutch their hats to their chests. The ship's chaplain, purser, and surgeon support Nelson's outstretched body while the captain, Thomas Hardy, clutches a list of captured enemy ships. West placed strategic areas of red (in the coats of the officers, as well several flags and the headscarf of the seaman in the right foreground) to pull the viewer's eye across the canvas. Rather than using color to provide compositional rhythm, West inflected the scene with a multitude of portrait heads. A clean, clear deck at the center front of the composition conveniently provided viewers with a place to rest weary, and perhaps over-stimulated, eyes.

Like *The Death of Wolfe*, *The Death of Nelson* was what West would have dubbed an "epic composition" – a picture that did not necessarily reproduce historical fact, but rather provided all the details necessary to conspire to "show the importance of the Hero." West illuminated what he meant by this term in a conversation with Joseph Farington:

There was no other way of representing the death of a Hero but by an Epic representation of it. It must exhibit the event in a way to excite awe and veneration; and that which may be required to give superior interest to the representation must be introduced – all that can show the importance of the Hero. Wolfe must not die like a common soldier under a bush; neither should Nelson be represented dying in the gloomy hold of a ship, like a sick man in a prison hole. To move the mind there should be a spectacle presented to raise and warm the mind, and all should be proportioned to the highest idea conceived of the Hero. No boy, said West, would be animated by a representation of Nelson dying like an ordinary man. His feelings may be roused and his mind

inflamed by a scene great and extraordinary. A mere matter of fact will never produce this effect.⁸⁰

West's comments conscientiously draw parallels between *The Death of Nelson* and *The Death of Wolfe* and are reminiscent of Reynolds' declaration that West's innovations might occasion a "revolution in the art" of contemporary history painting. Both compositions were grand in scale and integrated modern dress. Both paintings mediated the moment of death in order to affect viewers' sympathies in the most forceful way possible.⁸¹ Both scenes situate the warrior-hero in the most advantageous, narrative-driven location possible. On top of all this, the prints and paintings of Wolfe and Nelson played into the hands of a curious, hungry, and ever-expanding British consumer market.⁸²

West planned to display *The Death of Lord Nelson* at his Newman Street gallery alongside *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and *The Battle of La Hogue* (1778), and he advertised his exhibition in *Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine*.⁸³

⁸⁰ Farington, *Diary*, June 10, 1807.

⁸¹ Hoock, "Nelson Entombed," 121.

⁸² For more on whether or not West occasioned a "revolution" in art, see Kaylin H. Weber, "Displaying History: West's Gallery and the Great Room" (lecture, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, March 28, 2014).

⁸³ "Mr. West's Grand Historical Picture of the Death of Lord Nelson," *La Belle Assemblée, or, Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* (London: May 1, 1806), Issue

West's article established the painting's narrative, provided a biographical sketch of the artist, and drew parallels between Nelson and Wolfe. "In Nelson," West wrote, "there is nothing of affectation; every thing is as simple as was the character of the man; there is a kind of serene and saint-like heroism, the comfort and composure of a dying martyr."⁸⁴ While Nelson may have been resigned to a "serene and saint-like heroism," the rest of the composition was "terrible and awful" and recalled "sublimity in the fulness [sic] of its horrors."⁸⁵ Nelson's reserved demeanor, similar to Wolfe's, embodied neoclassical representational codes of stoicism and emotional reserve. Moreover, the "sublimity" of the scene allowed period viewers to witness the horror (and sacrifice) that came with battle while not literally putting themselves in danger.

The relative accuracy of West's scene was a significant issue as West and Heath raced Devis and Boydell to publish the first print after Nelson's death. While *Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* noted that West's painting was "a work of truth, and not of fancy," West's aforementioned conversation with Farington made clear that the details of the composition had been manipulated to favor a grand

IV. For more information on West's display practices, see Weber, "A Temple of History Painting," 14-49.

⁸⁴ *La Belle Assemblée, or, Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine*, May 1, 1806.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

narrative rather than the gritty realities of what had actually transpired on October 21, 1805. For example, period accounts of the Battle of Trafalgar noted that Nelson was wounded on deck, but quickly brought below to the cockpit where he spent the last minutes of his life surrounded by his fellow officers. While Devis chose to portray Nelson's death in the ship's dark, lamp-lit cockpit, West calculated that more feelings would be roused and more minds inflamed if he provided a more theatrical backdrop, complete with roiling clouds and smoke and as many characters packed in to the square inch as possible.⁸⁶ This important decision allowed West to include the "various groupes of men whose portraits are upon the canvass."⁸⁷ The practice of including authentic likenesses in history paintings was not limited to West's practice. Many of West's students – most notably John Trumbull – made similar efforts to provide correct likenesses of all the participants in a given military event. These portraits lent a degree of authenticity to West's narrative because they were real people who had served with Nelson, even though it was unlikely they had been beside the Admiral in his last moments.

⁸⁶ Devis took studies of the Victory's decks and cockpit while preparing his painting and was the sole artist to encounter Nelson's pickled corpse when it returned to London from Cape Trafalgar.

⁸⁷ *La Belle Assemblée, or, Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine*, May 1, 1806.

Bell's also notified readers that *The Death of Lord Nelson* would not be shown at the annual RA exhibition. If readers wanted to see the painting, they had to travel to Newman Street. This was a calculated move by West. The year 1806 was the first time since 1769 that West did not display an original or re-worked composition at the RA's annual show. By July West reported to Farington that he had "issued 6500 Cards for admittance and some [visitors] came with parties of 8 or 10..." West estimated that no less than thirty thousand callers had come to Newman Street to see the finished work.⁸⁸ It could be that this independent display of such an important work was one of the factors that lead to his re-instatement as President of the institution later that year.⁸⁹

While West hosted curious audiences at Newman Street in 1806, Heath collected subscriptions and engraved the plate.⁹⁰ In July of that year, Heath informed West that he would need more time – and an additional six hundred guinea advance – to complete the complicated engraving.⁹¹ Five years later, in March 1811, the plate

⁸⁸ Farington, *Diary*, July 2, 1806.

⁸⁹ "West displayed the Death of Lord Nelson allegedly to thousands of people at his house during 1807, and certainly to some 60,000 at the RA in 1811." Hoock, 123.

⁹⁰ Heath began collecting subscriptions in early 1806. In West's initial contract with Heath, proofs were four guineas (a guinea less than the price at which Boydell had publicly promised to sell his proofs) and common impressions were two guineas. For more details see Farington, *Diary*, July 8, 1806.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, July 8, 1806.

was finally ready for printing (fig. 2.16).⁹² Farington recorded that “Heath... expressed the great pleasure he felt in having finished His plate of “The death of Lord Nelson” from West’s picture, which had been a very heavy task witht. affording him amusement. The engraving of Coats and Waistcoats He sd. was dry work.”⁹³

Project for a Monument / The Apotheosis of Nelson, 1807

After all was said and done, Heath and West would beat Boydell and Devis to the publishing punch by a full year.⁹⁴ But what of Boydell’s 1805 call for a *monument* competition to honor Nelson? While not explicitly stated in the initial call for artists, the designs Boydell solicited were bound for St. Paul’s Cathedral. (Westminster Abbey had been crowded with monuments for some time, and in 1791 the authorities at St. Paul’s appropriated the space as an official British naval and military pantheon.⁹⁵) Further, we know that the public vetting process for the proposed Nelson monument was structured similarly to the public vetting process for the Wolfe monument at Westminster. By March of 1806 (a little over three months after the initial call for

⁹² Farington, *Diary*, March 23, 1811.

⁹³ *Ibid*, May 20, 1811.

⁹⁴ The Devis / Boydell print was issued in March 1812.

⁹⁵ For more information about the repurposing of St. Paul’s as a national military and naval pantheon, see Hoock.

submissions ran in the *Times*) at least “twenty seven or eight models” had been presented to the committee for review.⁹⁶ Also like the Wolfe monument competition, some of the most famous artists of the early nineteenth century submitted designs for the Nelson memorial at St. Paul’s. Three of these designs are key to understanding the Nelson pediment that West would erect from 1810 to 1812 at the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich.

The winning design for St. Paul’s was submitted by John Flaxman in 1806 and executed between 1808 and 1818 (fig. 2.17). From 1787 to 1794 Flaxman had studied classical, medieval, and Renaissance art in Rome while working as a supervisor for Wedgwood, and in 1800 he was elected a full academician with London’s RA. While the details of the sculptor’s design and its critical reception will be addressed in chapter three, it is helpful at this juncture to know that the main focus of Flaxman’s *Monument to the Memory of Lord Nelson* was a life-size standing portrait sculpture of the Admiral in contemporary uniform. Nelson’s likeness is supported by an anchor and situated atop a cylindrical pedestal decorated with bas-reliefs of river gods from the four continents. The pedestal is flanked on the right by a crouching British lion and on the left by an allegorical figure of Britannia who reaches up to grasp the tails of Nelson’s overcoat while ushering two young boys (also in contemporary clothes) to

⁹⁶ Farington, *Diary*, March 12, 1806.

pay their respects. A broad plinth, incised with a brief account of the Admiral's achievements, grounds and unifies the tight composition.

Antonio Canova, perhaps the most lauded neoclassical sculptor of the period, also submitted a design for the St. Paul's competition in 1806 – 1807. In addition to a series of grisaille paintings of the monument's figural reliefs, Canova published engravings of his design.⁹⁷ While Canova's objectives for these prints were never specified, a persuasive case can be made that Canova intended them for Boydell's monument contest. Their publication would have come at just the right time: the first prints after the *modello* were expeditiously circulated beginning in 1806 (fig. 2.18). These engravings served an important function: because Canova's plaster *modello* remained at his studio in Rome – it was too delicate to make the oceanic crossing in the damp hold of a ship – these prints stood in its place. Further, the sculptor maintained a healthy network of British patrons and artists. Canova's close affiliation with RA members like John Flaxman situated him in a favorable position with regard to the London art world. Moreover, Canova's apolitical temperament would have lent the sculptor an air of neutrality when it came to the conceptualization of a contemporary monument for a British warrior-hero. Canova would certainly have

⁹⁷ For an overview of Canova's work for British patrons and a specific investigation of the *modello* see Christopher M. S. Johns, *Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 145-170.

known about Boydell's call for designs from John Flaxman, and given Canova's professional stature it makes sense that he would have had nothing to lose by throwing his hat into the ring.

Constructed of plaster, wax, and terracotta, Canova's design for Nelson's tomb had more in common with classical Italian mausoleums than the iconography of the contemporary British warrior-hero (fig. 2.19). It was designed in the round, a logical choice as the monument's original site was intended to be beneath the cathedral's dome. A four-sided sarcophagus with a pyramidal lid sits atop an elevated, flat circular base. Three sides of the sarcophagus are decorated with figural reliefs. The first in the narrative series features Minerva, Mars, and Neptune entrusting the infant Nelson to the United Kingdom. The second panel depicts the body of Nelson, carried by seamen in classical costume, being received by female personifications of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The third relief depicts Nelson being crowned with laurels by a winged figure of Victory. The fourth side of the tomb bore an inscription related to Nelson's naval victories. Both the lid of the sarcophagus and the circular base are decorated with swags of laurel. Seated female allegories representing the four continents are placed around the outside of the circular base. Rendered in terracotta, these figures contrast with the bright white plaster of the rest of the *modella*.

Aside from its allegorical elements, Canova's design had very little in common with Flaxman's winning proposal. Joan Coutu has argued that public competitions for commissions like the Wolfe monument at Westminster Abbey may have inspired

selection committees to adopt a xenophobic attitude toward foreign artists; this theory may be relevant for understanding how Flaxman secured the winning bid at St. Paul's.⁹⁸ In addition, Canova's design may have looked too classical or old-fashioned for critics and connoisseurs who had come to expect contemporary elements in their historical compositions. While Canova chose to represent Nelson in the guise of a Roman *Doryphoros*, Flaxman carved the Admiral in contemporary uniform, (in)complete with his missing arm.⁹⁹ The accessibility of Nelson's likeness was important for Flaxman, who quipped, "Divine attributes, moral virtues, or national characteristics [sic], represented by allegory, are addressed to the speculation of the philosopher, or the imagination of the poet – but... general feelings are more gratified by the likeness of the man."¹⁰⁰ Canova's heavy sarcophagus emphasized the permanence of Nelson's death, while Flaxman's dashing figure underscored Nelson's living legacy.

Compared to the designs submitted by Flaxman and Canova, the funereal form of West's *Project for a Monument / The Apotheosis of Nelson* would have looked relatively conservative, perhaps even retrograde, to early-nineteenth-century viewers

⁹⁸ Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda*, 119.

⁹⁹ Canova's figural relief of Nelson crowned by Victory looks a lot like the Augustus of Prima Porta – but the Augustus was not discovered until 1863.

¹⁰⁰ Hoock, "Nelson Entombed," 125.

(fig. 2.20).¹⁰¹ The proposal was for a large stone funerary monument, fitted with a brightly colored, highly animated, *painted* scene of apotheosis. The scene of apotheosis is not unlike the figural relief on the base of the pedestal of the *Column of Antoninus Pius*, which West might have seen while traveling in Rome in the 1760s (fig. 2.21).¹⁰² In West's painting, Neptune lifts Nelson's body toward a winged Victory. In turn, Victory carries the shrouded hero to Britannia who sits in "shaded gloom," disconsolate over "the loss of so distinguished a character."¹⁰³ The faces of young seamen gaze in admiration at Nelson from the water below, while a British lion and putti fill out the action. This central narrative scene is surrounded by a hulking architectural frame, its base a solid plinth topped by two Doric columns and a lintel filled with text and decorated by emblems of naval warfare. Contrasting with the bright reds and blues of the painted apotheosis, the architectural frame is rendered in the same stoic grisaille palette as the two groups of "sculpted" figures in contemporary military dress who flank either side of the plinth. On the left are "a group of British

¹⁰¹ West's *Project for a Monument to Nelson* was displayed at the 1807 RA exhibition. West included a full narrative to elucidate the proposal's narrative. Full text is available in von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 223.

¹⁰² The base of the Column of Antoninus Pius was restored from 1706 to 1708, and erected in the center of the Piazza di Montecitorio in 1741, before being taken to the Vatican Museums in 1787. For more information see Diana E. E. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 285-288.

¹⁰³ Von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 223.

seamen... inspired by Nelson and ready to defend their country's cause."¹⁰⁴ On the right the viewer is presented with marines "from the three nations which now form the United Kingdom [sic]" who reflect on their mutual loss.¹⁰⁵ West's inclusion of these enlisted charges was important: Nelson's reputation as an approachable, affable mentor to his men was common knowledge. He was an admired leader. With the exception of Nelson's immediate family, West's sculpted soldiers were the men whom the Admiral's death affected most directly.

The form of West's *Project for a Monument* was very much in line with designs submitted forty-seven years earlier for the Wolfe monument at Westminster.¹⁰⁶ It included a central narrative scene of lamentation and apotheosis. The monument was designed for installation against a wall or in a nave of a great London cathedral. A lengthy inscription chronicled the Admiral's *exemplum virtutis*. All of these elements would have allowed West's proposal to enter into visual dialogue with the rich tradition of British funerary monuments established in the previous century.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ For a summary of the proposals for Westminster Abbey see Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda*, 124-134.

The *Project for a Monument* merges painting and sculpture, however – two traditionally independent mediums – and it was *this* quality that may have struck nineteenth-century viewers as unexpected. Most designs for funerary monuments contained a central figural, narrative focus meant to be carved in stone or cast in bronze or lead surrounded by a carved architectural frame. While the overall form of West’s design was fairly standard, his inclusion of an actual painting within a sculpted frame was unusual, even innovative. While the “painted” component of the proposal contained classicizing elements (Nelson’s draped figure, mythological references), its stylistic components fit more closely with the new wave of sublime Romanticism that was making its way to Britain via continental artists like Theodore Gericault and Eugene Delacroix. At the same time, West’s sculpted contemporary details reminded viewers that this memorial was tailor-made for a contemporary *British* warrior-hero.

Ann Uhry Abrams has argued that this “strangely anachronistic memorial” was a “pure flight of [West’s] imagination” with “no pretense of historical reality.”¹⁰⁷

Students at the RA had been warned against the use of contemporary dress in sculpture by Reynolds’ tenth *Discourse*, delivered on December 11, 1780: “Working in stone is a very serious business; and it seems to be scarce worth while to employ such durable materials in conveying to posterity a fashion of which the longest existence

¹⁰⁷ Ann Uhry Abrams, *The Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand-Style History Painting* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 206-207.

scarce exceeds a year.”¹⁰⁸ West’s use of contemporary uniforms in the “sculpted” portion of the composition contrasts with the allegorical figures in the central “painted” component of the proposal. Abrams is correct in her assessment that this object rejects many of the traditional, pedagogic rules that academicians like Reynolds set forth to guide the larger project of British history painting. And her suggestion that this object signals a shift in West’s practices during the final years of his career is accurate. But rather than a “flight of the imagination,” the *Project for a Monument* should be seen as a transitional object, indicative of just how far new modes of British history painting had allowed the visual bounds of British memorial sculpture to expand by the early years of the nineteenth century. If we look forward to the culmination of West’s *Grand Model of Neptune*, we see an artist who in 1806 is testing the boundaries of modern sculpture, just as he had tested the bounds of history painting decades earlier.

While the 1807 *Project for a Monument* may not have garnered West a commission for Saint Paul’s, the proposal evinces that West was actively working to tie the conventions of British history painting to a more permanent, “durable” medium. Perhaps West felt a degree of freedom when it came to playing with the traditional conventions of sculpture because he was *not* a trained sculptor. He had been trained to work and think like a painter. Painters had a greater variety of expressive tricks up

¹⁰⁸ Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, 186-187.

their sleeves than sculptors: they could inflect flesh with a rosy hue to express energy, or turn a halcyon day somber with an approaching front of churning storm clouds. West had revolutionized British painting by the inclusion of contemporary costume; why not attempt a similar feat in commemorative sculpture by pairing stoic, monochromatic contemporary and allegorical sculptures with an emotion-filled, sublime, *painted* representation of apotheosis? From West's perspective, collaborations between sculptors and painters would have had the potential to bring more attention to the work of British artists in general. And this was a good thing for West, as the elderly artist had just been reinstated to the President's chair at the RA.

The *Project for a Monument* brings up several important questions that must have been on West's mind in the early years of the nineteenth century and that help guide the next chapter. What were the necessary elements for this new type of monument to a British warrior-hero? Did the neoclassical focus on secular (rather than religious) themes present new opportunities for siting monumental sculptures in the nineteenth century? What were the most productive, legible ways to convey a narrative in sculpture? Examined in more depth in the following pages, West's *Grand Model of Neptune* provides a unique opportunity to investigate the nineteenth-century British drive to memorialize warrior-heroes in three dimensions.

Chapter 3

“AN EPIC OR HEROIC POEM IN SCULPTURE”

A wave of commemorative fervor washed over Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. Decades of military engagements had taxed the country’s armed forces, ranging from the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1714), to the War of Austrian Succession (1744-1748), to the Seven Years’ War (1755-1763), to the American Revolution (1776-1783), to the French Revolutionary Wars (1793-1801). As conflicts sprang up across Britain’s global empire, the country’s military – especially the Royal Navy – suffered huge numbers of casualties. One of the most striking examples of these losses was illustrated during the Seven Years’ War, when more than seventy percent of Britain’s sailors (133,708 out of a total of 184,899) were reported as either missing or deceased.¹⁰⁹

To maintain their substantive global presence, the Royal Navy needed good men to serve as officers and seamen. Some chose to enlist, while others were impressed by force or without notice. In both cases, young recruits were pulled away from their friends, families, and support networks, and often faced cramped and uncomfortable conditions in far-flung locales for months or years at a time. Illness and

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Stanley Turberville, *Johnson’s England: An Account of the Life and Manners of His Age*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), I:53.

malnutrition were formidable concerns, and warfare threatened to divest servicemen of life, limb, and everything in between. How could the Royal Navy take something like national marine service –a dirty, messy, stinky, unpleasant business at best – and render it more appealing to aspiring young men?

The Royal Academy's development and promotion of British history paintings that lauded contemporary heroes and depicted modern warfare was one step in the right direction. "Epic" compositions like Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and *The Death of Nelson* (1806) worked to galvanize the public toward the support of British imperialistic aims by appealing to sentiment and emergent ideologies of nationalism. History paintings repackaged the dirt, carnage, disease, and death of battle in the safe, palatable space of the canvas. They helped the public make sense out of the often irrational spaces and places of war. Moreover, they provided a clear, purpose-laden narrative and promised posthumous fame for their protagonists, all while inspiring the young men who would eventually fill the shoes of their predecessors.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the "revolutionary" advances attained by history painting were growing tired. In his *ESSAY on NATIONAL and SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS* (1808), William Wood lamented the demise of the genre's heyday:

In works of art; the great, the grand, and the terrible; should be reserved for great, and momentous purposes...The shock of electric clouds would cease to arrest attention, if it became perpetual; and it is a happy circumstance, that few men are qualified to touch the *great* chords of the human heart. *But a crisis is now arrived.* The Shepherd's pipe, and

the carol of the lark, may be sufficient to excite the response of *domestic* virtue; but not to awaken a sense of *public glory*. It is the thirst for posthumous fame; the wreath of immortality; and the tears of national gratitude; which induce men to forgo private comfort, and resist the temporary allurements of individual benefits.¹¹⁰

Wood's essay argued for the development of a new sort of public visual culture that would be bigger and more easily accessed by large numbers of people; grander, in other words, than a history painting hung on a wall in a gallery or exhibition hall. He went on to highlight the important role that contemporary public monuments could play in inspiring British citizens toward national service:

What is meant to record a nation's gratitude, and excite national virtue, should be addressed to the whole population of a country. Of the small number, who seek admission to our cathedrals, a few will halt at the marble tomb; still fewer pause to read the Latin inscription; and the rest pass on, with no other feeling, than the mere vulgar sense of their own inferiority to something which they cannot comprehend: but when those, who direct the helm of the state, shall find leisure to reflect on subjects of this nature; we may hope to see one massy pyramid arise on Portsdown Hill, to record the prowess of our naval heroes; and another attain it's height in the neighbourhood of that military seminary, from which we may justly expect a long continued emanation of equal skill and bravery.¹¹¹

Wood was calling for new monuments, sited in accessible, public places. Such objects would play the same ideological role that history paintings had been playing for the past several decades. In a way, these monuments were a natural extension of the ideological function of history paintings. Unlike history paintings, however, there was

¹¹⁰ William Wood, *An ESSAY on NATIONAL and SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS* (London, 1808), 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

no established convention for how to design a successful monument to a national hero.¹¹²

Wood's *ESSAY* implored readers to learn from recent monumental missteps. In 1799, the Duke of Clarence had proposed a project to erect a "GRAND NAVAL PILLAR." While the Duke's endeavor ultimately failed, it managed to ignite a contentious debate within London's artistic community over memorial forms. Wood's *ESSAY* also called attention to two projects that were currently in process: James Smith II's *Metropolitan Monument* to Horatio Nelson at the City of London's Guildhall (1806-1810), and John Flaxman's memorial to Horatio Nelson at St. Paul's (1808-1818). The places that Wood mentions (Portsmouth Hill and "the neighbourhood of that military seminary") would have been familiar to readers as well, for these public, outdoor spaces were easily accessible to those who served in the Royal Navy: Portsmouth Hill overlooked the Royal Navy's most historic harbor and the English Channel, and the "military seminary" referred to the Royal Naval College at Greenwich. Notably, these locations were antithetical to the indoor, private spaces of the Guildhall or churches like Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's where monuments to contemporary British warrior-heroes were in the process of being erected. The issue of a monument's location and public accessibility was so important in the early years of

¹¹² Joseph Wilton's monument to General Wolfe, while discussed at length in the previous chapter, had been critically received with mixed success and had failed to fully settle questions of monumental convention.

the nineteenth century, in fact, that satirist William Holland published a scathing commentary on the topic in 1805.¹¹³

To understand the sense of urgency surrounding Wood's commentary, it is helpful to recall the memorial landscape of early-nineteenth-century London. Prior to the turn of the century, there were surprisingly few examples of public monuments erected in honor of military "everymen" who had risen to prominence on the national stage. Memorial schemes had been produced mainly as sepulchral monuments, with the occasional monument to a monarch.¹¹⁴ Joseph Wilton's *Monument to Major General James Wolfe* (unveiled 1773) at Westminster Abbey was an important early exception to this trend. Marianne Czisnik has suggested that the catalyst for upending this tradition once and for all may have been the British victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo in the early nineteenth century, in part because of the public's desire to highlight the achievements and sacrifices of leaders like Horatio Nelson and the Duke of Wellington.

¹¹³ British Museum online catalog, entry for "The sailor's monument – to the memory of Lord Nelson," accession no. AN93636001.

¹¹⁴ Marianne Czisnik, "Representations of a Hero: Monuments to Admiral Nelson," *Reactions to Revolutions: The 1790's and their Aftermath*, ed. Ulrich Broich, H.T. Dickinson, Eckhart Hellmuth, and Martin Schmidt (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 263. Also see Joan Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); and Matthew Craske, *The Silent Rhetoric of the Body: A History of Monumental Sculpture and Commemorative Art in England, 1720-1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

The lack of an established tradition for visual commemoration, however, meant that some experimentation (and some critical failure) was to be expected during this transitional time. What should these new monuments look like? Who should they honor? Where should they be sited? How could an artist create an object that would be durable and legible for centuries to come?

I argue that Benjamin West attempted to reconcile the goals of the British project of history painting with this emergent need for an innovative, formal language for public monuments through his *Grand Model of Neptune giving up the body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* (fig. 3.1). This monument, which West described as an “Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture,” was installed at Greenwich’s Royal Hospital for Seamen in the fall of 1812.¹¹⁵ The conception and the design of the monument evolved out of a context that included the Duke’s 1799 naval pillar project as well as the commissions by Smith and Flaxman honoring Nelson discussed in the previous chapter. Significantly, West’s sculptural project strategically avoided many of the pitfalls that negatively affected the earlier monument projects. By closely examining its formal components it becomes clear that

¹¹⁵ The *Description* noted “It has been reserved for the President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, Esq., to form a design expressive and bold in all respects, which may not improperly be termed an Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture....” For the complete quote, see Benjamin West, *Description OF THE GRAND Model of Neptune giving up the Body of NELSON, With the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia, Executed from a Design of BENJAMIN WEST, ESQ., FOR GREENWICH HOSPITAL, At COADE and SEALY’S ORNAMENTAL STONE MANUFACTORY, Lambeth* (London, 1813), 3.

the visual cues and forms present in West's pediment, much like those in his well-received history paintings, connected his monument to some of the most revered artists and works of art of all time. West also created a dynamically layered narrative for his sculptural project with the publication of an auxiliary pamphlet in 1813; this *DESCRIPTION* animated the buff-colored neoclassicism of West's transcendent homage to Nelson with emphatic prose and thick descriptions of the pediment's figures and narrative. Further, by inserting a self-portrait into his composition, West identified *himself* as part and parcel of this substantial project at a very late moment in his professional career.

Formal Debates

The Grand Model of Neptune has received relatively little attention by art historians who study Benjamin West's body of work. One reason for this may be that the pediment resists easy categorization, blurring distinctions between memorial sculpture, fine art, and architectural ornament. Its multivalent nature would have been as jarring to nineteenth-century critics as it is to scholars today. Yet it was this quality that allowed West's design to respond to a period debate over the appropriateness of figural sculpture versus architecture for monumental commissions of national significance.

The foundation for this critical dialogue was laid on July 31, 1799 when the Duke of Clarence advertised a project to erect "A GRAND NAVAL PILLAR, to

PERPETUATE the GLORIOUS VICTORIES of the BRITISH NAVY.”¹¹⁶ The Duke of Clarence was no ordinary concerned citizen. He was Prince William IV, the third son of George III. The Prince joined the Royal Navy in 1778 and served in several high-profile engagements in North America and the Caribbean (where, for a time, he was stationed under Horatio Nelson’s command). Though he retired from active duty in 1790, William was nicknamed the “Sailor King” when he ascended the throne in 1830.¹¹⁷ As George III’s son and a retired naval officer, the Duke had an important stake in lobbying for a monument that would call attention to the Royal Navy’s legacy. George III was the monarchical or honorary patron of the Royal Academy and, by extension, a symbolic champion for contemporary British art and artists. The Duke’s call for artists and subscribers aligned with the King’s encouragement of the development of a native, contemporary visual culture. That the Duke wanted to erect a monument to commemorate Britain’s “glorious victories” at sea is no surprise, either, as the Royal Navy was the strongest military presence in the world at this time. The Duke’s project would presumably work to commemorate the hard work and sacrifices of his peers while simultaneously concretizing his father’s imperialistic legacy.

The Duke’s advertisement set clear parameters for the project’s form, message, location, and estimated cost:

¹¹⁶ “Grand Naval Pillar to Perpetuate,” *The Times* (London), July 31, 1799, Gale Group / British Newspapers, accessed November 12, 2012.

¹¹⁷ For general information about King William IV, see Tom Pocock, *Sailor King: The Life of King William IV* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991).

To commemorate these important Victories, and to do just Honour to those brave Men... It is proposed that a GRAND NAVAL PILLAR shall be erected on PORTSDOWN HILL, near Portsmouth, or some other Place which may hereafter appear more eligible... That this NATIONAL MONUMENT OF BRITISH GLORY may be solely the effusion of British Gratitude, it is proposed that it should be erected by General and Voluntary Contributions; and it is not doubted but a sufficient Fund for so noble a purpose will very speedily be raised. The Estimate, according to a Design already made, amounts to about £15,000, and the Pillar is intended to display Trophies descriptive of the unparalleled Victories obtained over the Fleets of France, Holland, and Spain, by our Naval Commanders... The Plan will be submitted to a Committee, for their approval, alteration, or amendment, for the more complete execution of the design... Subscribers Names will regularly appear in the News-papers.¹¹⁸

Situated above the English Channel along England's southern coast, Portsdown Hill's chalky terraces overlooked Portsmouth Harbor and the Royal Navy's most important (and historic) dockyard. The harbor provided a secure anchorage for the warships built and maintained at the yard. A triumphal pillar atop the hill would have been plainly visible to sailors and officers below at the naval base. Moreover, the architectural form of the triumphal pillar was steeped in association with classical antiquity. In this way, the pillar's form worked to authorize and memorialize the efforts of the British Navy. The Duke's advertisement was followed by a list of subscribers including members of the royal family, members of His Majesty's Cabinet like William Pitt the Younger, and notable public figures like R. Bowyer, proprietor of a popular historic gallery on Pall Mall. As promised, the list of subscribers was

¹¹⁸ "Grand Naval Pillar to Perpetuate," *The Times* (London), July 31, 1799.

updated and published again in January 1800; admirals, lords, dukes, and earls were listed alphabetically alongside less prominent businessmen.¹¹⁹

As subscriptions rolled in, the committee solicited designs from architects and sculptors. “A great variety of designs by different hands, in which considerable merit was displayed” were displayed in a public exhibition on Pall Mall.¹²⁰ The committee discarded the Duke’s initial idea for a pillar as they reviewed engravings and models for obelisks, pillars, pyramids, temples, and even colossal figures. Portsdown Hill remained a viable site for the monument, but locations in “the vicinity of the Capital” of London were also considered ranging from Blackheath, Shooter’s Hill, and Russell Square, to Lincoln’s Inn Fields and St. George’s Fields.

In the end, the Duke’s project failed to raise enough money to erect even a small statue. Malcolm Campbell has suggested that interest in the “GRAND NAVAL PILLAR” declined as the Napoleonic wars resumed in 1803.¹²¹ As early as 1805, editorials appeared in the *Times* from concerned donors calling for accountability.¹²² On June 13, 1809 (almost a decade after the Duke’s initial call for contributions)

¹¹⁹ “Naval Monument to Perpetuate the Glorious Victories of the British Navy,” *The Times* (London), January 27, 1800, Gale Group / British Newspapers, accessed November 12, 2012.

¹²⁰ “The Naval Pillar,” *The Times* (London), August 31, 1805, Gale Group / British Newspapers, accessed November 12, 2012.

¹²¹ Malcolm Campbell, “An Alternative Design for a Commemorative Monument,” *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, no. 2 (1958): 65.

¹²² *The Times* (London), August 31, 1805. Also see December 19, 1805.

subscribers gathered at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, Strand, and determined that unused funds should be returned or donated to charity.¹²³ While the committee for raising the naval pillar may not have been able to secure the funds to erect a permanent memorial to British naval prowess, the debate that the project inspired over proper monument form had important consequences for British commemorative practices.

John Flaxman, a sculptor, provided the catalyst for this conversation.¹²⁴ Some months after the Duke published the initial 1799 advertisement, Flaxman published “A LETTER TO THE COMMITTEE FOR RAISING THE NAVAL PILLAR, OR MONUMENT, UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUKE OF CLARENCE.” The sculptor’s ambitious vision departed from the Duke’s initial proposal. Rather than a “GRAND NAVAL PILLAR” for Portsdown Hill, Flaxman proposed a colossal, marble sculpture of “Britannia Triumphant” for Greenwich Hill.¹²⁵ The one hundred thirty foot tall sculpture of Britannia would require epic features: Flaxman estimated that her nose would be four and a half feet

¹²³ “NAVAL PILLAR. – At a General Meeting of the Subscribers to a Fund for erecting a NAVAL MONUMENT,” *The Times* (London), November 16, 1810, Gale Group / British Newspapers, accessed November 12, 2012.

¹²⁴ Flaxman was elected as a full Academician to the Royal Academy in 1800, and became its Chair of Sculpture in 1810. For an excellent examination of Flaxman’s life and career, see David Bindman, *John Flaxman* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

¹²⁵ Flaxman may have been developing an alternative scheme for a triumphal arch at Greenwich. For a summary of Flaxman’s sketches in the Princeton University Art Museum, see Campbell, “An Alternative Design”: 65-73.

long, her hand nine feet long, and the staff of her spear about two and a half feet in diameter.¹²⁶ Flaxman proposed that the figure be mounted on a one hundred foot tall pedestal and base, “the pedestal... decorated with the Heroes and Trophies of the Country, and the History of its Prowess inscribed upon the basement.”¹²⁷ To help readers visualize his scheme, Flaxman included a plate depicting the statue atop Greenwich Hill with a perspective view of the Queen’s House as well as the Grand Square of the Royal Naval Hospital in the foreground (fig. 3.2).¹²⁸ In addition, he sculpted a terracotta model of his colossus for display at the Royal Academy’s annual exhibition in 1801 (fig. 3.3).¹²⁹

Flaxman discussed his proposal with Benjamin West in December 1799.

Joseph Farington noted the details of the conversation in his diary: “West much approved [of] the idea of a *figure* instead of a Pillar. - If a Figure were to be adopted it

¹²⁶ Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre, 16 Vols., December 25, 1799 (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1978), IV: 1331-1332.

¹²⁷ John Flaxman, *A letter to the committee for raising the naval pillar, or monument, under the patronage of His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence* (London, 1799), 8.

¹²⁸ The location of Flaxman’s colossal figure is important. If the monument were to be placed in the Grand Court at Greenwich Hospital as Flaxman discussed with West, it would have to necessarily replace an existing monument honoring King George II, executed by John Michael Rysbrack in 1735. The etching submitted by Flaxman to the committee placed his colossal statue further up Greenwich Hill and behind the Queen’s House.

¹²⁹ For more on the emerging interest in matters of scale and engineering, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower and Panama Canal* (Pittsburgh: Periscope, 2012).

would be an *example* which would influence and figures would be thought of for commemoration instead of pillars.”¹³⁰ This conversation suggests that Flaxman and West – artists who both worked in figural traditions – were attempting to steer the committee’s critical discourse away from the strict, hierarchical approach of architects and toward the more permissive artistic conventions of painters and sculptors. These comments are also important for understanding the Nelson pediment because they link West to a consideration of commemorative sculpture for the grounds of the Royal Naval Hospital. Many of the hospital’s pediments and public spaces remained unadorned following the institution’s hasty opening to pensioners in the early eighteenth century. Might these empty spaces – quite literally architectural and spatial “frames” – prove suitable for new artistic endeavors that went beyond the static, two-dimensional realm of history paintings? The evidence suggests that West saw potential for new, three-dimensional, figural commissions for Greenwich Hospital. But where Flaxman imagined a colossus, West’s figures were designed with different classical sources in mind.

Flaxman’s letter consciously couched his enormous sculpture of “Britannia Triumphant” alongside the greatest wonders of antiquity. The sculptor reminded the committee that the colossal figure had many important precedents in the ancient world, relaying that “Pliny, speaking of these statues, says there were a hundred of

¹³⁰ Farington, *Diary*, December 25, 1799.

them in the city of Rhodes, each of which ennobled the place where it stood.”¹³¹

Further examples included Lysippus’s bronze Jupiter, sixty feet high, made for the Theatre of Pompey in Rome; Phidias’s ivory and gold Jupiter, also sixty feet high, made for the Temple of Elis; the ivory and gold Minerva of the Athenian Acropolis, which held a six foot high statue of Victory in her hand; and last but certainly not least, the brass Colossus of Rhodes, reportedly towering no less than one hundred five feet high. By drawing parallels between the great commemorative projects of antiquity and contemporary British heroic schemes, Flaxman encouraged the committee to consider how this project could situate British heroes – and artists – alongside those of great civilizations of the past.

There was one catch: Flaxman’s proposal was extraordinarily costly. The sculptor estimated that his monument would cost approximately fifty thousand pounds (significantly more than the Duke’s initial estimate of fifteen thousand pounds). In case his readers balked, Flaxman added a final thought for the committee: “It is not to be wondered at that the Ancients bestowed their money and labour so liberally upon these public statues, considering how much more sentiment and interest there is in a fine human figure than can possibly be produced in the choicest piece of Architecture.”¹³²

¹³¹ Flaxman, *A letter to the committee for raising the naval pillar*, 6-7.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 7.

Flaxman's 1799 letter to the committee was not, as he may have initially presumed, met with wholehearted acceptance. Architect Alexander Dufour submitted a rebuttal several months later deconstructing the sculptor's proposal. Dufour argued that the best form for the monument was not Flaxman's figure, but rather a more classically inclined piece of architecture. Britannia's colossal form was inadequate for the Duke's national memorial:

... the little boats in bas-relief... can produce no effect at the distance necessary for viewing his Monument. The four bornes or studs, at the angles of his steps, and of which he has taken the idea from his antique medal, seem as if placed there by chance. They answer no object of utility; and the square steps which lose themselves in these circular figures, would produce a very bad effect. His pedestal is heavy; its parts are too equal, and do not, besides, afford four places, well marked, to receive the four inscriptions which are absolutely necessary. His Figure is too short; the right arm is badly designed, and the fantastical helmet with which it is set off, gives to it, at first sight, the look of an Egyptian figure.

Were his monument a proper one, I should applaud his idea of placing it on Greenwich Hill, opposite the centre of the Hospital; but such a Figure would overpower and made an edifice, at present possessed of so much magnificence, appear to a disadvantage.

An Artist may raise an immense Column, and yet please; for whatever some Architects may assert, a Column is not an imitation of Nature; but in the imitative arts, such as Painting and Sculpture, every thing that outsteps Nature too far, surprises without pleasing us... So with Statues, those which have for ages enjoyed the greatest reputation are not colossal. These are, the Apollo, the Venus de Medicis, the Gladiator, the Laocoon, &c. All these approach, or only exceed in a small degree, human nature.

It is certain that if we wished to represent the portrait, the figure, or any memorable exploit of a hero, a Statue would answer the intent better than a Pillar, or an Obelisk... But if we wished to perpetuate his

memory, a piece of Architecture is better calculated for the purpose than a statue.¹³³

The narratives issued by Flaxman and Dufour reveal that several ideas were driving the new visual culture of commemoration as it blossomed in the early years of the nineteenth century. First, both artists looked to the classical past for inspiration. Flaxman's proposal was heavily invested in recycling the forms and visual traditions of antiquity. Dufour's proposal did this as well, but the architect noted that Flaxman's colossal figure merely mimicked the formal characteristics of antique art. Dufour pointed out that a project (like his) that employed classical forms as points of departure on the road to formal, visual innovation would be a more prudent choice.

Second, both Flaxman and Dufour were heavily invested in making sure that the finished monument conveyed a legible narrative, but they were divided when it came to determining the best way to share that story. Flaxman presumed that his audience would be best moved by an emotional, identifiable, figural *exemplum virtutis*. Dufour felt that a more timeless architectural form would better perpetuate the memories earned by national heroes. Both men considered what forms – hieroglyphics, bas-reliefs, inscriptions – would best convey the subject's narrative in as enduring a manner as possible.

¹³³ Alexander Dufour, *Letter to the nobility and gentry composing the committee for raising the naval pillar, or monument, under the patronage of His Royal Highness The Duke of Clarence; in answer to the letter of John Flaxman, sculptor, to the committee on that subject* (London, 1800), 13-15.

Third, both men wanted to ensure that the final monumental project was durable enough to stand the test of time. Dufour and Flaxman each devoted substantial consideration to the issue of iconoclasm, whether or not a form could be pushed over or otherwise destroyed by vandals. Both men agreed that it was of the utmost importance that Clarence's committee should spare no expense in securing high-quality materials and labor for the project.

The contentious retort issued by Dufour, while certainly meant to sway readers away from Flaxman's proposal, argued for the primacy of architectural forms over sculptural forms as they applied to commemorative efforts. The architect, contrary to Flaxman, believed that the new commemorative language should be based not in the "imitative" discipline of sculpture, but in the generative language of the built environment. The issues highlighted in the Flaxman / Dufour debate over the formal language of a national monument would become central themes for West as he designed his monument to Nelson for Greenwich Hospital.

The fiery debate over the Naval Pillar project – and the attendant conversations revolving around the use of ancient forms for contemporary commemorative purposes – was stoked in 1801 by the arrival of the first shipment of a group of antiquities brought to London by Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin.¹³⁴ His collection, colloquially

¹³⁴ Bruce departed London as British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in 1799 with the partial goal of collecting antiquities to be used as models for artistic practice in Britain. The so-called "Elgin Marbles" were shipped to London between 1801 and 1811. For a detailed report on the shipments, see the *Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Sculptured Marbles; &c.* (London, 1816), 8.

known as the “Elgin Marbles,” included fifteen metopes, seventeen pedimental fragments, and approximately half of the Parthenon’s frieze, as well as architectural sketches and casts from some of the ancient world’s most storied sculptures. In 1807, the fragments already located in London were installed in a shed on the grounds of a house Elgin had leased at the corner of Park Lane and Piccadilly.¹³⁵

Elgin invited eminent artists to study from his antiquities before they were available to the general public, and West had visited these objects at least once by March 1808. According to Farington, West thought that Elgin’s collection consisted of “sublime specimens of the purest sculpture,” and “when summer arrives [West meant] to devote much time to study from them. He sd. that this He wd. do though in His 70th year & had on this acct. a wish to be again only 20 years of age & that He might labour to profit by them.”¹³⁶

Moreover, West explicitly lent his support to Elgin’s efforts to keep the ancient sculptures in England. Elgin’s enterprise was (and today remains) controversial. In an effort to spur support for the project and lobby for the British government’s purchase of the marbles, William Richard Hamilton published the *Memorandum on the subject*

¹³⁵ The Elgin Marbles remained at this location until 1811, at which point they were transported to Burlington House. In 1816, they were purchased by the British government and deposited at the British Museum. See Allen Staley and Helmut von Erffa, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 439.

¹³⁶ Farington, *Diary*, March 30, 1808.

of the Earl of Elgin's pursuits in Greece in 1811.¹³⁷ The publication's narrative was bolstered by a number of appendices, the first of which, notably, contained two letters from Benjamin West in support of Bruce's efforts.

Art historian Alex Potts has suggested that the neoclassical aesthetics promoted by leading academicians at the Royal Academy around the turn of the nineteenth century were thrown into flux by the arrival of the Parthenon marbles.¹³⁸ In fact, the historical record indicates that West used Elgin's antiquities as inspiration for a number of his nineteenth-century neoclassical canvases. Writing about his efforts to develop compositions such as *Theseus and Hercules in Triumph over the Amazons* (1808) and *Neptune and Amphitrite* (1808), West commented:

In order to render the subjects which I selected, with perspicuity, and the effect, which arises from combined parts and the order of arrangements, comprehensive, I have ventured to unite figures of my own invention with those of Phidias; but as I have endeavored to preserve, with the best force of my abilities, the style of Phidias, I flatter myself, the union will not be deemed incongruous or presumptuous. Your Lordship may perhaps be inclined to think with me, that a point, and, if I may so express it, a kind of climax, is thus given to those works; by the union of those detached figures, with the

¹³⁷ Hamilton published a second expanded and "corrected" version in 1815. See William Richard Hamilton, *Memorandum on the subject of the Earl of Elgin's pursuits in Greece* (London, 1815).

¹³⁸ Alex Potts, "The impossible ideal: Romantic conceptions of the Parthenon sculptures in early nineteenth-century Britain and Germany," in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101-122.

incorporation of the parts of individual grandeur, and abstracted excellence of Phidias.¹³⁹

In March 1811 West again praised the marbles for their potential value for the arts in Britain: “Had I been blessed with seeing and studying these emanations of genius at an earlier period of life, the sentiment of their pre-eminence would have animated all my exertions; and more character, and expression, and life, would have pervaded all my humble attempts in Historical Painting.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, West’s detractors had long criticized the wooden, awkwardly lifeless figures in his “Epic” compositions. Scholars have suggested that the artist’s apparent inability to convey convincingly lifelike forms within the two-dimensional realm of the canvas may have stemmed from his limited early exposure to classical models and formal anatomical instruction during the course of his ad hoc artistic training in the British colonies. Hamilton’s *Memorandum* ultimately provided a strong, legible case for the British government’s purchase and retention of Elgin’s antiquities for the advancement of artistic industry in Britain. West’s earnest endorsement of their value was an important footnote to Hamilton’s argument.

¹³⁹ William Richard Hamilton, *Memorandum of the Subject of the Earl of Elgin’s Pursuits in Greece* (London, 1811), Appendix A, “Benjamin West, Esq., to the Earl of Elgin, London, Newman Street, Feb. 6, 1809,” 50.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53-56.

Memorial Mania

The debate over the Duke's naval pillar project and the arrival of Elgin's collection of antique marbles and casts would have been fresh in the minds of academicians when Nelson was fatally wounded at the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. With the addition of a publicly adored naval warrior-hero to the pantheon of contemporary British worthies, artists who had previously devoted their energies to the development of a "general" monument to naval prowess could now bestow their full attention to commemorating and concretizing Nelson's legacy in visual terms.

While the majority of memorials erected to Nelson's memory were financed via private subscription, three were put up at governmental expense: James Smith II's monument at the Guildhall (executed between 1806 and 1810, funded by the City of London); John Flaxman's memorial at St. Paul's Cathedral (executed between 1808 and 1818, funded by Parliament); and Benjamin West's *Grand Model of Neptune* at Greenwich's Royal Naval Hospital (executed between 1810 and 1812, funded by the hospital commissioners).¹⁴¹ The first of these, Smith's *Metropolitan Monument in gratitude and honour to the transcendent merits and services of the heroic Nelson*, was executed in stone and marble between 1806 and 1810 for the City of London's

¹⁴¹ Czisnik, "Representations of a Hero," 271. Czisnik notes that local subscription projects – rather than national subscription projects – might have been favored because "local monuments in the provinces appealed more to those living outside London, because [residents] could enjoy the result more directly."

Guildhall at a total cost of approximately £4443. It was, by most accounts, a critical failure (fig. 3.4).

The central portion of Smith's monument presents an allegorical figure of the City of London raising a tablet inscribed with the locations of Nelson's three most notable battles: the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar. To her left, a seated Britannia mourns while cradling a medallion emblazoned with Nelson's profile in her lap. A somber British lion with downcast eyes guards Britannia. Situated across the front edge of the composition is a recumbent Neptune, god of the seas. Neptune clutches a trident, and his right side is flanked by attributes including a canon and the large head of a fish. The background of the composition is filled out with four limp standards. The monument is elevated on a hulking base. The center panel of the base includes an epitaph by playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) situated above an elaborate rendering of the Battle of Trafalgar in bas-relief. Flanking the central panel are two niches, each containing a bare-chested seaman or marine in contemporary trousers.¹⁴²

While reviewers took issue with many aspects of the monument's composition (some suggested that the overwhelming number of attributes drew too much attention away from Nelson, while others lamented the odd effect achieved by the prominent posterior of the figure representing the City of London), Smith's critics were

¹⁴² Nicholas Penny, "'Amor Publicus Posuit': Monuments for the People and of the People," *The Burlington Magazine* 129:1017 (1987): 793-800. Penny has posited that Smith may have taken the idea of the flanking "common seamen" from West's 1807 *Project for a Monument to Nelson*; p. 798, footnote 32.

universally most displeased about the inconsequential role that the likeness of Nelson played as a part of the larger composition.¹⁴³ Following the monument's unveiling in 1811, the London *Times* allowed that "perhaps, by some strange error, economy, for which the City is certainly not proverbial, may have stepped in, and checked the artist's hand," and followed by wishing that "at least, the bust, but, perhaps, even the statue of the hero, should have graced his public monument."¹⁴⁴ This was the most gracious explication of the work. The description of the monument included in *A Brief Account of the Guildhall of the City of London* (1819) suggested, "It is much to be regretted that there is not a more prominent representation of the Hero. The medallion is by no means satisfactory, and is placed as to be invisible from the dust which falls upon it."¹⁴⁵ The monument's reputation did not seem to improve with the passage of time, either. In 1878, Walter Thornbury wrote the following searing description of Smith's project:

Nelson's fame is very imperfectly honoured by a pile of allegory... This deplorable mass of stone consists of a huge figure of Neptune looking at Britannia, who is mournfully contemplating a very small profile relief of the departed hero, on a small dusty medallion about the size of a maid-servant's locket. To crown all this tame stuff there are some flags and trophies, and a pyramid, on which the City of London is

¹⁴³ Flaxman visited Farington and relayed a conversation regarding Smith's artistic training and ability. This conversation sheds some light on the relative inexperience of Smith at this point in his career. For more information, see Farington, *Diary*, May 14, 1806.

¹⁴⁴ *The Times* (London), May 2, 1811.

¹⁴⁵ *A Brief Account of the Guildhall of the City of London* (London, 1819), 20.

writing the words “Nile, Copenhagen, Trafalgar”... At the base of this absurd monument two sailors watch over a bas-relief of the Battle of Trafalgar, which certainly no one of taste would steal.¹⁴⁶

The critical reviews of Smith’s *Metropolitan Monument* touched on an important theme that Sir Joshua Reynolds had addressed in his fourth *Discourse*: by including too many “peculiarities” in the form of attributes and allegorical figures and not enough of Nelson’s physical *likeness*, Smith had failed to convey enough of an idea of the Admiral’s legacy on earth.¹⁴⁷ These appraisals also tell us a great deal about what the critics wanted – or perhaps expected – to see in a monument dedicated to a contemporary hero: namely, a figural manifestation of the deceased that was grand enough to stand in for the man himself.

Perhaps because of the ardent criticisms lobbed at the sculpture its identity was altered in engravings created after the monument’s erection so that it would look more like a traditional sepulchral monument (fig. 3.5). While Smith’s sprawling composition gave viewers a sense that the mournful activity was occurring within the space of an elaborate stage set, the print after the monument increased the proportions of the tablet so much that it became the unifying focus of and frame for the allegorical scheme. While the print included the three central figures (Britannia, Neptune, and the

¹⁴⁶ Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London: A Narrative of its History, its People, and its Places* (London: 1878).

¹⁴⁷ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1975), 169-171.

City of London), it repositioned them in a tighter, more cohesive space. In addition, the print relocated the bas-relief portrait medallion of Nelson from its position in Britannia's lap (where it seemed to gaze toward the ceiling of the Guildhall) to a prominent position at the center of the allegorical group, reorienting its gaze out toward the viewer.

The disjointedness of Smith's *Metropolitan Monument* is useful for understanding West's pediment because it demonstrates the transition from the sorts of private funerary monuments that proliferated in Britain during the eighteenth century to a new engagement with public monuments that William Wood's *ESSAY on NATIONAL and SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS* promoted. Joan Coutu has argued that, up until the second half of the eighteenth century at least, most funeral monuments were fueled by a preoccupation with personal pedigree rather than a desire to align with nationalistic or imperialistic ideologies.¹⁴⁸

There were important exceptions to Coutu's argument, of course, most notably Joseph Wilton's monument to Wolfe at Westminster Abbey. Both Wolfe and Nelson were regarded as national martyrs. Both monuments pay homage to the deceased hero through a combination of recognizable, classical tropes and contemporary narrative details. In addition, both monuments are situated atop hulking bases that provide important context related to the death of the hero: Wilton's monument to Wolfe is accentuated by a lead relief of the Battle of Quebec, whereas Smith's monument to

¹⁴⁸ Joan Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda*, 11.

Nelson is grounded by a stone relief of the Battle of Trafalgar. Moreover, both Wilton and Smith included figures in their composition who represented the everymen under the direction of Wolfe and Nelson. Smith's design, much like Wilton's, unabashedly declared that Nelson's death was not merely an "individual" loss. It was a matter of concern for the soldiers and sailors pictured – and for the public at large. After all, Nelson served and died for the nation. In Smith's design, Britannia cried "tears of national gratitude."¹⁴⁹ West would employ the same approach as he conceptualized the message of the *Grand Model of Neptune*, but as we will see he would plan his pediment so that it bypassed the design flaws of the *Metropolitan Monument*.

Where James Smith's public monument to Nelson failed to present a "prominent representation of the Hero," John Flaxman succeeded. On November 22, 1805, less than two weeks before Alderman Boydell would advertise the print competition to honor Nelson (discussed in the previous chapter), the London *Times* posted "a subscription for erecting a NAVAL PILLAR, STATUE, or some other PUBLIC MONUMENT... to the memory of the ever-to-be-honoured and lamented Vice Admiral LORD VISCOUNT NELSON."¹⁵⁰ These announcements for sculptures, prints, and paintings must have reminded painters *and* sculptors that there were opportunities to profit by visualizing Nelson's death. The monument competition was not unlike the Duke of Clarence's project for a naval pillar in that it would be

¹⁴⁹ Wood, *An ESSAY on NATIONAL and SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS*, 7.

¹⁵⁰ *The Times* (London), November 22, 1805.

presided over by a group of influential public figures and Royal Academicians known as the Committee of Taste and funded by private subscriptions. The competition for a monument to Nelson differed from the Duke's project, however, in that the Committee quickly determined that the monument would be located within the space of St. Paul's Cathedral. This designation discouraged artists from submitting the sorts of "colossal," prohibitively expensive monuments that had ultimately led to the failure and dissolution of the Duke's naval pillar project. By March 1806 (a little over three months after the initial call for submissions ran in *The Times*), at least "twenty seven or eight models" had been presented to the committee for review.¹⁵¹ The following month, Sir George Beaumont visited Farington and reported that the committee had granted the commission to Flaxman, giving "preference to one which for simplicity and true Sculptural character, was manifestly superior to the others."¹⁵²

Executed between 1808 and 1818 for St. Paul's Cathedral, Flaxman's *Monument to the Memory of Lord Nelson* was a life-size portrait sculpture of the warrior-hero (fig. 3.6). Nelson's likeness stands tall and proud atop a cylindrical pedestal decorated with bas-reliefs of four river gods. The pedestal is flanked on the right by a crouching British lion and on the left by a standing figure of Britannia who reaches up to grasp the tails of Nelson's overcoat while ushering two young boys to pay their respects. A broad plinth, incised with a brief account of the Admiral's

¹⁵¹ Farington, *Diary*, March 12, 1806.

¹⁵² Farington, *Diary*, April 19, 1806.

achievements, grounds and unifies the tight composition. Flaxman's monument engaged with many of the same classical and allegorical tropes that Smith had built into his "pile of allegory" at the Guildhall, but it did so in a more critically successful way.¹⁵³

German sculptor Ludwig Schorn recorded his impressions of the sculpture in 1827 after a visit to the church:

...Against one of the great pillars which separate the cathedral from the choir, I found the monument to Lord Nelson, likewise fashioned by Flaxman, a work of exceptional greatness and splendor and quite in keeping with the style that the English follow above all in the ordering of their funerary monuments, only that the artist has made as evident as possible the purity of his purpose shaped by antiquity, and the nobility of forms which he learnt from there... Here the sea hero is sat on a high pedestal leaning on an anchor in the costume of his time, dressed in the fur he received from the Grand Commander. Somewhat lower down to his right Britannia, a tall figure similar to the war-like Minerva, is leading two young mariners up to Nelson, their great exemplar. On the other side the British lion lies as a symbol and also as guardian of the monument. At the base on the plinth sit four figures representing the North Sea, the German Sea, the Nile and the Mediterranean, and on the cornice the words Copenhagen, Nile, and Trafalgar are carved.¹⁵⁴

This commentary provides a reasonably objective reading of the composition and raises some interesting points. Schorn perceived Flaxman's composition as typical of

¹⁵³ On March 14, 1807, the committee decided that Flaxman would execute the monument to Nelson at St. Paul's. For more information see Farington, *Diary*, March 16, 1807.

¹⁵⁴ For more on Ludwig Schorn's visit to London see David Bindman, *John Flaxman* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 30.

an English funerary monument. One reason for this may be that Nelson's body had been interred in the crypt at St. Paul's following his state funeral in 1805; even though the monument was not placed directly over Nelson's tomb, the association of St. Paul's with his funeral and subsequent interment may have lent Flaxman's monument a sepulchral connotation in Schorn's mind.

The German tourist may have also noted that Flaxman's monument looked a lot like the other secular monuments to deceased public figures that filled the niches and lined the walls of the cathedral's interior. Flaxman designed his monument to Nelson to accord visually with existing memorials at St. Paul's to Sir William Jones (John Bacon the Elder, 1799); Charles, Marquess Cornwallis (John Charles Rossi, 1807); and Captain George Nicholas Hardinge (Charles Manning, after 1808).¹⁵⁵ All of these monuments relied on *figural* likenesses of the deceased to convey their stories. Flaxman's design was reverential to Nelson's memory and clear in its narrative, a secular memorial assigned to a religious context.

And what of Flaxman's full-size, standing figure of Nelson? Schorn's commentary reminded readers that Nelson was dressed in "the costume of his time." If we consider the Royal Academy's promotion of the genre of history painting early in its formation, as well as West's arguments for the use of contemporary costume as they applied to James Wolfe and other modern military heroes, then the juxtaposition of a contemporary-looking representation of Nelson alongside classicizing, allegorical

¹⁵⁵ Coutu, *Persuasion and Proaganda*, 292-294.

motifs comes as no surprise. Flaxman's design would have drawn from sculptures that included contemporary costumes like Wilton's monument to Wolfe at Westminster (1773) or Rossi's monument to Charles, Marquess Cornwallis at St. Paul's (1807).

Evidence suggests that Flaxman may have struggled to strike a correct balance between his preferred mode of classical perfection (as embodied in the *Apollo Belvedere*) and the historically correct, physical reality of Nelson's person. A preliminary sketch of Flaxman's Nelson composition has the same overall feeling of the finished monument: a broad, rectangular base supports a cylindrical pedestal, on top of which a standing figure of Nelson is flanked by a selection of naval attributes and allegorical figures of Britannia and the City of London (which would be replaced, in the final composition, by a crouching British lion) (fig. 3.7). A major difference between Flaxman's preliminary sketch and the finished monument revolved around the historical idealization of Nelson's right arm, which had been lost at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797. The sketch presented the Admiral with all limbs intact; Nelson's figure stands tall and employs his right arm to support himself on Britannia's shoulder. The finished monument for St. Paul's, however, did away with the arm entirely. The sacrifices that Nelson made for his country – ranging from the amputation of his arm to the loss of his sight in one eye to his final demise via a sniper's bullet at the Battle of Trafalgar – were as important a part of his legacy as the victories he helped secure during his service in the Royal Navy. In some ways, Nelson's absent arm encouraged the same sort of sympathetic reflection in Flaxman's statue as Wolfe's nudity conferred in Wilton's monument. In an effort to make the

final composition less jarring for viewers, Flaxman arranged the Admiral's greatcoat over his shoulders, achieving an effect not unlike that of classical drapery.

Flaxman's monument did not inspire the outspoken, searing criticisms that afflicted James Smith's *Metropolitan Monument* at the Guildhall. The sheer conventionalism of Flaxman's monument may explain its agreeable reception. Its design was familiar, its material was traditional, and its location already suited to memorial sculpture. Further, the sculpture took a relatively long time to complete; Nelson died in 1805, Flaxman secured the commission for St. Paul's in 1806, and executed the monument between 1808 and 1818. By the time it was finally unveiled, the mania for all things Nelson that had swept the country during the previous decade had largely subsided.

However, there was one aspect of both Smith *and* Flaxman's memorials that infuriated the very public to whom these monuments were meant to speak most directly: the common sailor. While the monuments at the Guildhall and St. Paul's were ostensibly funded by the government and *intended* for the public, they were both situated in buildings that levied admission fees. Assessing the rise of the public monument in Britain, Nicholas Penny has suggested it was hoped that "common soldiers and sailors would come to St. Paul's and imitate the grief and homage of their marble counterparts... and there was considerable indignation that the fees charged by [St. Paul's staff] made such visits improbable."¹⁵⁶ Not only would a sailor have to ante

¹⁵⁶ Penny, "Amor Publicus Posuit," 798.

up several pence to pay homage to Nelson's memory in these spaces, he would have to travel to these sites. This is especially notable because there was a critical mass of retired naval officers – many physically crippled from their service – living just downriver from London at the Royal Naval Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich. How would these men, especially those who lived as pensioners and were confined to the grounds of the hospital, negotiate the distance between their residence and the Guildhall or St. Paul's? Even if they could arrange for travel and afford the admission fees, would these servicemen feel at ease in the privileged spaces of the Guildhall or St. Paul's?

This indignation was expressed in a satirical print published in 1805 by William Holland entitled, *The sailor's monument – to the memory of Lord Nelson* (fig. 3.8). Holland's etching depicts Jack, a disgruntled-looking sailor with crossed arms and a ruddy scowl, contemplating a homemade monument to Nelson that he has erected in his garden. The upper left corner of the composition is filled with a short description of the scene:

I'll be no 'Towpenny Customer at St. Paul's!
This shall be poor Jack's Monument, in his
little Garden, to his Noble Companion –
first of all is my Sea Chest, in memory
of the many Voyages Thou had with
his Honor – on it I have chalk'd a
Text from Scripture suitable to the
occasion – then comes two Cogs of
Grog in memory of his noble Spirit –
then two Hangers in memory of his
gallant bravery – then his uniform Hat,
which reminds me of the Nile, Copenha-
gen, and Trafalgar, - and above all is

the figure of an **Englishman's Heart**,
hung with black Crape [sic].

As described, a sea chest serves as the monument's "plinth," inscribed with a verse from Revelation, chapter eight, verse nine: "And a third part of their ships were destroyed." This passage carried several layers of meaning for Holland's audience. Some might recall that the biblical passage referenced the rapture, a time when the Nile River would run red with blood. Nelson's fame was built, in part, on his strategic victory over Napoleon's forces at the Battle of the Nile, and period readers might have drawn this connection when viewing Holland's print. The passage also may have reminded readers of the Battle of Trafalgar – the skirmish that cost Nelson his life – as the Royal Navy managed to regain Cadiz with only eleven ships remaining from the original fleet of thirty-three. The sea chest supports two wooden barrels, which in turn hold up a pair of sheathed swords topped with an Admiral's hat. Framing the ad hoc assemblage, a crepe swag and heart-shaped emblem hang from the branches of a willow tree forming the right side of the compositional frame; the willow tree, monument, and scowling figure echo the tropes of early-nineteenth-century mourning prints. Black crepe was routinely found all around memorial sculpture in parish churches in England and on the continent. A scroll along the bottom edge of the etching drives Holland's message home for viewers: "Every person who wishes to see

the Monuments in St. Paul's must pay Twopence!! Sailors should have free admission."¹⁵⁷

Holland's homemade monument bore a striking formal similarity to Flaxman's memorial to Nelson at St. Paul's: the sea chest matches the inscribed plinth; the barrels echo the cylindrical shape of the column supporting Nelson; a head, torso, and legs are conjured metonymically through a hat, swords, and a heart. The only thing missing from Holland's monument was a body. This purposeful omission of a human *figure* is especially interesting given the deliberation between Flaxman and Dufour concerning the use of sculpture versus architecture that had played out a mere five years prior. That a popular audience would quickly understand Holland's joke speaks to the public nature and widespread resonance of this debate.

Holland's print satirized the formal conventions and ideological presumptions of the memorial mania that consumed London during the early years of the nineteenth century. Monuments followed strict formal conventions set out and mediated by Academicians, artists, connoisseurs, collectors, and critics alike. These conventions were so familiar to audiences that ordinary things like chests and barrels could stand in for elements like plinths and columns. The inexpensive ubiquity of these objects contrasted with the costly reality of erecting marble monuments like the Duke of Clarence's "Grand Naval Pillar" at enormous public expense. In addition to its

¹⁵⁷ British Museum online catalog, entry for "The sailor's monument – to the memory of Lord Nelson," accession no. AN93636001. The text appears bold in the original.

commonplace components, Holland's monument occupied a particularly pedestrian site. Tributes to public heroes were traditionally sited in significant public spaces or grand cathedrals like St. Paul's Cathedral – not in the private plot of a commoner's garden.

By depicting a sailor who has erected his own monument to Nelson, Holland's image also commented on the authority of the sculptor as artist and on the authority of the connoisseur as critic. Jack Sailor's red and white striped trousers, blue jacket, and ribbon-trimmed hat are wrinkled and worn, and they would have contrasted with the fine clothing of an aspiring (or established) artist. Further, the sailor's ruddy, upturned scowl and folded arms mimic the role of the connoisseur as he reflects on the ad hoc memorial. The appearance of this common seaman, however, was worlds away from that of a revered connoisseur like Charles Townley or a well-known dealer of antiquities like Gavin Hamilton. By satirizing the roles of the sculptor and the connoisseur, Holland's print raised questions about the production, presentation, and reception of sculpture. These concerns about form, audience, and access would prove just as important to the location and experience of Benjamin West's Greenwich pediment. Indeed, while James Smith was executing his monument for the Guildhall (1806-1810), and John Flaxman was occupied with his designs for the commission at St. Paul's (1808-1818), West was cooking up his own memorial to Nelson's memory.

The Greenwich Commission

The 1805 competition for a monument commemorating Nelson at St. Paul's encouraged Benjamin West to consider his emergent ideas about figural representation and classical models alongside the demands of modern commemorative practice. His *Project for a Monument / The Apotheosis of Nelson* (1807), discussed in chapter two, was the first step in this process. Its failure, however, may have been what spurred the artist to conceptualize a new sort of memorial to commemorate Britain's latest, greatest hero. In early August 1810, West sent a letter to John Dyer, the Secretary of the Royal Hospital for Seamen at Greenwich, containing a description and preliminary sketch of his proposed pediment to Horatio Nelson for Greenwich Hospital.

The subject of the drawing which will accompany this letter – includes the most distinguished Naval Victories of Lord Nelson – they are brought into one composition; and from which it is the intention of the Board in Greenwich Hospital to have it executed in artificial Stone, for one of the Pediments on the front of their Hospital. This design being the most extensive in the number of figures, as well as magnitude, will be the most expensive to the Board of any they may erect: Mr. Seeley and myself have therefore, agreeable to what was requested, made a rough calculation of its expense. The Pediment on which this composition is intended to be placed – is more than forty feet in length, by ten in height – and the figures most conspicuous, will be in size, from Eight feet, to Eight and a half in height – the other figures will be reduced in size agreeable to the station they hold in composition with respect to the other groups; and the expense by our rough calculation will be from one thousand – to twelve hundred pounds – the other designs would be reduced in expense, in proportion as they diminish in size... If any gentleman of the Board of Admiralty would wish to see me, I will have the honour to wait on him at any hour he may mention for his further information on the subject of ornamenting the several Pediments on the Fronts of Greenwich

Hospital, which may be in my power to communicate to him on that subject –¹⁵⁸

This letter indicates that West was well along in his plans to erect a memorial honoring Nelson at Greenwich by the fall of 1810. That the proposed design would be “the most expensive to the Board of any they may erect” may be an indication that some of the pediment’s component parts could be removed from the overall composition in the event that the Board wanted to cut costs; the ideal composition with all of the bells and whistles would still be set at the attractive figure of just one thousand to twelve hundred pounds.

West’s invitation to the Board of Admiralty to discuss “information on the subject of ornamenting the several Pediments on the Fronts of Greenwich Hospital” is significant as well. While they were never erected, West completed two additional sketches for memorial pediments to naval heroes. These proposed pediments honor Richard Howe, First Earl Howe (1726-1799) and Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney (1719-1792), and they combine allegorical and contemporary historical elements that are in keeping with the Nelson pediment as well as West’s work in history painting (figs. 3.9-3.10). All three compositions include an allegorical depiction of apotheosis as well as symbols like the British lion and laurels of victory. The sketches for memorials to Rodney and Howe present their protagonists in contemporary uniform, much as West’s heroes are visualized in his history paintings. The Howe proposal

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Benjamin West to “Mr. Dyer,” August 8, 1810. Transcript located in HSP collection 3000 (the Staley / von Erffa Papers), box 33, folder 15.

even includes a figural group with a crouching Native American, similar to the Mohawk man depicted in the left foreground of *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770). Contemporary costumes and details like these, drawn from the North American landscape, had helped West establish his name as a painter. Here, perhaps, he hoped these devices would cement his name as a sculptor.

The fact that West explicitly designed pediments – rather than freestanding memorial figures or pillars – is important for understanding how the second President of the Royal Academy contributed to early nineteenth-century sculptural practice in Britain. While decorated pediments are relatively common in cities today, this was not the case in early-nineteenth-century London. In fact, West had only a handful of significant precedents to guide his designs for the Nelson, Rodney, and Howe memorials. Joshua Marshall had executed two allegorical pediments, one of Fortitude and Dominion of the Sea, and another of Mars and Fame, for empty tympanums at Greenwich Palace during the 1660s (figs. 3.11-3.12). Francis Bird designed a Biblical relief, *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1706), for the tympanum at St. Paul’s Cathedral (fig. 3.13). And Sir Robert Taylor was selected to design the pediment for the City of London’s Mansion House. Taylor’s relief, *The City of London trampling Envy and receiving the benefits of Plenty brought to London by the River Thames* (1744-45), was situated at the busy intersection of Cornhill and Lombard Streets and was frequently included in period renderings of Mansion House (fig. 3.14). West would have also been aware of John Bacon’s design for the pediment of the portico to the East India House (fig. 3.15). Bacon’s pediment, now demolished, was executed

between 1793 and 1811, and would have been nearing completion as West designed the Nelson pediment for Greenwich Hospital. While these pediments may have influenced West, however, they were entirely allegorical; West, by contrast, departing from convention, added recognizable, contemporary public figures to his designs for “several Pediments on the Fronts of Greenwich Hospital.”¹⁵⁹

Modern likenesses and costumes were not West’s only departures. The earlier pediments were all painstakingly carved from costly white marble. West’s letter to Dyer reveals that he had decided to contract the manufacture of his pediment’s components to the modelers at Coade and Sealey’s Artificial Stone Factory in Lambeth. Coade’s production methods would have easily accommodated any last-minute changes to West’s overall design per the Committee’s preference. While the artist’s choice to use Coade stone will be examined more closely in chapter four, here it is important to note that West’s calculated decision to employ this composite material as the primary medium for the pediment had a direct impact on both the cost of the project and the speed with which the memorial could be driven to completion. James Smith’s “deplorable mass of stone” for the Guildhall had cost more than four thousand four hundred pounds and required upwards of four years to complete. Smith’s was a relatively modest proposal, however, when compared to other bids for monumental projects during the period. In 1799, Flaxman estimated the cost for his

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Benjamin West to “Mr. Dyer,” August 8, 1810. Transcript located in HSP collection 3000 (the Staley / von Erffa Papers), box 33, folder 15.

proposed colossal figure of *Britannia Triumphant* at fifty thousand to seventy thousand pounds. Further, the figure and its massive pedestal would have required at least ten years to execute in marble.¹⁶⁰ Robert Smirke's 1817 proposal for a monument to the Battle of Trafalgar for Greenwich Hill would have required almost one hundred ten thousand pounds, not to mention six or seven years of labor. Even grander, another design by Smirke for a monument commemorating the Battle of Waterloo might have cost as much as one hundred sixty thousand pounds.¹⁶¹ West even remarked that if his proposed monument to Nelson were to be carried out in marble, it would have cost fifteen thousand pounds and required approximately fifteen years to complete.¹⁶² When compared to these figures, West's estimates for construction costs ranging between one thousand and twelve hundred pounds must have looked like a bargain to the Greenwich Hospital Board.

While there is scant documentary evidence in the public record, the board must have approved of West's proposal and given the go-ahead for the pediment's execution, for in November 1811, West published a report on the pediment's progress in *Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine*. The piece acted as a teaser, providing a detailed narrative of the composition, a commentary on the durability and ingenuity of

¹⁶⁰ Farington, *Diary*, December 24, 1799.

¹⁶¹ Farington, *Diary*, May 10, 1817.

¹⁶² "Monument to Lord Nelson," *La Belle Assemblée: or Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* (1811): 231, <http://search.proquest.com.udel.idm.oclc.org>.

its Coade stone body, and a promise that the entire project would not take more than eighteen months to complete.¹⁶³ This may have been a conservative estimate. Later that month, Farington received a visit from the seventy-four year-old artist. West, he wrote,

...looked ill and told me He had been confined to His Chamber for some days, which had been ascribed to a Cold, “but,” said He, “the truth is it is the effect of over application. Having had to superintend the progress of the work carrying on at Coade’s Manufactory, to commemorate Lord Nelson, from my designs for Greenwich Hospital I have applied too much, & thinking a week of such application wd. complete my part of the business I exerted myself till I could do so no longer, having applied by night and by day.¹⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the pediment was completed and unveiled in November 1812. A small announcement in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* tempted readers:

A magnificent monument, in honour of Lord Nelson, has been erected in one of the squares of Greenwich Hospital. The statue of the hero is in a recumbent position, and surrounded by emblematic figures of the United Countries mourning his loss, and a great number of rich corresponding ornaments and devices.¹⁶⁵

West’s *Grand Model of Neptune* was indeed a magnificent monument.

Overlooking the interior courtyard of the King William Block at the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich (figs. 3.16-3.25), the pediment occupied a broad triangular

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Farington, *Diary*, November 20, 1811.

¹⁶⁵ “Domestic Occurrences,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (November 1812): 490, accessed via ECCO / British Periodicals.

space approximately ten feet high by forty feet long and presented viewers with the grand scene of Horatio Nelson's apotheosis. The sculpted narrative exuded neoclassical reserve and might have astonished spectators by its similarities to Elgin's famous collection of marble sculptures and plaster casts. With its mix of classical allegory, religious references, and "peculiarities" like contemporary artillery and storm-tossed ships, the pediment managed to exploit the measured rhythms of the Parthenon's friezes and sculptural forms while simultaneously conveying the dynamic energy that would come to infuse some of West's late, Romantic history paintings.

The pediment's central vignette depicts Britannia receiving Nelson's corpse (fig. 3.16). Holding a trident, she wears the classical helmet of Athena, Greek goddess of war. Britannia is dressed in a classical *peplos*, cinched below her breasts and clasped at her shoulders. The garment falls to her ankles, just revealing her sandal-clad feet and bare toes. With the assistance of a common seaman and a winged Victory, Britannia supports the world-weary body of the deceased hero in her arms. Nelson's foreshortened, nude form is partially covered by a flowing drape that serves a triple purpose: the material modestly covers the Admiral's genital area and muddles the visual space where Nelson's right arm should be, while lending the composition a sense of unifying, classical timelessness.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ West was considering a similar compromise that mediated modern dress and classical drapery in his proposal for the Howe pediment.

By rendering Nelson's likeness in this manner, it is clear that West was negotiating the formal challenges posed by the inclusion of realistic physical details and contemporary costume. While Nelson's pictorial identity had already been established via the medium of history painting, his likeness presented two formal hurdles for sculptors working in the neoclassical tradition. The first point of contention revolved around what the Admiral should wear. Artists like Arthur William Devis and Benjamin West had gone to great lengths to clothe Nelson in doggedly precise contemporary uniforms in their paintings and prints. But painting a hero in contemporary costume was quite a different thing from sculpting that hero in three-dimensional contemporary costume. In his tenth *Discourse* (1780), Reynolds put forward strong opinions concerning the sartorial aspects of statuary:

Working in stone is a very serious business; and it seems to be scarce worth while to employ such durable materials in conveying to posterity a fashion of which the longest existence scarce exceeds a year.

However agreeable it may be to the Antiquary's principles of equity and gratitude, that as he has received great pleasure from the contemplation of the fashions of Dress of former ages, he wishes to give the same satisfaction to future Antiquaries; yet, methinks pictures of an inferior style, or prints, may be considered as quite sufficient, without prostituting this great art to such mean purposes.¹⁶⁷

By the time Reynolds delivered this lecture, however, it is clear that the sartorial standards for sculpture were tenuously evolving alongside those of contemporary

¹⁶⁷ Reynolds, *Discourses*, 187.

history painting. Wilton's *Monument to Major General James Wolfe* (unveiled 1773) at Westminster Abbey included two representations of Highland Grenadiers in eighteenth-century uniforms supporting a portrait-sculpture of Wolfe stripped of his shirt and stockings. Flaxman's design for the *Monument to Lord Nelson* at St. Paul's ignored Reynolds' suggestions outright by presenting the Admiral in full naval uniform. While West's designs for monumental pediments honoring Howe and Rodney integrated modern costumes, his *Grand Model of Neptune* followed Wilton's example by presenting Nelson as a sympathetic, nude figure.¹⁶⁸ Nelson's limping, reclining body called to mind Renaissance paintings and sculptures of lamentation like Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1435), Michelangelo's *Pieta* (1498-1499), and Rubens' *Deposition* (1602). The pediment's allusions to these Christian themes reminded period viewers that Nelson died in service, as a martyr, for *Britain's* cause.

Nelson's missing right arm posed additional aesthetic and practical challenges for sculptors. Smith, Flaxman, and West all struggled with how best to represent the Admiral in ways that would not detract from the idealization expected of a public monument. Indeed, this corporeal deficiency may have been one reason that Smith represented Nelson as a medallion portrait relief, thereby evading altogether the dilemma of a missing arm. Flaxman may have struggled with this as well. Early

¹⁶⁸ For more on sympathetic nudity see Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War: Allegiance and Autonomy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 112-113.

sketches for the monument at St. Paul's employ Nelson's right arm (positioned with his elbow bent and hand on his waist) as a support for the figure of the hero (fig. 3.7), but audiences may have found fault with Flaxman's departure from truth had he included the appendage in the final monument, for Nelson's missing arm was part of his public mythology. West's *Grand Model of Neptune* was not a free-standing figural portrait sculpture, so many of the structural concerns that applied to Flaxman's composition were non-issues for West. But navigating how to represent that missing arm was still a difficult task. Rather than obscuring where the pediment's classical drapery meets Nelson's damaged upper body with tailored clothing or a maritime attribute, West situated Nelson's shoulder proudly atop a sea of classicizing drapery (fig. 3.17). West has made no real effort to hide the missing limb, instead choosing to fill the space with light- and shadow-catching folds of imaginary cloth, eliding the absence of the arm.

Below and to the left of the dramatic, central vignette, mythological denizens of the sea pay their respects to Nelson (fig. 3.18). Neptune looks out toward the courtyard below while gesturing toward Britannia with broadly open arms, relinquishing his trident. Another river god, situated just beneath Neptune with his back turned toward the viewer, gazes up at the scene as the river god's curling, scale-covered tail threatens to flop out of the pedimental frame. The left corner of the triangular composition contains bas-reliefs of four writhing horse heads and a small flotilla of war ships in various stages of sinking or burning (figs. 3.19-3.20). Hovering above the action is a seemingly disembodied portrait relief of West himself (fig. 3.21).

A pair of hands – perhaps meant to correspond with West’s portrait – support a plaque incised with the inscription “Trafalgar MDCCCXV” (the date and location of the battle during which Nelson was mortally wounded).

To the right, Britannia’s right side is flanked by a menacingly clawed British lion holding a sign that reads “Nelson / CXXII Battles” and a chubby putto holding a plaque reading “The Nile/Copenhagen” (fig. 3.22). West also included a group of three emblematic women, representations of the British Isles, in various states of mourning (fig. 3.23). From left to right, Scotland (holding a thistle) consoles England (clutching a small bouquet of roses), while Ireland (grasping a clover to her breast) leans on England’s shoulder for support. The remainder of the far right side of the composition is filled with a selection of attributes related to maritime and military life: shields, canons, lead shot, and sailing paraphernalia including an anchor, tiller, buoy, coiled lines of rope, and a heavy block with tackle (fig. 3.24-3.25).

West was revered for exciting sympathy in his history paintings through grand scale and tight composition as well as gestural and figural cues that called to mind religious themes like sacrifice and lamentation. The Nelson pediment contained all of these devices and would have been just as effective in evoking sentiment from period viewers as West’s paintings and prints of Wolfe had been in the 1770s. The roiling composition stretched out in high relief over viewers in the courtyard below who might have identified with the mournful faces of the personifications of England, Ireland, and Scotland. The pediment’s busy, balanced frame included details like war

ships and maritime attributes that reminded viewers that they were looking at contemporary events and people made timeless by the stoic veil of neoclassical form.

The vibrant colors and atmospheric effects of West's paintings were a bit more difficult to achieve through the pediment's buff-colored ceramic body. West compensated for this difference by printing a *DESCRIPTION OF THE GRAND Model of Neptune giving up the Body of NELSON, With the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia*.¹⁶⁹ Curious pilgrims to Greenwich could purchase the inexpensive, eight-page pamphlet for six pence, like a souvenir. Leaflets of this sort had become de rigueur for early-nineteenth-century sightseers. They were commonly sold at public exhibitions of fine art like those at the Royal Academy as well as smaller, more intimate premieres like West's exhibition of *The Death of Lord Nelson* at his Newman Street studio and gallery in 1806.¹⁷⁰ In addition, guides like Henry David's *An historical description of WESTMINSTER ABBEY, its MONUMENTS and CURIOSITIES* (1783), offered thick descriptions of monuments in London's most famous place of interment like Wilton's 1773 monument to Wolfe (which described the warrior-hero in the "last agonies of expiring heroism, with his hand closing the wound which the ball that killed him had made in his breast, and falling into the arms

¹⁶⁹ No entry exists in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for a T. Romney. However, there is an entry for a "John Romney" (1786-1863) who worked as an engraver. John Romney was engaged with a project between 1812 and 1845 to etch plates for the *Description of the Collection of Ancient Marbles in the British Museum*.

¹⁷⁰ For the complete text see von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 220-221.

of a grenadier”) and Patience Wright’s 1775 wax figure of the “great Earl of Chatham in his parliamentary robes,” which was so lifelike that it seemed to speak to its audience.¹⁷¹

Like Henry David’s *Historical description of WESTMINSTER ABBEY*, West’s *DESCRIPTION* was part history lesson, part advertisement. The first of its three sections provided context for understanding the pediment’s narrative, offering an account of Nelson’s service along with West’s justification for why he had chosen to couch his “Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture” within an allegorical context. The second section of the leaflet reviewed the pediment’s narrative. The final pages of the pamphlet listed the many benefits of Coade’s ceramic body as well as selected locations in Britain where the Manufactory’s wares were proudly displayed.

Situated in the outdoor recreation court at Greenwich Hospital, the *DESCRIPTION*’s evocative text came alive and encouraged readers to imagine things that could not be conveyed visually like smells, tastes, and motion. For example, Britannia is “seated on a rock washed by the Ocean, her countenance highly marked with the most pungent (though suppressed) grief.” She supports “the body of the hero with her right hand, whose languid head reclines on her bosom.”¹⁷² The text indicates that Britannia’s rock is being washed by the Atlantic – the same ocean that affected

¹⁷¹ David Henry, *An historical description of Westminster-Abbey, its monuments and curiosities* (London, 1783), 58, 51.

¹⁷² West, *Description*, 4.

the brackish tidal flow of the Thames River, adjacent to Greenwich Hospital. With that much water so close to the pediment's site, there can be no doubt that visitors to the courtyard could feel the river's residual dampness and perhaps smell or even taste a salty, metallic tinge in the air. The *DESCRIPTION* also implies that the pediment's figures interact right before viewers' eyes. In the narrative text, Britannia receives Nelson's body with her right hand, and his languid head reclines on her bosom. While the text is accurate with regard to Britannia's hand that supports Nelson, a close look at the composition's central vignette reveals that the dying hero's "languid head" has not quite made it to Britannia's chest – but we know that it will recline there soon because Nelson's final moments are imminent. Thus the Admiral moved with viewers' imaginations.

In addition to imagining smells, tastes, and motion, the *DESCRIPTION* challenged readers to conjure sound. One section describes the British Lion whose "tremendous roar declares with exultation, that Nelson has bled in One Hundred and Twenty-two Battles in the defence [sic] of his country, while his fiery eye-balls with indignant rage views [sic] the dead body." Lions were included in the monuments to Nelson by Smith and Flaxman, too, but the pamphlet's text rendered the "fiery eye-balls" and "indignant rage" of West's feline a much more formidable force. Another passage describes Neptune pleading with Britannia to "Receive the Hero; who, at yonder battle, finished his career of glory, expiring in the cause of his country in the arms of Victory; receive from Victory, my Trident, in token of the dominion of the

Seas, so nobly acquired by your immortal Nelson.”¹⁷³ If a reader was paying attention to the printed page or recalled how Nelson’s 1805 state funeral had processed up the Thames, he or she could almost imagine Neptune’s voice whispering on the breeze.

The *DESCRIPTION* also called attention to West’s long interest in and engagement with classical design sources. For example, West’s narrative boasted that his design contained “the finest torso ever executed since the days of Phidias” and four “Sea-Horses” that “appear to have equal merit with those of that celebrated artist, lately brought from Athens by Lord Elgin.”¹⁷⁴ By conspicuously connecting his designs to those of antiquity, the artist justified his design choices for the pediment, shielded himself from the criticisms that had afflicted the Guildhall monument to Nelson, and instigated a critical dialogue about formal issues of representation.

As Jules Prown has noted, West had been cultivating a deep appreciation for and understanding of classical sources since the 1760s.¹⁷⁵ Since his tour in Italy (1760–1763), the artist had consistently availed himself of opportunities to sketch antique sculpture with the intent to recycle these forms in his neoclassical history paintings. Ruth Kraemer has asserted that West’s sketches of the procession of Romans after the *Ara Pacis* reliefs are so “fresh” that they were almost certainly

¹⁷³ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷⁵ For more on West’s use of classical sources, see Jules David Prown, “Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity,” *American Art* 10:2 (1996): 29–49.

“made in front of the marble reliefs and not copied from a publication of antique sculpture,” thus placing their date of creation during West’s time in Rome.¹⁷⁶ While it is unknown if West’s preparatory sketches for the *Grand Model of Neptune* still exist, the artist’s long engagement with and repeated recycling of classical sources for contemporary projects makes it plausible that West sat with the Parthenon marbles as he developed the Nelson pediment.

Moreover, West was a major proponent for the British government’s acquisition of Elgin’s collection of “sublime specimens of the purest sculpture” from the Parthenon, which had arrived in London between 1801 and 1811.¹⁷⁷ A sketch of the Parthenon’s metopes, alongside notes in Farington’s diary, indicates that West spent a significant amount of time with these objects, perhaps as early as 1807. Significantly, this was also the period during which West was occupied with paintings, prints, and designs for memorial sculpture honoring Nelson. In fact, the *DESCRIPTION* explicitly highlighted the connections between West’s current work and its antique precedents. For example, West “borrowed” from the Parthenon marbles as he conceptualized the figure of Neptune to Britannia’s left (fig. 3.18). The leaflet observed, “This Statue is supposed to be one of the finest in the kingdom, both for

¹⁷⁶ Ruth S. Kraemer, *Drawings by Benjamin West and his son Raphael Lamar West* (New York: David R. Godine and the Pierpont Morgan Library, 1975), 5. West’s sketches of the Ara Pacis are reproduced on page 4 (figure 2, *Procession of Romans after the Ara Pacis*, Philadelphia Museum of Art) and Plate 2 (*Procession of Romans after the Ara Pacis*, Pierpont Morgan Library).

¹⁷⁷ Farington, *Diary*, March 30, 1808.

anatomy and expression.”¹⁷⁸ West’s note about the form of the figure referred to the cast Coade stone Neptune that visitors might gaze up toward in the courtyard at Greenwich as well as the antique figure of Dionysus that Lord Elgin had recently extracted from the Parthenon’s east pediment (fig. 3.26). This figure – the only one from Elgin’s cache that had managed to retain its head – was lauded for its forceful, anatomical naturalism and classical grace; it had been compared to the *Apollo Belvedere* as the pinnacle of antique figural representation.¹⁷⁹ While West repositioned the Coade figure’s toned arms to an outstretched gesture in the contemporary pediment, the correlation between the tight, muscular abdomen of the Parthenon Dionysus and that of West’s Neptune is striking.

Some of West’s allusions to the Parthenon marbles were not explicitly noted in the *DESCRIPTION*, but would have been readily apparent to anyone even remotely

¹⁷⁸ West, *Description*, 4.

¹⁷⁹ There was debate in the early nineteenth century concerning the name of this figure. According to the 1816 *Report from the Select Committee*, there were two reclining male figures in Elgin’s collection: a “Statue of Hercules or Theseus” from the east pediment, and the “Statue of a river-god, called Ilissus.” There was a third figure listed as “Part of the Chest and Shoulders of the colossal figure in the center (supposed to be Neptune).” Following a close look at the figures in West’s pediment, I would posit that the figure of Neptune in the Nelson pediment is actually modeled upon the figure from the east pediment. This figure, while identified in the period as “Hercules or Theseus,” has been re-assigned by historians at the British Museum as being a figure of Dionysus. It seems that West – as well as many of his fellow academicians – may have used the names “Hercules,” “Theseus,” “Ilissus,” and “Neptune” when referring to this object.

familiar with Elgin's collection. For example, the artist was especially fond of the Parthenon's equestrian groups, encouraging his pupils at the Royal Academy to

Look at the fire of their eyes, the distention of their nostrils... they are in perfect unison with the life in each. At the moment of their animation they appear to have been turned into stone by some majestic power, and not created by the human hand. The single head of the horse seems as if it had been struck into marble when he was exerting all the energy of his motion.¹⁸⁰

When comparing the horses from the Chariot of Selene (sculpture fragments that were part of Elgin's collection) with the horses that ferry Nelson's limp body from the pediment at Greenwich Hospital to the heavens, there can be little doubt that West spent time studying, sketching, and determining how he might integrate these antique beasts into his own sculptural project (figs. 3.19, 3.27).

The dramatic equines were not the only artistic quotations that West made from Elgin's collection. West's three allegorical figures of the British Isles were almost certainly inspired by the "Groupe of two Female figures" and the "Female figure in quick motion – Iris" from the east pediment of the Parthenon (figs. 3.28-3.29).¹⁸¹ While West had pulled pedimental components like the horse heads and the torso of Dionysus (for Neptune) virtually verbatim from the original Greek marbles, he took a little more liberty with the execution of this trio of women. While the

¹⁸⁰ John Galt, *The Life and Works of Benjamin West, Esq.*, part II (London, 1820), 150-151.

¹⁸¹ For a description of these sculptures, see the *Report from the Select Committee on the Earl of Elgin's Collection of Marbles, &c.* (1816), 70.

positioning of the bodies of West's emblematic females is analogous to their Phidian antecedents – Ireland, the figure on the far right, reclines with legs outstretched against the seated form of England, who in turn convenes with the seated form of Scotland – West's treatment of drapery is more straightforward. The myriad folds and creases and delicate roils of Pentillic marble have been recycled into clean, empire-waisted Coade stone tunics that effectively catch light and shadow while not being so involved that the forms of the figures beneath them are rendered illegible (fig. 3.23).

In addition to tying the monument to timely critical discourse over the uses of classical sculptures as models for artistic emulation, West's emblematic female figures helped to visually define the territorial scope of the modern British Empire in the early nineteenth century. While England, Scotland, and Ireland had shared interests for centuries, the three separate countries were not officially united as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland until 1800. (While Scotland and England had shared a ruler since James VI took the throne in 1603, the 1707 Acts of Union officially bound the two countries together as the Kingdom of Great Britain. Similarly, Ireland and England had shared a monarch since the 1540s but were not officially bound until the Union with Ireland Act in 1800.) The resulting "United Kingdom" was important for maintaining British imperial hegemony, especially as the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and the War of 1812 (1812-1815) threatened to exhaust the Royal Navy's ranks of able-bodied seamen. By including the three emblematic figures of England, Ireland, and Scotland, West visually concretized the alliances created by the Acts of Union in 1707 and 1800. Nelson was not just a hero for

England. He was a hero for all that the British Empire had come to include following the turbulence of the eighteenth century. This figural group recognized English, Irish, and Scottish contributions in service of the British crown while insuring that these once-sovereign powers were now bound in a collective imperial struggle.¹⁸²

While the British Empire of West's day was hugely expansive, its collective imperial struggle was squarely centered in Greenwich. The Royal Observatory (the location of the prime meridian) had existed in Greenwich Park since its commission by Charles II in 1675. Greenwich Palace (now destroyed) was the birthplace of Henry VIII. Greenwich Hospital was home to scores of retired naval officers and seamen, and was a symbolically progressive jewel in the Royal Navy's crown. To understand how the *Grand Model of Neptune* may have "awakened a sense of public glory" and inspired men in the service of Britain's interests, it is important to consider how the pediment worked as part of the spatial and architectural complex at Greenwich Hospital in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Located just south of London via the serpentine coil of the Thames, the sparkling white Georgian facades of the Royal Hospital for Seamen presided along a busy riverfront. The hospital's campus, designed by Christopher Wren and modeled

¹⁸² For good overviews of evolving British imperial identity, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707 – 1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Eliga H. Gould, "A Virtual Nation: Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy of the American Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 104:2 (1999): 476-489; Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years' War*; and Rosie Dias, *Exhibiting Englishness: John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and the Formation of a National Aesthetic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

on the Invalides in Paris and Chelsea Hospital in London, was established as a residence for injured sailors and officially opened to its first forty-six pensioners in 1705.¹⁸³ By 1738, one thousand pensioners called the buildings home. At its peak capacity in 1814 (just two years after West unveiled his pediment to Nelson's memory), the hospital housed 2,710 "in-pensioners."¹⁸⁴ Canaletto captured the effect of the impressive campus in his composition *Greenwich Hospital from the North Bank of the Thames* (1752) (fig. 3.30). The two blocks pictured closest to the river are the King Charles Building (right) and the Queen Anne Building (left); located directly behind those buildings and at the base of Greenwich Hill are the prominent domes of the King William Building (right) and the Queen Mary Building (left).

West's *Grand Model of Neptune* is situated over the stairs leading to the outdoor recreation court in the interior of the King William Block (fig. 3.31). The pediment is located on the eastern side of the interior court, facing southwest over a cobbled recreation court. The tympanum is mounted atop an elevated, Doric colonnade with a rusticated base constructed of Portland stone (figs. 3.32-3.33). The

¹⁸³ The Royal Naval Hospital for Seamen was founded in 1694. The campus was designed by Sir Christopher Wren and was constructed between 1696 and 1712. The hospital housed pensioners between 1712 and 1869. Between 1873 and 1998 the buildings were used by / known as the Royal Naval College. In 1997 "Maritime Greenwich" was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since 1998 the campus has been managed by the Greenwich Foundation for the Old Royal Naval College and has supported a variety of educational and cultural initiatives.

¹⁸⁴ John Bold, Charlotte Bradbeer, and Peter van der Merwe, *Maritime Greenwich* (London: Belmont Press, 1999), 33.

north range of the courtyard abuts the brick, exterior façade of the Painted Hall. Early plans for this elevation indicate that Christopher Wren had planned to face the brick substructure with Portland stone (to match the fabric of the colonnade) and add decorative carvings of Neptune, Galatea, and Tritons under the upper register of windows.¹⁸⁵ Because the stone veneer and decorative carvings were never executed, the Georgian red brick, large, leaded glass windows, and buff-colored window-surrounds of the courtyard's north wall contrast with the high neoclassicism of the colonnade and pediment. The west and south ranges of the recreation court continue this polychrome approach with large circular, octagonal, and arched windows and a range of architectural decorations including more Doric columns, fruited swags, and rustication. The pediment's embedded location within the courtyard seems, at first, less than ideal. The *Grand Model of Neptune* would not have been visible by ships moving up and down the Thames, and the average visitor to the hospital would not have been required to descend the short flight of steps that lead to interior of the courtyard. Even today the pediment seems to occupy a space of afterthought: one has to know what one is looking for in order to find it.

When one considers the recreation court's historical context, however, the pediment's siting makes more sense. The King William courtyard was used daily by

¹⁸⁵ John Bold, *Greenwich: An Architectural History of the Royal Hospital for Seamen and the Queen's House* (New Haven and London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press in association with English Heritage, 2000), 117.

pensioners as a space for recreation and exercise, and it was located just steps away from the Hospital's subterranean refectory and bowling alley. Not only was the *Grand Model of Neptune* free for any visitor who wanted to study its composition and meaning, it was situated in a courtyard that remained a part of the daily perambulations of pensioners as they traversed the spaces between their living quarters and the cafeteria. Thus, West's pediment was uniquely suited to serve the common sailor, the very segment of the public that had been most displeased by the admission fees levied at the Guildhall and St. Paul's.

In short, West surely chose this location because it allowed him to best address the audience for whom the pediment was intended: the veterans who resided at Greenwich Hospital. These were the same veterans whose cries had provoked William Holland's satirical print in 1805; the same men who had been unwilling – or unable – to pay admission fees levied at St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey. Moreover, in addition to serving Hospital pensioners, the recreation yard functioned as a formative space of historical memory. As noted earlier, the courtyard was directly adjacent to James Thornhill's elaborately decorated Painted Hall.¹⁸⁶ While Thornhill's decorative scheme had been a tourist destination unto itself as early as 1726, its notoriety increased in January 1806 when it was chosen as the site where Nelson's body would lay in state prior to his interment upriver at St. Paul's Cathedral.¹⁸⁷ Rudolph

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 153, 169. Also see *The Illustrated London News*, March 25, 1865.

¹⁸⁷ Bold, *Greenwich*, 145.

Ackermann's *Microcosm of London or London in Miniature*, published in 1810, even included an engraving of visitors to the Painted Hall admiring the relic of Nelson's funeral carriage (fig. 3.34). The image, *Greenwich Hospital: The Painted Hall*, depicts two groups of visitors, several of whom are clothed in naval uniforms and hats. The group on the right gestures to a funeral car decorated to look like a warship. The group on the left is enlivened by a young boy – perhaps a future naval recruit – who gestures toward the large, leaded windows on the left side of the Hall. Just outside those windows was the King William courtyard (fig. 3.35). This print would have been conceived around the time that West was working out his designs with the Greenwich Hospital Board. Could the visitors in the 1810 print of the Painted Hall perhaps be pointing out an in-process piece of contemporary sculpture? The pediment would continue to remind pensioners and laypeople alike of the period when Nelson's body lay in state in the Painted Hall; indeed, it was almost as if Nelson's spirit had exited through the leaded glass windows of the hall and proceeded with his apotheosis in the King William courtyard itself, just as West had imagined the otherworldly event.

Because of its limited visibility in the King William court, West's pediment may not have contributed to public debates over the forms and functions of contemporary memorial sculpture in the ways that it might have had it been sited in a more publicly-accessible place. Even so, it engaged in heady dialogues with Smith and Flaxman's memorials honoring Nelson. West's 1810 proposal for the *Grand Model of Neptune* came just months after the unveiling of James Smith's monument to Nelson at the Guildhall; the chief complaint of Smith's detractors was that his memorial

scheme contained only a scant figural reference to the hero in the form of an ineffective portrait medallion. Likewise, by 1808 Flaxman had begun executing his freestanding sculpture of Nelson for St. Paul's; satirical commentaries had been lobbed at its form and inconvenient location since 1805, when Holland's *The Sailor's monument* was published. That West was able to weigh and avoid the pitfalls of the monuments at the Guildhall and St. Paul's meant that his project to memorialize Nelson offered solutions for artistic challenges that plagued some of the best-known sculptors of his era.

West's project also offered a definitive opinion on the potential for the appropriation of classical sources for contemporary historical events. Important sections of West's *Grand Model of Neptune* (for example, Nelson's outstretched body) referenced Renaissance masterworks, while the composition's measured progression of figural sculptures, arranged like sentence fragments, quoted directly from Elgin's collection of Greek marbles. This fusion of high Renaissance classicism and ancient Greek forms may have been West's answer to the debate over what constituted suitable precedents for artistic study and emulation. By employing strategies of historical appropriation, West demonstrated that highly idealized forms like the *Apollo* and the *Torso* could co-exist with the "naively naturalistic" models provided by the Parthenon marbles.¹⁸⁸ Interestingly, West's pediment was unveiled just before James

¹⁸⁸ Alex Potts, "The Impossible Ideal: Romantic Conceptions of the Parthenon Sculptures in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain and Germany," ed. Andrew

Bubb would put the final touches on his monument to William Pitt the Younger at the Guildhall in 1813 (fig. 3.36). Bubb's monument, notably more sepulchral in setting than West's pediment, included a standing portrait sculpture of Pitt in contemporary costume flanked by copies of the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Meleager* and guarded by an allegorical figure of Britannia atop a galloping, idealized steed that resembles Elgin's "Sea-Horses."

West's composition also managed to find a creative way to respond to the debate between Dufour and Flaxman over whether figural sculpture or architecture was inherently better suited for memorial forms. With its dynamic figures, energetic rhythm, and obvious allusions to the great (some argued greatest) sculptures of classical antiquity, the *Grand Model of Neptune* certainly qualified as sculpture. However, this was sculpture that functioned dually as architectural ornament. With its placement over a long colonnade, high above the courtyard entrance, the pediment evoked a ceremonial, processional experience. This quality allowed West's pediment to straddle the architecture-sculpture divide with aplomb. The pediment even managed to sidestep many of the potential pitfalls of sculpture and architecture that Flaxman and Dufour had identified during their debate over the Duke of Clarence's Naval Pillar project. Flaxman had been concerned that "sculpture does not represent shipping with effect," yet the bas-reliefs of burning and sinking ships at the far left corner of West's

Hemingway and William Vaughan, *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101-122.

composition were perfectly legible to viewers on the ground.¹⁸⁹ Could West have succeeded in his effort because the malleability of the Coade stone material allowed greater control over the fine details of relief sculpture than did marble? Sunlight and shadow played off of the detailed surfaces of the sailing paraphernalia as if to suggest that a steady breeze would roll them out of the composition.

West Invests

When we consider the clever ways that West's *Grand Model of Neptune* recycled Renaissance and classical forms, as well as how the pediment and the printed *DESCRIPTION* engaged with period debates over form, narrative, and audience, it becomes clear that this project was more than just another commission for West. Had the aging President of the Royal Academy simply wanted to tell Nelson's story, he had already done so through a series of successful paintings and engravings documenting the Admiral's heroic death and apotheosis. These images provided clear, legible narratives in two-dimensional formats that viewers were accustomed to seeing. Painting-to-print projects like *The Death of Nelson* (1806, 1811) also promised considerable financial incentives for artists like West (as well as his engraver-publisher, James Heath). A sculptural project simply did not offer the reproductive flexibility of a two-dimensional canvas. Why, then, at such a late point in his career

¹⁸⁹ Flaxman, *Letter to the Committee*, 5.

did West undertake such a massive endeavor – one that, according to Farington, caused him to “look ill” and suffer the “effect of over application?” What were West’s motives?

One explanation may reside in matters of artistic legacy. Over the course of his long career West painted nine self-portraits, and included himself in at least two additional family group portraits.¹⁹⁰ One example, the *Self-Portrait* of 1776 (fig. 3.37), shows a young West who sports a flawless complexion, a tasteful suit, and a broad-brimmed hat while holding one of the most important tools of his trade: a fragment of an antique bas-relief. In the *Self-Portrait* of 1806 (fig. 3.38), West portrayed himself as an older gentleman with a serious visage who clasps a palette and brushes while painting a portrait of his wife. In both self-portraits West depicts himself as a respectable, successful, dedicated artist. But the *Grand Model of Neptune* concretized West’s artistic legacy in ways that a painted self-portrait simply could not do. In this sense, the small self-portrait that West added just to the left of the pediment’s central vignette is crucial (fig. 3.21).

West has inserted himself into an important moment on the timeline of British imperialism. The sculpted self-portrait anachronistically shows the artist in the prime of life: his eyes focus on Nelson’s body, his face is smooth, the corners of his mouth turn slightly downward (in a manner consistent with most of his other self-portraits),

¹⁹⁰ For a full account of West’s known self-portraits see von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 450-456.

and thick locks of hair frame his face and cascade down the back of his neck. Rather than wearing a formal coat or suit, West has cast himself bare-shouldered, wearing only the knotted neckerchief of a common sailor. Here, West is the everyman that his composition functioned to inspire.

That West chose to don the costume of a common sailor may also indicate that he was drawing parallels between the indispensable role the Royal Navy (and its seamen) played in support of the British Empire and the critical part that an artist played in narrating the Empire's stories as inspiration for posterity. Sailors defended the empire's interests, while artists defined and communicated those interests in visual terms. In order to function properly, the Royal Navy needed a healthy supply of sailors – just as Britain needed a healthy variety of artists to communicate its agendas and ideologies via painted, printed, and sculpted images. Both sailor and artist were necessary, West's work seems to imply, for the propagation of a powerful and influential nation-state.

The relationship between the artist and the subject in West's Nelson pediment illuminates another interesting footnote in our evaluation of the object as part of West's artistic legacy. Following a lecture on West's gallery at the Paul Mellon Centre, art historians Kaylin Weber and Mark Hallett pondered whether West had immortalized Wolfe and Nelson via his status as an artist and showman – or whether Wolfe and Nelson had ultimately brought West fame via their roles as larger-than-life

British warrior-heroes.¹⁹¹ While this question may seem at first capricious, it reveals what was at stake for artists like West and institutions like London's Royal Academy during the period. If artists bore ultimate responsibility for concretizing the visual cultures of British nationalism and imperialism, then there was a credible reason for artists and institutions like the Royal Academy to be supported by the King as well as the Parliament. If West was, in fact, responsible for presenting Britain's contemporary warrior-heroes in consumable packages, then public support of a national school of art was quantifiable.

Perhaps Benjamin West anticipated this debate. It is clear that the pediment allowed West to enter into an artistic conversation spanning centuries and continents. If there was any doubt about the role that the artist wanted to be remembered for playing, pilgrims to Greenwich needed only to open the pages of the *DESCRIPTION*. The opening paragraph of the leaflet reminded readers:

It has been reserved for the President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, Esq. to form a design expressive and bold in all respects, which may not improperly be termed an Epic or Heroic Poem in Sculpture, representing in a sublime stile, various signal actions distinguished by great events, and affecting the mind with the deepest sympathy and the love of heroic virtue; a work in which great images are required, and greater judgment in forming them aright.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Kaylin H. Weber, "Displaying History: West's Gallery and the Great Room," paper presented at the Paul Mellon Centre, London, March 2014, <https://new.livestream.com/mfah>.

¹⁹² West, *Description*, 3.

This passage emphasized that a certain degree of experience, education, taste, and most importantly *talent* was required of artists who aspired to cast Britain's legacy in visual terms. West's portrait relief, hovering alongside Nelson as the Admiral floats toward heaven, indicated that West was one of a select group of artists – if not the only artist – who could effectively share stories of contemporary warrior-heroes in the service of British empire. The pediment allowed West to be remembered not only as an artist, but as an envoy of British imperial history.

In sum, the *Grand Model of Neptune* enabled Benjamin West to accomplish a number of things that one of his well known and widely circulated paintings or prints could not. The pediment ingeniously allowed West to lessen the academic divisions that set architects at odds with sculptors in early-nineteenth-century Britain. The pediment's moderate cost and expeditious timeline for design and execution also provided a pragmatic solution for the production of future monuments to British warrior-heroes. Its narrative provided a clear ideological message, while its innovative Coade stone body spoke to the ingenuity of contemporary British industry. Further, the decision to design a pediment for a public space – rather than a freestanding monument in one of London's cathedrals – allowed West to respond craftily to period criticisms over the access of monuments for the audiences they were intended. The siting of the pediment also guaranteed that West's memorial would occupy an important space of memory for generations of pensioners and visitors to Greenwich Hospital in the years to come. In addition, the site, when combined with the printed

DESCRIPTION, encouraged audiences to imagine smells, tastes, motion, and sounds, and it imbued the pediment with a ceremonial or processional quality that was unusual for most free standing memorial sculpture. While the *Grand Model of Neptune* may at first seem like an outlier within West's larger oeuvre, it was, in many ways, a natural progression for an artist who had grand visions for his designs as well as his personal legacy.

Building from our understanding of the pediment's iconography, the next chapter investigates how West's choice to use Coade stone as his primary construction material actually made the realization of a project of this magnitude possible. West's unconventional use of artificial stone aligned with his desire to explore, experiment with, and take advantage of new methods and technologies during his late career. What attracted West to the Coade firm? What were the particular qualities of Coade stone that made it ideal for achieving the formal requirements of neoclassical design? Finally, what can West's use of Coade stone tell us about industrialization, the rise of neoclassical aesthetics, and emergent ideas of modernity, innovation, and labor in early-nineteenth-century London?

Chapter 4

“A PAINTER, SIR, MAKES THE BEST SCULPTOR”

In *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors* (1846), journalist Allan Cunningham surveyed a short list of artists most important to the development of British sculpture. Included in Cunningham’s roster were familiar names such as Joseph Wilton, John Bacon, and John Flaxman.¹⁹³ These sculptors were fixtures in the history of the Royal Academy and their work might have been familiar to people who visited the annual exhibitions at Somerset House. Alongside these luminaries, Cunningham reported “even Benjamin West, the President [of the Royal Academy], laid down his brush for a time and modeled ornamental statues. To a friend who found him in the manufactory, splashed with clay and laboring at a figure, Benjamin smiled gravely and said, ‘A painter, sir, makes the best sculptor.’”¹⁹⁴

Cunningham’s chance encounter with West probably occurred in the early years of the nineteenth century at Coade and Sealey’s Artificial Stone Manufactory. The artist was likely “laboring” on his designs for the *Grand Model of Neptune*. And

¹⁹³ Allen Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors*, 1846. Volume three is dedicated to nine sculptors: Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), Caius Gabriel Cibber (1630-1700), Louis Francois Roubiliac (c. 1702-1762), Joseph Wilton (1722-1803), Thomas Banks (1735-1805), Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823), John Bacon (1740-1799), Anne Damer (1749-1828), and John Flaxman (1755-1826).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

West was only one member of a team of highly skilled individuals, ranging from mold-makers to modellers to firemen, who worked to bring the pediment to life. Cunningham wrote during an age when a professional artist typically focused on only one medium – painting, sculpture, architecture, or drawing – fairly early in his or her training. Why, then, would an illustrious *painter* like Benjamin West decide to dabble in a field that required the specialized skills of a sculptor? What was this old man doing, “splashed with clay and laboring at a figure?”

This chapter explores West’s use of Coade stone for the *Grand Model of Neptune* and contends that there were a number of factors that converged in the early nineteenth century that made it possible for West to realize his monumental homage to Nelson. West’s unconventional use of artificial stone aligned with his desire to explore, experiment with, and take advantage of new methods and technologies during his late career. Nevertheless, his decision raises questions: What attracted West to the Coade firm? What were the particular qualities of Coade stone that made it ideal for achieving the formal requirements of neoclassical design? Finally, what can West’s use of Coade stone tell us about industrialization, the rise of neoclassical aesthetics, and emergent ideas of modernity, innovation, and labor in early-nineteenth-century London?

The Allure of Artificial Stone

Artificial stone had a long history in London. While Eleanor Coade would eventually streamline the production and marketing of this high fire ceramic medium through her profitable Manufactory and Gallery, she took her inspiration from several industrious businessmen who had researched, argued for, and marketed ceramic statuary and architectural ornament during the eighteenth century. Coade's predecessors drew parallels between their products and the most storied ancient wonders across the globe via printed treatises and essays, while arguing for the advantages of artificial stone over more traditional materials like marble, Portland stone, or Bath stone.

The first serious case for the advancement of artificial stone was published in Richard Holt's *Short Treatise of Artificial Stone* (1730).¹⁹⁵ According to Holt, natural stone was inadequate. Its failure lay in its heterogeneous nature; a pocket of air or brittle assemblage of fossils could negate hours of labor and set back production deadlines if a stonemason had the misfortune to choose an inferior specimen for a commission. Portland stone, for example, was less-than-ideal for discerning masons as there were "vast Numbers and Clusters of *small Shells*... commonly found in the very Boson and Center of the *Portland Stone*... Where this is the Case, whatever is made of

¹⁹⁵ Richard Holt, *A Short TREATISE of Artificial Stone, As 'tis now Made, And Converted into all Manner of CURIOUS EMBELLISHMENTS, And PROPER ORNAMENTS of ARCHITECTURE: CONTAINING The most Beautiful, the Strongest, and the Cheapest Method, of Adorning BUILDINGS of all Sorts* (London, 1730).

it, is liable to Cracks and Flaws; and, on every little Incident, is ready to *fly in Pieces*.”¹⁹⁶ Bath stone was similarly lamentable, being of a “spungy Body, compounded of extreme soft and yielding Particles, which, besides the Pores common to all stones in general, contain within themselves many more considerable Vacuities” that made it “altogether unfit for solid Use and long Service.”¹⁹⁷ These natural materials were not reliable.

After searching the world (and suggesting that ancient wonders such as the Sphinx or Stonehenge may have been made of artificial stone), Holt developed and patented a recipe for a “Compound Liquid Metal” in 1722.¹⁹⁸ Holt’s recipe attempted to address the problems arising from heterogeneous, unreliable natural stone. Although no specific ingredients or proportions were revealed in the 1730 *Treatise*, Holt’s patent application indicates that his recipe included lead ore, making his formula unique from that later developed by Eleanor Coade.¹⁹⁹ Holt’s products could be purchased at the “Artificial-Stone-Ware-House, over-against York-Buildings-Stairs, and near Cuper’s-Bridge, in Lambeth, Surry,” but evidence suggests that Holt

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁹ Ingrid Roscoe, Emma Hardy, and M.G. Sullivan, “Richard Holt,” *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660-1851, Henry Moore Foundation*, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.henry-moore.org/hmi/library/biographical-dictionary-of-sculptors-in-britain>.

may have encountered difficulties when attempting to manufacture his products consistently and economically.²⁰⁰ Daniel Pincot, a young rival, reported that Holt's wares were "all covered on one side with an earthen ware, white glaze; and some of it is poorly painted with blue ornaments, baskets of flowers, &c." and that they were neither tasteful in design nor neat in execution.²⁰¹ Newspaper advertisements indicate that the firm was active until August 1732, after which Holt – and his "Compound Liquid Metal" – sank into obscurity.

The next argument for artificial stone came from that very competitor, Daniel Pincot, in his *ESSAY on the Origin, Nature, Uses, and Properties, of ARTIFICIAL STONE: together with Some OBSERVATIONS upon common natural STONE, CLAYS, and BURNT EARTHS in general* (1770). The *ESSAY* noted the six key qualities of artificial stone products with a connoisseur's exactitude. According to Pincot,

Good artificial stone should, in the first place, retain perfectly the form it received from the mould; secondly, exactness in its dimensions; thirdly, it should be free from cracks, or fire flaws; fourthly, it should be equally burnt, or have an even firmness throughout its whole substance; fifthly, it should have but small unconnected pores; and lastly, a bright stone colour should grace the whole.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Holt, *A Short TREATISE of Artificial Stone*, viii.

²⁰¹ Daniel Pincot, *An ESSAY on the Origin, Nature, Uses, and Properties, of ARTIFICIAL STONE: together with Some OBSERVATIONS upon common natural STONE, CLAYS, and BURNT EARTHS in general* (London, 1770), 47.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 59.

Not surprisingly, Pincot's artificial stone promised to allow fashionable Londoners to enjoy the convenience of high-quality artificial stone without having to endure the "poorly painted" surfaces and inconsistent glazes of inferior bodies like those manufactured by Holt. While Pincot had certainly experimented with artificial stone bodies for some time, the historic record does not provide much information regarding his business endeavors. We know that he was, at the very least, more than casually acquainted with Richard Holt's Lambeth shop.

Using the accomplishments and failures of businessmen like Holt and Pincot as a point of departure for her own business, Eleanor Coade would become the most successful purveyor of artificial stone products in London during this period. The daughter of a hot-presser in the wool trade, Eleanor came of age during the early years of the industrial revolution in England and seemed to possess an innate business sense.²⁰³ At age thirty-six (in 1769), she officially opened the doors to Coade's Artificial Stone Manufactory in Lambeth. By 1771 she had brought on sculptor John Bacon to produce and execute designs, and she exhibited works in so called "Coade stone" at the Society of Artists of Great Britain seven times between 1773 and 1780. While Eleanor would eventually employ a range of designers, craftsmen, mechanics, and managers at her firm, evidence indicates that she was personally proficient in the manufacturing process and occasionally participated in the production of Coade

²⁰³ For a general history of Eleanor Coade's family see Alison Kelly, *Mrs. Coade's Stone* (Reading: The Eastern Press Ltd., 1990).

wares.²⁰⁴ Her will indicates that she lived comfortably and independently, owning and bequeathing significant property at her death in 1821.²⁰⁵

Coade made a conscious effort to distinguish her business and her products from those of her competitors. Research suggests that Pincot may have been an early proprietor on the site that Coade's Manufactory came to occupy in Lambeth, and he likely worked with Coade as she established her business in the late 1760s. What is clear is that whatever working relationship may have existed between Pincot and Coade was rapidly disintegrating in 1771. Coade issued a curt notice in the September 11, 1771 *Public Advertiser* stating that Pincot was "no other than a Servant to her in that Affair, and that no Contracts, or Agreements, Discharges, or Receipts, will be allowed by Her, unless signed or assented to by herself."²⁰⁶ Perhaps Pincot failed to take the hint. The following week Coade published a harsh follow up:

WHEREAS Eleanor Coade has thought proper to dismiss Mr. Daniel Pincot from any farther Employ in her Manufactory at King's Arms Stairs, Narrow Wall Lambeth, the Public are desired to take Notice that he is not empowered by her to do any Act for her on her Account; and that she has not any Connection with him in any Shape wha [sic] ever.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ John E. Ruch, "Regency Coade: A Study of the Coade Record Books, 1813-21," *Architectural History* 11 (1968): 34-56, 106-107.

²⁰⁵ Will of Eleanor Coade, Spinster of Christ Church, Surrey, 8 December 1821, The National Archives, Kew, Public Record Office, PROB 11/1651/97.

²⁰⁶ *Public Advertiser* (London), September 11, 1771.

²⁰⁷ *Public Advertiser* (London), September 17, 1771.

Coade's formula – much like those developed by Holt and Pincot – was a closely guarded secret. The precise recipe for her artificial stone was never patented or recorded, but conservators have determined that the basic formula contained ball clay, flint, quartz, and silica. In his study of the Coade Record Books, John Ruch has noted that manager William Croggon's orders are not particular to the sort of clay desired for Coade's products, except that it should be “of the light [?] and if [sic] the best kind.”²⁰⁸ Croggon's notations indicate that uniformity and color were important considerations in the production of Coade wares.

No matter the precise composition, Coade's artificial stone was perfectly suited to accommodate the symmetry, regularity, and consistency demanded by neoclassical fashions. Coade's clay body resembled a light colored, natural stone straight from the kiln and could be polished to imitate marble. Moreover, most of Coade's products were formed by hand pressing rolled sheets of unfired clay into plaster molds. Neoclassical architects like the Adam brothers required a high level of repetitive accuracy that these molds could deliver. Industrial archaeologist Michael Stratton has suggested that it was in fact Coade's molds that enabled the consistent and regular execution of the complex designs for which the firm was known.²⁰⁹ They could be reused many times, and were often combined – like a language – to advance moralistic

²⁰⁸ Ruch, “Regency Coade,” 44.

²⁰⁹ Michael Stratton, *The Terracotta Revival: Building Innovation and the Image of the Industrial City in Britain and North America* (London: Victor Gollancz in association with Peter Crawley, 1993), 46.

messages through allegory or to tell stories of modern day heroism through different combinations of classical forms.

In addition to its dependable constitution, Coade's unique formula helped to mitigate risk during the firing process. Standard clay bodies could be expected to shrink up to twenty percent during the drying and firing process, yet Coade stone (which included ground bits of pre-fired material known as "grog") shrank only about eight percent. This relatively low shrinkage rate meant that Coade materials were less likely to warp, crack, or explode during production than those of her competitors.²¹⁰ Fewer kiln accidents yielded more finished products available for sale. Ultimately, Eleanor Coade's ability to produce (and reproduce) uniform, high quality wares using molds and a reliable, relatively risk-averse clay body meant that she kept costs down while maximizing profits.

The Manufactory's late-eighteenth-century trade cards provided patrons with an image of one of the large kilns at the core of the firm's success (fig. 4.1). The foreground of the trade card is filled with an allegorical scene of "The attempts of TIME to destroy SCULPTURE and ARCHITECTURE, defeated by The vitrifying Aid of FIRE." Father Time, a muscular, nude, winged figure complete with a scythe, attempts to pull an allegorical figure of Architecture down from her pedestal. Architecture clasps a compass and a T-square, tools of her trade. An emblematic

²¹⁰ Jeanne Marie Teutonico, "Architectural Ceramics: their history, manufacture, and conservation: a joint symposium of English Heritage and the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation, September 22-25, 1994" (London: James & James), 36.

figure of Fire pushes Father Time away from Architecture with her left hand, while grasping a flaming torch with her right; her belt is inscribed with the Latin phrase “IGNEA VIS,” or “a fiery force.” The background is filled with one of Coade’s beehive shaped kilns. The front of the kiln has been cut away revealing a figural sculpture of the three graces positioned atop a sizeable Corinthian capital. An inscription over the doorway reads “NEC EDAX ABOLERE VETUSTA.” This inscription comes from the epilogue of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “amque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira nec ignis / nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere vetustas.” The phrase translates to “And now my work is done, which neither the anger of Jupiter, nor fire, nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time shall ever be able to destroy.”²¹¹ Ovid was one of Rome’s greatest poets, and the aforementioned quote speaks to the resilience of the poet’s work – and ultimately his fame – in the face of time. Appropriately, this quote doubles as a guarantee for purchasers of Coade’s wares: the Manufactory’s vitrified sculptures, vessels, and architectural ornament could withstand lightning, fire, and erosion, and were a steadfast investment for consumers. Well-educated patrons might have chuckled to themselves when they recognized this literary wink.

Trade cards were only one aspect of the firm’s printed presence. Eleanor Coade commissioned a set of engravings depicting the Manufactory’s products in 1779, nearly a decade after she opened her doors at Narrow Wall (fig. 4.2). The

²¹¹ Cheryl-Lynn May graciously provided the translation of the phrase.

images are simple, straightforward line engravings of a wide range of ornaments: free-standing classical statuary, allegorical bas-reliefs, game animals, funerary monuments, classical urns, antique vases, friezes, capitals, ceiling roundels, fireplace surrounds, and even rusticated elements imitating natural stone. Discerning patrons could order their own Coade stone copy of the *Farnese Hercules* or even a miniature *Laocoön*. A handful of the plates are dated, but none were assigned formal titles or numbers during the period. While several bound copies of these etchings exist, it is not clear if they were meant to function as a bound set in the eighteenth century. Prints may have been provided on an individual, as-needed basis to architects or patrons who were negotiating bespoke work.

The etchings functioned in several ways. First, they allowed Coade to reach a web of new consumers. Architects could share Coade's images when a client expressed interest in artificial stone, while patrons could review pictures of their own design preferences with peers as they remodeled or updated their domestic spaces or gardens. Since the Manufactory workshop was an out of the way destination, Coade may have calculated that she could entice new customers to visit the yard at Narrow Wall by peppering the consumer landscape with images of her fashionable ornaments. These etchings did not function independently, however. Since there was no descriptive system or organizational structure to narrate the pictures for clients, Coade depended on conversations between her representatives and prospective buyers in order to sell her wares. One can imagine conversations about size, material, finish, cost, and other details that are not immediately apparent from the etchings.

The way that Coade used her printed images and texts was not unlike the way that West marketed his historical compositions (and personal brand) through the vehicle of British print culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the same way that Coade imbued her products at the Manufactory with voice via classical references and texts, West would give the Nelson pediment voice with the 1813 *DESCRIPTION*. Both Coade and West were businesspeople who sensed certain kinds of opportunities afforded by printed media like the marketability of classical forms, and both Coade and West clearly had the entrepreneurial spirit required to pursue these opportunities when they presented themselves. The printed media associated with the productions of Coade and West should be seen as an integral part of their product, not merely an embellishment.

In 1784 Coade streamlined this aspect of her sales strategy by publishing *A Descriptive Catalog with Prices Affixed* (fig. 4.3). The thirty-one page bound catalog could be purchased for a shilling at several locations, including the Manufactory. Statues, busts, vases, pedestals, medallions, keystones, coats of arms, and a range of additional offerings (including furniture) were all listed with measurements and prices. Friezes, fasciae, architraves, and rusticated elements were sold by the foot. Further, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and composite capitals were sold “by the face” (if a customer only needed the front portion of a capital for their project, that was all they were required to purchase). The descriptions in the 1784 catalog can be easily paired with the engravings issued in 1779, and these two printed resources were likely used in tandem when negotiating commissions. When paired with the 1779 etchings, the 1784

catalog could also be sent to prospective clients who were otherwise unable to travel to London.

While the 1779 and 1784 compendia were useful for customers who wanted to know about prices, materials, and forms, they were admittedly less than poetic. Coade was aware that some elite patrons may have regarded her wares as “low” art in comparison to classical statuary or neoclassical marbles, and in 1799 she took action to access that segment of the market by publishing a third catalog and guide to her recently-opened Gallery (figs. 4.4-4.5).²¹² This publication opened with a cordial address to Gallery visitors and proceeded with an exhaustive list of the locations at home and abroad where Coade products could be found. A colorful description of the Gallery and a room-by-room listing of wares for sale followed. Most of the short “list” descriptions included in Coade’s 1784 *Catalog with Prices Affixed* were expanded, and many included poetry or quotes by authors ranging from Ovid and Homer to Milton and Shakespeare that illuminate the narrative behind the object in question. For example, no. 127 is “A female statue laying on a couch – as large as life, modeled by LOCATELLI, from nature;” just below the description is a short passage from Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*: “Would you not deem it breath’d? / Still methinks /

²¹² Eleanor Coade, *COADE’S GALLERY or EXHIBITION in ARTIFICIAL STONE, WESTMINSTER-BRIDGE-ROAD, by appointments, from the KING, PRINCE of WALES, DUKE of YORK, &c. of STATUES, VASES, BUSTOS, PEDESTALS, and STOVES, Medallions and Panels in Bass-Relief, MODELS from the Antique, Chimney-Pieces, Monuments, Fonts, Coats of Arms, &c. and Specimens from the Manufactory, at King’s Arms Stairs, NARROW-WALL, LAMBETH* (London, 1799).

There is an air comes from her. What fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?”²¹³

Several illustrations break up the text, including an impressive engraving of the Coade pediment atop London’s Pelican Life Insurance Company and a smaller plate of the firm’s trade card. These illustrations and descriptions may have been familiar to potential patrons. References to famous objects like the *Borghese* and *Medici Vases*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, or the *Laocoön* might have stimulated well-heeled patrons to recall their own experiences while traveling abroad on the Grand Tour.²¹⁴ Educated visitors might also have read about these objects in Winckelmann’s widely circulated *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (first edition 1755; English language edition 1765).

While each of Coade’s catalogs could be used as stand-alone tools to market products from the Manufactory, they could also be used together, alongside the firm’s trade cards, or in conjunction with a handful of engravings published in serials like the *European Magazine* (1787, 1802) (figs. 4.6-4.7). If the broad dissemination of Coade wares is an indicator, these marketing materials were quite effective both at home and abroad. By 1799 there were known examples of Coade statues, busts, and vases in St. Petersburg; capitals, friezes, keystones, and chimneypieces for the “New Federal City” of Washington; monuments in Jamaica; and gothic windows in Poland. While little

²¹³ Coade, *COADE’S GALLERY* (1799), 35.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-35. See no. 65, “The vase of the Medicis”; no. 66, “The Vase of the Villa Borghese”; no. 105, “A Statue of the Apollini at Florence”; no. 123, “The Laocoön – a group.”

recorded evidence in the form of daybooks or ledgers exists prior to 1813, research has revealed that Coade's international presence expanded further during the first decades of the nineteenth century: allegorical relief panels were ordered in 1809 for the Royal Bank of Montreal, and an elaborate gate with a coat of arms was ordered for Rio de Janiero in 1820.²¹⁵

Professional Modelling

The distinguished modellers who worked at the Manufactory were a critical part of Coade's success. These talented craftsmen were highly skilled professionals who helped the Coade firm bridge the perceived gap between fine and applied arts. Modellers like John Bacon (1740-1799) and Joseph Panzetta (active c. 1787-c. 1830) considered themselves artists in their own right. Evidence suggests that these men were skilled enough to conceptualize and produce finished sculpture on their own, but instead parlayed their extensive technical knowledge to assist high-profile artists who had the requisite reputations for securing the most lucrative commissions during the period. In many cases, the identities of modellers were buried in the public record

²¹⁵ Marc Lafrance, "Coade Stone in Canada," *Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology* 5:3 (1973): 103-108. For Coade stone commissions in Rio de Janiero see "Royal Arms surrounded by wreaths of laurel... supported by 2 colossal statues of Justice and Truth" and "statue St. George with St. John with eagle," Roscoe, *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660-1851*, Henry Moore Foundation, accessed January 27, 2015, <http://www.henry-moore.org/hmi/library/biographical-dictionary-of-sculptors-in-britain>.

beneath the more ubiquitous names of the artists they worked for. As a result, relatively little has been written about these key contributors to eighteenth and nineteenth-century sculptural practice.²¹⁶

The drive to create higher quality products for a growing consumer market via experimental technologies and techniques received encouragement from a range of professional societies that emerged in eighteenth-century London. These organizations grew out of Enlightenment precepts that emphasized reason, scientific thought, and intellectual exchange. The first of these, known as the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (RSA), was founded in 1754 to “embolden enterprise, enlarge science, refine art, improve our manufactures, and extend our commerce.”²¹⁷ Admitting men and women on equal terms, the RSA attracted members from many walks of life: among the early associates were Benjamin Franklin (scientist, statesman, printer, and political theorist), Elizabeth Montagu (social reformer, writer, and founder of the “Bluestocking Society” for women in literature), and Richard Arkwright (socially progressive factory owner and labor reformer). John Bacon exhibited at the RSA in 1759, and Eleanor Coade’s father

²¹⁶ One notable exception is Matthew Craske, “Model Making and Anti-Competitive Practices in the Late Eighteenth-Century London Sculpture Trade,” *RIHA Journal* 87 (2014).

²¹⁷ Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), <https://www.thersa.org>, accessed January 27, 2015.

George (1706-1769) joined in 1762, presumably to promote his textile business.²¹⁸

Although Eleanor was never admitted as a member and there is little written evidence for the important, interdisciplinary associations that individuals like Coade and Bacon might have made through the RSA, there can be little doubt that the institution encouraged members to think in new ways about their own areas of expertise.

The formation of the broadly conceived RSA spurred the creation of two additional, more specialized fraternal associations. The first, known as the Free Society of Artists (FSA), was chartered in 1761.²¹⁹ The FSA continued as a viable entity until it was dissolved in 1791, due in large part to the rise of the Royal Academy of Arts (RA). Founded in 1768, the RA was a specialized society dedicated to promoting the arts of design in Britain through education and exhibition. Much like the FSA, the RA provided an important forum for intellectual exchange, hosting exhibitions annually beginning in 1769. The relative success of the RA compared to the FSA may be attributed to the social cache of its early membership and its royal patronage: its founding associates were prominent painters, sculptors, and architects, including such notable personalities as Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough,

²¹⁸ Algernon Graves, *A Dictionary of Artists who have Exhibited Works on the Principal London Exhibitions from 1760 to 1893*, third ed. (Bath: Kingsmead Reprints, 1969).

²¹⁹ “The Free Society of Artists” was originally referred to as “The Society of Artists of Great Britain” and also went by the more colloquial title of “The Society of Arts.” With so many competing benevolent groups springing up around this time, many that had very similar monikers, I have chosen to refer to this group as the “The Free Society of Artists” and abbreviate their name as FSA.

Angelica Kauffman, Sir William Chambers, and Benjamin West. The RA's members were generally genteel, well traveled, and many were associated with the royal court.

Societies like the RSA, the FSA, and the RA aided young artists like John Bacon and Joseph Panzetta as they worked to gain traction and exposure in professional circles. Bacon was an early participant at the RSA and was awarded his first premium in 1759 for a figure of *Peace*. Touted as the “first great British sculptor of the Industrial Revolution,” Bacon was active in both the applied and the fine arts.²²⁰ The 1760s and 1770s were a busy period for his career. He exhibited at the RSA from 1759 to 1778 and at the RA starting at its inaugural exhibition in 1769. A life-size statue of *Mars*, exhibited at the RSA in 1771, apparently caused Benjamin West to remark, “If this is his first essay, what will this man be when he arrives at maturity?”²²¹ An early trade card reveals that Bacon was working as a stone carver and modeler at Daniel Pincot's shop around 1764-1766 (fig 4.8). He began collaborating with Josiah Wedgwood in 1769, and he established his home and workshop at seventeen Newman Street in 1774, just down the block from West's home at studio at fourteen Newman Street.²²²

²²⁰ Roscoe, “John Bacon,” *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660-1851*, Henry Moore Foundation.

²²¹ Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors*, 178.

²²² By the 1790s Bacon employed approximately twenty assistants at his studio at 17 Newman Street, and evidence suggests that the premises had been expanded to accommodate more workshop space and improve accessibility to the road for transport.

It was with Eleanor Coade, however, that Bacon found the source of steady employment that would occupy him for the remainder of his life. Bacon was an industrious designer for the Coade firm from 1769 until his death in 1799. He devised the allegorical composition *The attempts of TIME to destroy SCULPTURE and ARCHITECTURE, defeated by the vitrifying Aid of FIRE* for the firm's trade cards and for the main entry to the Gallery. Bacon also produced numerous designs for molds over the course of his three-decade tenure at the firm. While the 1799 Gallery Guide only attributed fourteen designs to the sculptor, Timothy Clifford has argued that the majority of the pre-1799 models at Coade's manufactory were probably of his invention.²²³ His most lauded Coade design was that of a bearded male nude figure seated on a rock, known as the River God (fig. 4.9). The River God graced Bacon's pre-Coade trade cards, and it reappeared in Coade's 1779 etchings as well as the 1784 *Catalog with Prices Affixed*.

Bacon's peripatetic affiliations, first with the RSA (1759), then with the FSA (1762-1768), and finally with the RA (1769-1799), are instructive for our understanding of the importance of the professional and social connections that these early societies provided for their membership. Bacon was formally trained and identified as a sculptor of fine art – even when he was working in plaster or artificial stone. While Eleanor Coade herself stopped exhibiting publicly in 1780 – presumably

²²³ Timothy Clifford, "John Bacon and the Manufacturers," *Apollo* CXXI: (1985): 293.

to focus her attention on the Manufactory – she chose to employ RA associates Bacon and Panzetta as modellers at her firm. The exhibition rates of Bacon and Panzetta fell off at the RA as Coade’s manufactory gained traction as a provider of sculpture and architectural ornament, but the social networks these artists maintained through the FSA, RSA, and RA continued to serve them well, perhaps even connecting to and enticing the President of the RA to approach the Coade firm with significant commissions.²²⁴

While Bacon has been praised as “the first great British sculptor of the Industrial Revolution,” we know less about his colleague, Joseph Panzetta. After taking a “long residence in Italy for improvement,” Panzetta arrived in London in 1787.²²⁵ An application for financial assistance to the Artist’s General Benevolent Institution (AGBI) in 1830 reveals that Panzetta had been trained, at least in part, by Royal Academician Joseph Wilton (1722-1803). Working as Wilton’s assistant, he executed vases (1787) and lions (1790) for Somerset House; a funerary monument to General Sir Archibald Campbell for Westminster Abbey (1795); and a funerary monument to Archbishop John Tillotson at Yorkshire (1796). In addition to his work with Wilton, Panzetta worked during the late 1780s as an assistant to RSA and RA affiliate Thomas Banks (1735-1805), executing the relief of “Shakespeare between the

²²⁴ For more information see Graves, *A Dictionary of Artists*.

²²⁵ Application for assistance for Mr. Joseph Panzetta, July 27, 1830, Artists General Benevolent Institution, London.

Dramatic Muse and the Genius of Painting” in Portland stone for the Shakespeare Gallery at Pall Mall (1789).²²⁶ Wilton and Banks were regular contributors to the RA’s annual exhibitions, and they probably encouraged the young sculptor to participate as an emerging professional. They were also closely affiliated with Benjamin West and may have encouraged the aging President to take note of the younger sculptor’s considerable talents.

Panzetta first exhibited “A Fountain basso relievo” at the RA in 1789 and returned in 1791 with three compositions drawn from classical literature and Greek mythology: “Polyphemus, Acis, and Galatea;” “Perseus transforming his enemies to stone;” and “Perseus going to cut off Medusa’s head.” Panzetta next submitted work to the RA in 1802: “Part of a monument for a child;” “The mother and her babe; from the Greek of Archias;” and “British Mars triumphant.” “The mother and her babe” was particularly well received by a critic in *The Monthly Visitor*, who noted,

In the model academy were busts of eminent characters, executed with singular merit, particularly those of the late Duke of Bedford, Charles Fox, and Arthur O’Leary. But the most striking piece was the mother and her babe, from the Greek of Archias, by Panzetta. The subject [was] highly impressive....²²⁷

The annual RA exhibition catalogs reveal only two more nineteenth-century submissions from Panzetta: in 1808 he contributed a model of a funerary monument

²²⁶ Application for assistance for Mr. Joseph Panzetta, July 27, 1830, Artists General Benevolent Institution, London.

²²⁷ “Exhibition of the Royal Academy at Somerset-House for the Year 1802,” *The Monthly Visitor, and new family magazine*, May 1802, *British Periodicals* 40-46: 45.

honoring the recently-deceased Whig Charles James Fox, and in 1810 he sent a bust of the Congregationalist minister William Jay.

A close examination of Panzetta's exhibition history at the RA raises several important points. For one, there is marked shift after the turn of the century in terms of the subject matter he chose to depict: while stoic mythological and literary themes dominated Panzetta's early submissions from the 1790s, his work in the 1800s appealed to sentimental emotion and emergent ideas of British nationalism. Further, Panzetta's eagerness to exhibit at the RA seemed to wane after 1802. While his exhibition listings from 1791 suggest ambitious, complex subjects – in line with the Academy's preference for classical and historical themes – the sculptor's submissions in 1802 anticipate another segment of the sculpture industry with subjects for funerary or monumental purposes. His submissions in 1808 and 1810 continue this practical trend. Notably, the annual RA catalogs included addresses for participating artists, and by 1808, Panzetta's "place of abode" was listed as Coade's Artificial Stone Factory, Lambeth.²²⁸

This evidence suggests that the thematic shifts in Panzetta's designs and his decreased participation at the RA's annual exhibitions between 1789 and 1810 were a consequence of his increased involvement at Coade's Artificial Stone Manufactory. While Panzetta never achieved the lofty status of Academician, his ambitious and

²²⁸ Algernon Graves, F.S.A., *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904* (London: Henry Graves and Co. Ltd. And George Bell and Sons, 1906), VI: 46.

well-received submissions to the annual exhibitions in 1791 and 1802 may have caught Eleanor Coade's eye and led him to work for the firm in the early years of the nineteenth century. His name appears frequently in the Coade record books spanning the period 1813 to 1821, and his 1830 application to the AGBI stated he had worked for the Coade firm for twenty six years, placing him at the Manufactory as early as 1804. The figural group of *Polyphemus, Acis, and Galatea* – marked no. 37 in Coade's 1799 Gallery Guide – could have been the same composition that Panzetta submitted to the RA's Model Academy in 1791 and may suggest that the sculptor supplied designs to the Manufactory as early as the 1790s.²²⁹ Notable commissions during his tenure at the Coade firm listed in his application to the AGBI included a figure of George III for Lincoln Heath (1810); a "colossal" figure of Baron Roland Hill for the Lord Hill Column at Shrewsbury (1814-1816); and a figure of Britannia for the town hall in Devonport, Plymouth, Devon (1835). Most notable of all was his "large pediment at the Greenwich Hospital presenting national regret for the loss of Nelson designed by Mr. West."²³⁰ I contend that Panzetta's technical knowledge and artistic skill was integral to the successful completion of West's *Grand Model of Neptune*.

²²⁹ For Coade's listing of the figural group of *Polyphemus, Acis, and Galatea* see Coade, *COADE'S GALLERY* (1799), 22; for Panzetta's contribution to the RA Model Academy in 1791 see Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, 46.

²³⁰ Application for assistance for Mr. Joseph Panzetta, July 27, 1830, Artists General Benevolent Institution, London.

Process Makes Perfect

While no archival materials have been located that illuminate the production process of West's pediment, much can be learned from William Henry Pyne's (1769-1842) 1824 visit to Coade's Gallery and Workshop. This experience allowed the journalist a unique opportunity to observe and document the careful processes by which Coade wares were created. Escorted by manager William Croggon, Pyne recorded the use of molds as well as the meticulous handiwork of Coade's modellers, providing readers with a rare window into the art of manufacturing artificial stone:

Some articles are first formed roughly to give them the external shape in the mould; they are then polished by the chisel while in the soft state, which [the modellers] endeavor to preserve by wrapping the block carefully in wet cloths. In some cases, particularly enrichments prepared in matrices are added; and in others the whole is nearly the work of the hand. The former of these instances refers chiefly to the manner of forming vases, the latter to the manner of forming figures, which in some cases are turned like pottery on a wheel, and moulded by the hand like smaller ware... After the figure is completed in all its parts, it is cut into separate pieces, for the conveniency of introducing it to the oven, and it is afterwards put together, firmly cemented, and iron rods introduced into the arms or other parts that may require to be strengthened.²³¹

Pyne's description is helpful for understanding how Coade's workshop operated. The process began when an artist like Benjamin West conceptualized a design. Designs might be culled from a variety of sources including pattern books, existing classical or

²³¹ William Henry Pyne, "Coade's Gallery of Artificial Stone Ornaments," *Somerset House Gazette, and Literary Museum; Or, Weekly Miscellany of Fine Arts, Antiquities, and Literary Chit Chat* (London: 1823-1824); 381-382.

contemporary objects, or even the imagination of the artist. Preliminary sketches lead to the development of small, working models in clay or even wax. Then, working with a modeller like Bacon or Panzetta, the artist supervised the production of a scale model. This scale model was then developed by a highly skilled mold-maker. Molds were created, prepared clay was rolled out and pushed into the molds, and the resulting forms were allowed to dry to a soft state. As the clay body slowly dried, it naturally pulled away from the mold. Semi-dry pieces were then assembled into a complete composition, wrapped with wet cloths as indicated by Pyne, and finished with tools by the modeller and perhaps also the artist. Once the artist was satisfied with the overall form and finishing, large figural compositions like the Nelson pediment were carefully cut apart for the firing process. Skilled “firemen” were tasked with carefully heating the commodious kilns to maintain high temperatures, with firings often lasting four or five days and requiring significant amounts of costly coal fuel. Once the firing was complete, successfully fired parts were reassembled, strengthened with interior supports, and cemented.

Ushering a sculpture to completion at the Coade workshop was not unlike the process of finishing a plaster that would be prepared for sale on the fine art market. These fine art plaster sculptures were often so highly finished that they were virtually indistinguishable from their marble counterparts, even to the discerning eye of a connoisseur. Pyne even drew parallels between the art of artificial stonework and that of fine art sculpture. Comparing the process at the Coade Manufactory to what he had

observed during a visit to the workshop of Royal Academician Sir Francis Chantrey, the journalist reminded readers that

It is well known that [sculptors]...seldom employ themselves in [carving marble blocks], but allow inferior workmen to make the copy from their model in clay, reserving to themselves the last finish to the marble by their own hand...by uniting the nicety of the hand with the readiness of the mould in giving the general design, [the Coade process] at once combines cheapness with a certain degree of intrinsic value, arising out of the individual skill of the artist.²³²

Here, Pyne is making an important claim for the indexical value of Coade's sculpted wares – they are simultaneously inexpensive and more authentic in conventional and aesthetic terms than most mass-produced sculpture because their relationship to the “nicety of the hand” of the artist is more immediate. Pyne's narrative also reminds us – however backhandedly – just how important skilled modellers like Bacon and Panzetta could be for the artist's successful execution of a commission.

What Pyne's narrative does not convey is the considerable anxiety that probably surrounded the final stages of the production process. By the time an object (especially a large, multi-figure commission like the *Grand Model of Neptune*) reached Coade's kilns, a great deal of time, energy, and material had been invested in its production. Even the slightest inattention to detail – an air pocket, for example – could lead to a crack in the final product or a devastating explosion that had the potential to destroy not only the object itself but everything surrounding it in the kiln. If this occurred, Coade's team of workmen had to start over. While Pyne's description

²³² Ibid, 381-382.

of the finishing process differed from the cutaway scene on the firm's trade cards discussed above, both remind readers that there was quite a lot of hot, dirty labor implied in the goods that the Coade Manufactory designed and sold.

With this in mind one has to wonder: How active was Benjamin West in the realization of the Nelson pediment? The artist had already had some experience collaborating with Coade in 1789 when he designed bas-reliefs and statuary for the Chapel at Greenwich Hospital. West provided the firm with plans for four oval medallions of the prophets Daniel, Micah, Zechariah, and Malachi, as well as sketches for six circular medallions of scenes from the Acts of the Apostles.²³³ A year later in 1790, the artist designed four life-size freestanding figures of *Charity*, *Faith*, *Meekness*, and *Hope* that were executed in artificial stone and installed in the niches of the Chapel's entrance vestibule (figs. 4.10-4.13).²³⁴ While these sculpted objects are striking as outliers within West's larger body of work, they were in line with the sorts of statuary and ornament that the Coade firm churned out on a regular basis.

The pediment was a different sort of undertaking, however. Instead of a straightforward standing figure or molded relief panel, West worked with Panzetta to conceptualize and execute a complicated, one-of-a-kind commission. Several letters

²³³ John Bold, *Greenwich: An Architectural History of the Royal Hospital for Seamen and the Queen's House* (New Haven and London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press in association with English Heritage, 2000), 176.

²³⁴ Bold, *Greenwich*, 176.

between the Governors at Greenwich Hospital and West reveal that the pediment was designed and executed between 1810 and 1812 and that the estimated cost was twelve hundred pounds (a fraction of what a similar design would cost if executed in natural stone). The left lower corner of the pediment is inscribed “MODELLED BY B. WEST AND JOSEPH PANZETTA.” The frontispiece of the 1813 *Description* credited West as the designer, and the introduction notes that their collective efforts were “finely expressed in the grand model just executed by Mr. West, and Mr. Panzetta, under his immediate inspection.”²³⁵

The initial designs for the *Grand Model of Neptune* likely began much like West’s 1789 sketches for bas-reliefs or his 1790 sketches for *Charity, Faith, Meekness, and Hope* at Greenwich Chapel. Rather than using pattern books to guide his hand, however, West’s first-hand encounters with the Elgin marbles were an important source for his designs for the Nelson pediment. Once West was satisfied with his initial concept, he would have shared his sketches with the modeller who would most closely assist him on the production of the commission: Joseph Panzetta. The two men would have discussed the composition: West probably spoke of the energy and sentiment that he wanted the narrative to relay; Panzetta likely calculated how he would assemble individually molded components in ways that were seamless,

²³⁵ Benjamin West, *Description OF THE GRAND Model of Neptune giving up the Body of NELSON, With the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia, Executed from a Design of BENJAMIN WEST, ESQ., FOR GREENWICH HOSPITAL, At COADE and SEALY’S ORNAMENTAL STONE MANUFACTORY, Lambeth* (London, 1813), Introduction (first page, no numbers).

aesthetically pleasing, and impervious to the weather. No matter the details of their conversation, the limits of this collaborative undertaking were delineated by the material constraints of its molded Coade stone body.

Once West and Panzetta settled on a final design, molds were created for each of the pediment's component parts. Clay had to be carefully prepared, then cast, then allowed to dry to a semi-hard state. Once the sculpted elements were extracted from their molds and assembled, West may have had a hand in the finishing process, working alongside (or perhaps hovering over) Panzetta into the wee hours of the morning. Once the pediment's elements were successfully fired, they would have been transported via boat downriver to the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich.

The installation of the pediment was surely just as complicated as the manufacture of its parts. Installed just after Farington's visit with West in late 1811, its unveiling may have loosely been timed to take advantage of commemorations surrounding the fifth anniversary of Nelson's death in October 1805 and his state funeral at Greenwich in January 1806. The pediment's high relief components would have been assembled, like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, nearly forty feet above a stone courtyard. The sections were carefully orchestrated so that very few seams are visible from the courtyard below; fissures are observable only along the base of the figural relief as well as near the elbows and shoulders of some of the figures. These seams may indicate that these high-relief areas have been reinforced with steel rods for stability. While the pediment's relief sculptures appear to be carved in the round, it is more likely that many of these component parts are in fact hollow on their reverse

face. The backside of a preliminary cast of the pediment's ferocious British lion, for example, reveals at least three distinct segments that have been hand-pressed into a mold (fig 4.14). Notably, marks in the clay body also reveal the long extensions of fingertips – perhaps those of Benjamin West, Joseph Panzetta, or one of the nameless “mechanicks” who assisted at the Manufactory.

A Recipe for Success

How might such a lauded artist – the President of the RA, no less – have come to work with Joseph Panzetta – a relatively obscure modeller at Coade's Manufactory? A variety of factors converged in the first decades of the nineteenth century to draw West toward the Coade firm and realize the *Grand Model of Neptune* in artificial stone.

West would have most certainly been attracted to Coade's professional, public identity. The firm's trade cards and printed catalogs were informative, economical, and efficient, and allowed Coade to reach patrons in far-flung locations across the globe. This marketing technique surely struck a chord with the aging artist: West had long profited from printing technologies that allowed for the wide dissemination and reach of engraved plates after popular history paintings like *The Death of General Wolfe*. As noted earlier, West would employ similar textual tactics when outlining the Nelson pediment's in the 1813 *DESCRIPTION*. While Eleanor Coade was certainly not the only businessperson to employ this type of narrative strategy, the marketing

used by both West and Coade does reveal similar worldviews of the period consumer landscape.

Further, the businessman in West would have appreciated the low cost and expeditious production timelines of Coade's wares. As discussed in chapter three, monuments could be extraordinarily expensive and time consuming to design and execute. Many design competitions, such as the Duke of Clarence's 1799 project to erect a Naval Pillar, foundered as a result of limited funding and waning public attention. Coade's artificial stone – dependable, resilient, cost-effective, and locally sourced – was the perfect solution for West and his design for the Nelson pediment.

West might also have been attracted to the similarities between Coade's Gallery and Manufactory and those of other successful ceramics manufactories from the period, most especially the Wedgwood Potteries (est. 1759). While Coade's workshop was smaller in scale than Wedgwood's sprawling establishment at Etruria, a similar workshop mentality prevailed. As noted earlier, Pyne's narrative of his visit to the Manufactory indicated that finished Coade wares were not the result of a single "hand," but rather the culmination of the efforts of a variety of skilled specialists ranging from artists, designers, and modellers to mold-makers and firemen. Further, Pyne's descriptions of "shew rooms [containing] a great variety of ornamental figures, enriched vases, baptismal fonts, garden fountains, and capitals of pillars of different orders... of every variety of size... piled up one on the other decreasing to the top of the column, as gardeners range their flower-pots" may have encouraged readers to draw parallels between Coade's Gallery and the "various Table and desert services"

and great “variety of setts of Vases” that decorated the tables and walls of Wedgwood’s showroom in London’s fashionable West End.²³⁶ The similarities between Coade and Wedgwood even extended to the ways that they marketed their wares via illustrated catalogs.

West also would have been impressed by the wide range of neoclassical ornaments and statuary for sale at Coade’s Gallery. West recommended that his students study the *Hercules*, the *Laocoön*, and the *Gladiator*, as they embodied “appropriate character in art, particularly in sculpture.”²³⁷ The artist had used examples of such classical figures for his historical compositions since his early travels in Italy (1760-1763). In the landmark essay “Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity,” Jules Prown located source materials for many of West’s early compositions ranging from the *Apollo Belvedere* (see West’s *Savage Warrior Taking Leave of His Family*, ca. 1760), to the *Ara Pacis* (see *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, 1768), to the *Meleager* (see *Hercules Between Virtue and Vice*, 1764), to *Trajan’s Column* (see *The Indians Delivering up the English Captives to Colonel Bouquet near his Camp at the Forks of Muskingum in*

²³⁶ Pyne, *Coade’s Gallery*, 381-382. Wedgwood letter from the Etruria Collection, May 31, 1767, E25-18141.

²³⁷ John Galt, *The life, studies, and works of Benjamin West, esq., president of the Royal academy of London, composed from materials furnished by himself*, second edition (London, 1820), 152.

North America in Novr. 1764, 1765).²³⁸ The ease with which West could obtain accurate copies of such acclaimed source materials from Coade's firm must have made his head spin.

While West was certainly attracted to Coade's Gallery and Manufactory for the practical reasons already noted, the firm may have also been attractive to the artist because of its association with West's social and professional networks. West's activities with the RSA, the FSA, and the RA would have fostered an atmosphere of innovation and experimentation that emerged as a result of progressive Enlightenment ideologies of the eighteenth century. In addition to these social networks, it is likely that the physical geography of London encouraged the cross-pollination of ideas and working methods between artists and manufacturers. Writing years later in *The Crayon*, Rembrandt Peale commented on the propitious location of Benjamin West's home, gallery, and studio:

On establishing himself in London, Mr. West selected a retired street in the West End – himself the only artist in that quarter – but such was the effect of his growing celebrity, that *Newman Street* finally became a street of artists, and their studios in the greatest demand.²³⁹

The West End was a vortex of creative activity. By 1810, Newman Street was home to at least eight additional artists, including the sculptors Thomas Banks and John Bacon. As discussed earlier, these artists maintained strong ties with Eleanor Coade's firm.

²³⁸ Jules David Prown, "Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity," *American Art* 10:2 (1996): 29–49.

²³⁹ Rembrandt Peale, "Notes and Queries," *The Crayon* 4 (1857): 308.

Galleries and high-end shops, such as Wedgwood's ceramics showrooms on Great Newport Street and St. James Square, populated the neighborhood. The area was also home to artisans ranging from "colourmen" who manufactured and supplied artists' materials, to carvers, gilders, printers, bookbinders, and jewelers, and was only several blocks removed from the RA's headquarters at Somerset House.²⁴⁰ Canaletto's *Westminster Bridge from the North on Lord Mayor's Day* (1746) gives a good impression of what must have been a bustling, up-and-coming district: countless boats filled with people and goods seem headed in every direction as the gothic towers of the Palace of Westminster frame the right side of the canvas (fig. 4.15).

Further, the new Westminster Bridge allowed for increased traffic between the West End and South London's developing industrial hub where Coade's Manufactory was located. Richard Horwood's detailed plan of London provides a glimpse into what was happening on the south shore of the Thames in the cramped, working-class landscape of Lambeth. It must have been a smelly, damp place to work: more than a dozen timber yards surrounded the Manufactory, in addition to a coal yard, a brewery, a tannery, and the Lambeth Water Works.²⁴¹ Proximity to industrial resources like these may have been what enticed Coade (and perhaps other artificial stone

²⁴⁰ The artists: George Dawe, Henry Howard, John Jackson, Thomas Stothard, James Ward, John Russell, Thomas Banks, and John Bacon. For more information see Holger Hock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30-31.

²⁴¹ Richard Horwood, *Map of London, Westminster, and Southwark*, 1792-1799, accessed on January 27, 2015, <http://www.motco.com/map/81005>.

manufacturers as well) to situate her business on the south bank of the river, as the timber and coal yards could have easily supplied the fuel necessary to heat her large kilns. The close geographic proximity of this industrial center to a more fashionable, sanitized consumer center would have encouraged competition while driving prices down. It was a symbiotic relationship, if ever one existed.

There may have been an additional reason that Coade's wares struck West as the solution to his sculptural aspirations. The aging President of the RA may have experimented with Coade stone in an effort to elevate modern British sculpture while securing his own artistic legacy for posterity. The artist's unconventional use of artificial stone aligned with his longstanding desire to explore, experiment with, and take advantage of new methods and technologies during his late career. These experiments were likely spurred on by West's fall from favor with the English court during the early years of the nineteenth century – and many of them had failed miserably.

West's first botched attempt to cement his reputation via a sculptural medium transpired between 1789 and 1791, when he designed the decorative program for a ceiling at the Queen's Lodge at Windsor.²⁴² The scheme consisted of nine elements: a central roundel of *Genius Calling Forth Arts and Sciences*; four allegorical corner panels of agriculture, manufactory, commerce, and riches; and four frieze-like

²⁴² There is some debate about which room the designs were meant to adorn. See von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 409-413.

horizontal “intermediate compartments” representing astronomy and navigation, electricity and geography, chemistry and botany, and fortification and gunnery.²⁴³ While the ceiling no longer exists, it is possible to imagine what the finished installation might have looked like from four remaining oil sketches. A nude, winged Genius is surrounded by allegorical figures representing painting, sculpture, architecture, navigation, geography, and astronomy in *Genius Calling Forth Arts and Sciences* (1789) (fig. 4.16).²⁴⁴ *Agriculture* (c. 1789) presents viewers with several figures engaged in the process of harvesting wheat while a wind-powered mill grinds grain in the distance (fig. 4.17).²⁴⁵ *British Manufactory* (c. 1789) highlights British industries, including weaving, spinning, ceramics, and metallurgy; the prominent jasperware vases in the foreground (referencing Wedgwood’s experiments with clay bodies and the Portland Vase) led some period historians to refer to this composition as “Etruria,” a reference to Josiah Wedgwood’s famous factories outside of London

²⁴³ *The Windsor Guide; containing a Description of the Town and Castle; the present state of the paintings and curiosities in the royal apartments; an historical account of the monuments, &c. in St. George's Chapel; with the Foundation of the Royal College of St. George, and the Institution and Ceremonies of the Order of the Garter. Also, a description of the lodges, parks and forest. With a View of the Town and Castle* (1795), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Delaware Library, 8 Mar. 2015. DOI: CW101959035.

²⁴⁴ For more on *Genius Calling Forth Arts and Sciences* (1789) see Staley and von Erffa, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, no. 435, 409-411. West’s oil sketch is in the collection of the De Young Museum, San Francisco, CA.

²⁴⁵ For more information on *Agriculture / Husbandry Aided by Arts and Commerce* (1789) *ibid*, 411. West’s oil sketch is in the collection of the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC.

(fig. 4.18).²⁴⁶ The last of these sketches, *Riches* (1789), features allegorical figures of Inland Navigation (left) and Marine Navigation (right) attending to Britannia (center) as the blue waters of the Thames glimmer in the distance (fig. 4.19).²⁴⁷ West's designs are united by their romantic, painterly style and a progressive, nationalistic sentiment.

West's iconography here was not unconventional – but the material that he used was: namely, stained marble dust. Charles Knight's *Windsor Guide* (1795) described the completed ceiling:

In the beginning of the year 1789, a ceiling was affixed up in the drawing-room of the Queen's lodge, by an artist of the name of Haas, of a peculiar and novel art, to which no name has yet been applied; but the figures are in imitation of, and have all the force and effect of the best oil painting; with this great advantage, that the various groupes of figures may be distinctly seen at any point of view. Only one simple article is used by the artist, which is stained marble dust; this is strewed with a piece of card, either on board or canvass. The composition of, as well as the manner of using the cement, is known only to the artist himself, which upon trial, has been proved to resist the various changes of weather...The subjects of the ceiling are from the designs of Benjamin West, Esq.²⁴⁸

The artist, George Haas, was a German “table decker” working at Windsor in the late eighteenth century. His primary responsibility was to provide elaborate table

²⁴⁶ For more information on *British Manufactory / Manufactory Giving Support to Industry / Etruria* (1789-1791) *ibid*, 411-412. West's oil sketch is in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland OH.

²⁴⁷ For more information on *Riches / Marine and Inland Navigation Enriching Britannia* (1788-1789) *ibid*, 412-413. West's oil sketch is in the collection of the Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley MA.

²⁴⁸ *The Windsor Guide*, second edition (1804), 117-118.

decorations made of colored sand, marble dust, or sugar for royal events.²⁴⁹ These ephemeral decorations were situated on plain white tablecloths between fruit bowls or sweetmeat dishes and discarded after the meal. Haas's more enduring "fixed" work for West in stained marble dust developed from this tradition.²⁵⁰

West's collaboration with this talented German table decker is notable for several reasons. First, West conceptualized his designs with the expectation that they would be carried out and executed by Haas, a specialist who possessed a skill set extending beyond West's more conventional training as a painter. As a result West's final designs were conditioned by the material potential of Haas's stained marble dust technique. It was one thing to design and execute a work of art independently, but West's decision to outsource the execution of the final panels to Haas tells us that he had an interest in the novelty – and perhaps the potential – of the proposed medium. Further, this early collaboration bore a striking resemblance to the sort of process that would guide the design and execution of the *Grand Model of Neptune* nearly two decades later.

It is significant that West wanted these panels executed in marble dust as opposed to stained sand, colored sugar, or even paint. Marble was the material of choice for sculptors of the classical past and the neoclassical present. Marble was

²⁴⁹ Staley and von Erffa, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 410.

²⁵⁰ For more information on Haas, see John Mummery, "Marmortinto, or Sand-Painting," *Notes and Queries* (April 8, 1854), 327-328.

permanent, refined, and elevated. Hiring Haas to execute this commission in stained marble dust allowed West to draw parallels between the classical past and the increasingly industrialized present. This unconventional approach to painting was a technical novelty, and further evinces West's spirited sense of experimentation as well as his interest in artistic innovation.

Unfortunately for West, the decorative scheme for the Queen's Lodge at Windsor suffered from the dual threat of structural instability and royal disfavor. As George III's health declined around the turn of the century, the Queen grew less amenable to West's associations with the King. According to Joseph Farington, Charlotte went so far as to request that the ceiling be disassembled, and in the process of executing her request several of Haas's delicate panels were cracked.²⁵¹ In their cracked state, the panels remained an eyesore through the end of West's life, and were finally taken down entirely when the Lodge was demolished in 1823 by order of George IV.

Just six years after receiving the commission for the ceiling of the Queen's Lodge, West identified a new opportunity that he hoped would guarantee his seat at the table of world art. Unfortunately for West, this new opportunity would be even

²⁵¹ Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre, 16 Vols., November 20, 1811 (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1978), VI: 2166, 2172, 2173.

more humiliating than his run-ins with Queen Charlotte over the fate of the stained marble dust ceiling.

West had been interested in the techniques used by Italian painters since his extended visit to Italy (1760–1763), but he could not understand why his best efforts to copy works by Venetian masters resulted in work that looked comparatively lifeless.²⁵² Art historians have suggested that he was not alone in his curiosity, and that there was in fact a longstanding desire in the London art world among artists, critics, and connoisseurs to “get to the bottom of Venetian materials and techniques,” as Angus Trumble explains, “to recover the lost secrets of Titian’s studio practices, to emulate his elusive, maddeningly unattainable effects of rich color and luminosity, and to harness all this for the benefit of a new and even greater British school.”²⁵³ If West could only emulate such works with success – and perhaps teach his students at the Royal Academy to do so as well – London would be poised at the center of a new renaissance in the fine arts. The city could be a Venice for the modern, industrialized world.

An opportunity to investigate this interest in these “lost” painting techniques arose in 1795. West was approached by Thomas and Ann Jemima Provis, two

²⁵² For an excellent discussion and analysis of the Venetian Secret, see Angus Trumble, Mark N. Aronson, and Helen A. Cooper, *Benjamin West and the Venetian Secret: Yale Center for British Art, September 18, 2008-January 4, 2009* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2008).

²⁵³ Trumble, *Benjamin West and the Venetian Secret*, 6.

shadowy personalities who claimed to have in their possession a manuscript containing the techniques used by Venetian painters of the High Renaissance. The Provises offered West, along with a select group of his fellow academicians, exclusive access to their “Venetian Secret” in exchange for payment of two hundred pounds each and the promise of secrecy. West took the bait.

West’s trials with the “Venetian Secret” yielded a sizeable history painting titled *Cicero Discovering the Tomb of Archimedes* (1796-1797) (fig. 4.20). The painting’s subject is telling. Cicero, considered to be one of the greatest classical orators and writers, is depicted as he stumbles upon Archimedes’ tomb. Archimedes’ foremost achievement was thought to have been his discovery that the sphere has two-thirds the volume of a cylinder, and his tomb bears these telltale shapes, one on top of the other. Period viewers of this work would have understood that West was drawing parallels between himself and Cicero and between the Venetian Secret and Archimedes’ great mathematical discovery. West was conspicuously writing himself into the greatest achievements of the classical past, using the Provises’s “secret” as his calling card. Displayed at the Academy’s annual exhibition in April 1797, the painting had a cold, bluish cast that caused one *Bell’s Weekly* critic to remark on its remarkable “puperine” hue.²⁵⁴ Fellow painter James Barry was perhaps the harshest critic of all, writing in an open letter to the Society of the Dilettanti:

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 23.

Those who go no farther than mere Dilletantship may well laugh at all the fuss about this new nostrum, this Venetian secret of Painting. Such a concurrence of ridiculous circumstances, of so many, such gross absurdities, and such busy industrious folly, in contriving for the publicity and exposure of a quacking, disgraceful imposture, is, I believe, unparalleled in the history of the art. I should laugh too, were I not withheld by considerations for the reputation of the country, of the English School of Art, for the character of the Royal Academy, and for the fate of its poor pupils, now sent adrift to search out for themselves that true Venetian art of painting, which must not be taught them, as the President and so many of the Academicians are each of them bound under a forfeiture of £200 to keep it secret.²⁵⁵

The Provises's elaborate hoax had run its course by the middle of 1797. It was personally mortifying for West, as the artist had dedicated funds as well as almost two years of his time experimenting with the bogus formula. The debacle was also potentially damaging to "the reputation of the country, of the English School of Art, for the character of the Royal Academy, and for the fate of its poor pupils," as Barry had noted in his letter. As the head of the Academy and the most vocal proponent of the dubious "Secret," West was doubly shamed.

Why did West fall for the Provises's ruse? Angus Trumble has argued that West "had a consistent tendency to seek whatever was most likely at any given moment to constitute an artistic philosopher's stone, the better to cement the important position in the history of art that he felt himself called to occupy."²⁵⁶ This drive to prove himself, alongside a recurring desire to innovate, may be what spurred West

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

forward with the Provises's manuscript, even while he faced crumbling relations with the King and Queen and diminished patronage from the Court.

In many ways, *the Grand Model of Neptune* embodied the same innovative attitudes that West brought to his experiments with marble dust and the Venetian Secret. This spirit is most evident in the text of the 1813 *Description*:

The intense fires to which this Lithodipyra is exposed in the kilns, gives it a durability resembling Jasper or Porphyry; so that, when brought up to their necessary heat, which nearly approaches Vitrification, neither frosts nor damps can any ways affect it, consequently it ever retains that sharpness given it by the genius and hands of the sculptor, every fine touch depicting the passions, and swelling the sinews, is not only preserved, but heightened; nothing is lost from passing through the chissels of inferior workmen. It also possesses properties of resisting lightening... on the contrary, fire purifies it, so that had Phidias, that eminent Grecian sculptor, worked with a material like this, the touch of his graceful figures, would have been preserved to the latest period, in all its native elegance.²⁵⁷

West's assertion that Phidias – one of the most (if not *the* most) praised sculptors of classical antiquity – would have benefitted from Coade's unique "Lithodipyra" indicates that West was attempting to place this modern, industrial material into an ongoing conversation spanning centuries and continents. Coade stone was resilient and timeless, yet modern and state of the art.

In many ways *The Grand Model of Neptune* was Benjamin West's last great experiment. Overlooking the interior courtyard of the King William Block at the

²⁵⁷ West, *Description*, 7.

Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich, the pediment occupied a broad triangular space approximately ten feet in height by forty feet in length and presented viewers with the grand scene of Nelson's apotheosis. The entire commission took only two years to design and execute (1810–1812), and if West's preliminary estimates were correct, the final cost was no more than twelve hundred pounds. While the formal significance of this object was discussed in the previous chapter, I argue here that the success of the Nelson pediment was inextricably linked to West's decision to execute the commission in Eleanor Coade's remarkable artificial stone.

Writing about the relevance of material in *The Art Bulletin*, Michael Ann Holly recently noted, "A medium is that which carries a visual message, and together – structure and image – they result in the thickness, the sensuous materiality of a work of art, a thing among other things. Yet in its physical vibrancy, its affect and effect, this special thing possesses a certain kind of agency."²⁵⁸ This comment bears special resonance following a discussion of the *Grand Model of Neptune's* unique Coade stone body. I argue that West's pediment possesses the agency and thick materiality to which Holly refers by virtue of its physical composition, its links to important figures and moments in history, its role in period debates over modernity and the role of the Royal Academy, its fixed location at Greenwich, and its printed presence.

The pediment's form and function is most immediately determined by its Coade stone body. As noted earlier, the clay required a significant investment of time

²⁵⁸ Michael Ann Holly, "Notes from the Field," *The Art Bulletin* 95.1 (2013): 15

to prepare and had to be thoroughly mixed to a uniform, homogenous appearance before it could be cast in prepared plaster molds. This raw mixture contained a high proportion of pre-fired grog, and was thus less prone to shrinkage and more likely to survive the extended firing times required for large objects. This high level of dependability meant that the final profit margins for Coade wares were high when compared to artificial stone competitors whose wares were less risk-averse. Coade stone's vitrified body was also incredibly weather resistant, especially when compared with natural stone options. While Portland stone may have contained "vast Numbers and Clusters of *small Shells*," and Bath stone was hard to work with because of its "spongy Body" with "considerable Vacuities," Coade's wares were uniform in appearance and virtually impervious to the grime and soot associated with the climate of nineteenth-century London.²⁵⁹ Further, Coade's homogenous clay body was perfectly suited to achieve the symmetry, regularity, and consistency required by early nineteenth-century neoclassical aesthetics. Coade stone's light colored body could be polished to imitate expensive marble – but the expense and trouble of actually carving marble was fully mitigated. When clay was prepared and rolled out into sheets, modellers at the Manufactory could push the material into detailed molds, thus ensuring a high level of accuracy for the final products.

West's narrative, what Holly refers to as the "structure and image" of the pediment's message, was entirely reliant on the physicality of Coade's artificial stone

²⁵⁹ Holt, *A Short TREATISE of Artificial Stone*.

and the working knowledge of the material possessed by skilled craftsmen at the Manufactory. While West conceptualized the overall design of the Nelson pediment, and Panzetta brought these ideas into three-dimensional being, there is another important factor to consider in our assessment of the pediment: the agency of the Coade stone itself. No matter how skilled the artist or mechanic, the physical material of the pediment was the determining factor for what was possible to achieve. In this way, the clay body of the sculptures takes on an additional and significant meaning.

While the pediment's "sensuous materiality" cannot be denied, *The Grand Model of Neptune* also gained significance through its links to important historical figures and objects. Most obviously, the object is a memorial to Horatio Nelson, one of the most beloved historical military figures in nineteenth-century Britain. Benjamin West has represented himself well here, too, both through his disembodied portrait that hovers near the center of the composition and through the small but distinctive credit line inscribed "MODELLED BY B. WEST AND JOSEPH PANZETTA." While less well-known, Joseph Panzetta's work as a co-contributor to the project reminded period viewers that the project was a collaborative effort requiring specialized knowledge and skills. The fact that the pediment had been designed and executed by West and Panzetta granted the object a certain indexical value. Together, Nelson, West, and Panzetta lent the pediment important historical credence and justification.

In addition to its links to important historical personalities, the pediment's "physical vibrancy" is further bolstered by the role that the sculpted elegy played in

period debates over modernity, industrialization, art production, and the role of the Royal Academy. Several components of the pediment – most notably the emphatic horse heads – embody the form and energy of the Parthenon marbles so vociferously that they may actually have been cast from molds made directly from the treasured antiquities. While Coade’s molds have long since been destroyed and no evidence has surfaced to corroborate my observation, the similarities between the Parthenon fragments and the Nelson pediment are impossible to ignore and would have been immediately evident to period viewers. Likewise, the pediment offered a positive footnote in the history of British art and may have forced concerned critics (for example James Barry, who had criticized West’s previous involvement with the Venetian Secret) to reevaluate their assessment of how West’s contributions could positively inflect the larger history of British art. I argue that the material used for the pediment, when combined with classical forms and modern-day heroes, positioned London – and the Royal Academy – at the center of an industrial renaissance in the fine arts.

The pediment’s thick materiality is also informed by its placement at Greenwich. As noted in chapter three, the pediment’s position within the King William Block of the Royal Naval Hospital meant that it was immediately accessible to retired pensioners, many of whom might have recalled Nelson’s funeral and lying in period in the adjacent ceremonial space of the Painted Hall. The experience of the pediment – the damp, salty air that surrounded it, the sounds of pensioners and

activities at the hospital, the smells of the adjacent subterranean refectories on site – lent it an important degree of meaning, too.

Finally, the pediment was exponentially informed by the text provided in West's 1813 *DESCRIPTION*. The far reach of print culture in nineteenth-century Britain has been mentioned numerous times in the preceding pages, but it is important here as an additional layer of meaning that contributes to the overall effect of the Nelson pediment. Depending on the reader's background, the pamphlet's text could carry a variety of levels of meaning, and perhaps resonated even more with readers who were also familiar with Coade's extensive printed presence consisting of trade cards, illustrated catalogues, and thick verbal descriptions of objects for sale.

Holly's ideas of "sensuous materiality," "physical vibrancy," and "affect and effect" are excellent frames to use when considering our reading of the pediment's final realization, but an important question still remains: Was the pediment a success? Our evaluation of success depends, as with most things, on how we define the term. This dissertation has demonstrated that the pediment was historically significant and engineered in such a way that it sidestepped many of the fatal flaws of similarly conceived monuments in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London. Benjamin West was able to achieve his goals for the project. In these ways, *The Grand Model of Neptune* qualifies as a success.

Whether the pediment was viewed as a success during the period, however, is more difficult to determine. While there are several published reports of the pediment's erection in 1812, my research has not revealed period accounts of the

pediment's reception by either individuals or the critical press. This is not to say that individual accounts do not exist. Most of the records relating to The Royal Hospital for Seamen and its pensioners are now held at The National Archives in Kew, under the designation ADM (Admiralty, Navy, Royal Marines and Coastguard). These records include letters, account books, estate books, admissions, entry books, registers of warrant officers, and staff and out pensioner pay books. Perhaps future research will reveal insights from these archival resources.

While period reception of the monument remains a gray area, contemporary audiences can tell that the pediment has held up very well over time. Even today, nearly two hundred years since its fabrication, the bisque-colored surfaces of *The Grand Model of Neptune* remain crisp and legible for viewers gazing up from the courtyard below. Nelson remains a popular historical figure in British culture, and while the King William Courtyard remains an out-of-the-way corner of the larger historic campus, tour guides accompany curious visitors to the courtyard and provide valuable contextual historical summaries that enliven the forms for modern-day pilgrims. The pediment's forms still read clearly, and when compared to sculptures on the property made from natural stone (most notably the statue of George III facing the Thames), it is remarkable how well the Coade material has fared given the grime, soot, and pervasive dampness associated with London's post-industrial climate.

While West has been remembered as a painter, his willingness to experiment and his broad classical education allowed him to take advantage of the opportunities at Coade's. His use of artificial stone aligned with his desire to explore and take

advantage of new methods and technologies during his late career. West's use of Coade stone suggests that industrialization, at least in this case, was not perceived as a threat to neoclassical culture and values. If anything, the relative success of West's *Grand Model of Neptune* suggested that modern industry and technology could improve upon the greatest achievements of classical art and the classical past. Neoclassical compositions executed in modern materials embodied acts of artistic labor. But they also provided a forum for emergent ideas of British nationalism and physical acts of labor for one's country rather than personal fame.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

An examination of *The Grand Model of Neptune giving up the Body of Nelson, with the Dominion of the Sea into the Arms of Britannia* (1810-1812) provides insights into the early-nineteenth-century ideological sphere that conditioned the pediment as well as other areas of Benjamin West's prolific oeuvre. This dissertation argues that the Nelson monument was a final iteration of the project of contemporary history painting for Benjamin West, a concluding footnote in the artist's career just as the genre was being subsumed by the new styles and subjects of nascent British Romanticism. As we have seen, West dedicated significant energy to working out the conventions of contemporary British history painting through canvases like *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) and *The Death of Nelson* (1806). Transitional studies like the *Project for a Monument / The Apotheosis of Nelson* (1807) allowed West to respond to period debates over representational modes and to merge contemporary British history painting with the more established conventions and permanence of memorial sculpture, thus pushing the bounds of what was deemed acceptable in early-nineteenth-century painting *and* sculptural practice. West's training as an academic painter rather than an academic sculptor may, in fact, be one of the reasons that he felt

the freedom to so generously manipulate the traditions of sculpture, a medium that he was only beginning to absorb and understand.

The Nelson pediment responded to and negotiated period expectations for memorial sculpture in several important ways. These new monuments were dedicated to contemporary, secular British warrior-heroes. While Wolfe and Nelson were prime candidates for this sort of memorialization, West's sketches for additional pediments honoring Richard Howe, First Earl Howe (1726-1799), and Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney (1719-1792) indicate that there were plenty of commendable individuals who were eligible for and deserving of similar types of commemoration. The classical forms and other visual cues proffered by these new secular monuments linked modern life with the visual tropes and permanence of antiquity, while simultaneously arguing for the preeminence of recognizable, figural modes of representation that appealed to a broad populace. These new objects needed new venues for display, too. Rather than sanctified, religious sites, monuments to contemporary warrior-heroes found their way into publicly accessible secular spaces. These sites allowed a broader segment of the public to actually experience, interact with, and pay homage to the memorials and nationalistic and imperialistic ideologies that these objects worked to reinforce. Further, the Nelson pediment demonstrates that these new monuments took advantage of an array of technological advances that resulted in high quality, durable objects that could withstand the environmental rigors and challenges of an increasingly industrialized world. Even the printed pamphlet that West created to accompany *The Grand Model of Neptune* lent the project a degree of

interactive modernity as it encouraged visitors to and residents of the Greenwich Hospital to conjure smell, taste, motion, and even sound.

If, as outlined above, West's experiments in three dimensions affected the sculptural landscape of early-nineteenth-century London, then West's assertion that "a painter makes the best sculptor"²⁶⁰ begs the question: Was Benjamin West, the second President of London's Royal Academy, a prolific painter, and a mentor to a generation of British and American artists, also in fact a sculptor? The answer is always relative, of course, and depends on how we define the term. Along these same lines, the final answer to the question is largely immaterial. The issue does, however, open up a meaningful conversation about how this term was understood during West's period and what the legacy of that understanding means for the historiography of British and American art at large.

Benjamin West was certainly willing to embark on experiments that had the potential to broaden the significance of his influential oeuvre as well as the reach of the Royal Academy. He made his name as a painter, but his interest in reproductive prints and his work in three dimensions for the Chapel and grounds at Greenwich certainly indicates he was working to stretch the bounds of his formal training as a painter to new, and perhaps significantly lucrative, ends. It is certain that West did not

²⁶⁰ Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors, in 3 volumes*, (New York, 1846), III: 177.

have a firm grasp of the technical aspects of sculptural practice as he embarked on the Nelson pediment, but when we consider the stratified system of production for any sculpture – a system that required the work of many hands possessing specialized, technical knowledge and skills – West was perhaps as much of a sculptor as his compatriots at the Academy who worked up designs and then farmed out the production of preparatory and scale models to modellers and “mechanicks” like John Bacon and Joseph Panzetta. West also argued for the primacy of sculptural engagement in his *Discourses* and was a vocal proponent of Britain’s acquisition of the Parthenon marbles. To the extent that West engaged with the tropes and challenges of the medium, then, I credit the aging President of the Royal Academy with a high degree of aptitude for sculptural theory. In terms of personally working through the hands-on training and preparation to interact with the medium of sculpture from a material stance, however, West’s contributions in three dimensions were less significant. At any rate, West saw himself as enough of a sculptor to include these experiences as a meaningful chapter when he reflected on his career, and this, in and of itself, carries meaning for art historians as we work to recover portions of his historical record.

If West indeed saw himself as a sculptor, then what did his use of Coade stone mean on both practical and ideological levels? I have argued that one of the end games for West’s interests in technology was to place London at the center of a renaissance in the fine arts. His experiments with innovative methods and techniques, he hoped,

would simultaneously secure his legacy and position London as the new Venice or Florence of the modern, industrialized world. While many of his projects failed, most notably the debacle over the Venetian Secret, I believe that West's efforts to realize the Nelson monument were an unequivocal success that helped carry British art closer to his goal. The artist's calculated decision to employ Coade stone for *The Grand Model of Neptune* had a direct impact on both the cost of the project and the speed with which the memorial could be driven to completion. Coade's artificial stone body was perfectly suited to accommodate the symmetry, regularity, and consistency demanded by neoclassical fashions. Its unique formula helped mitigate risk during the firing process. Moreover, the indexical value of Coade's sculpted wares was part of their inherent value as well: they were simultaneously inexpensive and more authentic in conventional and aesthetic terms than most mass-produced sculpture because of their relationship to the nicety of the artist's hand. West's use of Coade stone suggests that industrialization, at least in this case, was not seen as a threat to neoclassical culture and aesthetic values. If anything, West's use of Eleanor Coade's artificial stone does in fact prove that modern industry and technology could coexist and even improve upon the greatest achievements of classical art and the classical past.

West's collaborative work with Coade modeller Joseph Panzetta merits some comment here as well. As discussed in chapter three, Panzetta's once frequent exhibition rates at professional societies like the Royal Society for the Encouragement

of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (RSA), the Free Society of Artists (FSA), and the Royal Academy declined as his work at Coade's Manufactory gained traction.

Panzetta's nomadic exhibition history indicates that he used these societies for the valuable connections and professional exposure that they could provide. These organizations allowed for critical networking, and while it is difficult to recover the details of members' exchanges, there can be little doubt that these organizations were part and parcel to the extraordinary expansion of the arts in London during the early nineteenth century.

Moving further, what can we infer from Panzetta's professional trajectory, and how might our case study of the Nelson pediment encourage us to think in new ways about the confluence of the fine and applied arts during the period? The bold, script heading of Panzetta's 1830 application for assistance to the Artist's General Benevolent Institution (AGBI) conveys that Panzetta identified as a *sculptor* – rather than a modeller, mechanic, or other variety of skilled craftsman as dictated by eighteenth and nineteenth-century conceptions of the divisions of the fine and applied arts. Panzetta's explanation of his oeuvre in the application is significant as well. The document states the sculptor's "own designs" included "a large Pediment at the Greenwich Hospital presenting national regret for the loss of Nelson designed by Mr.

West.”²⁶¹ I would argue that this statement consciously positioned Panzetta as the driving generative force behind the Nelson pediment. The value of the pediment, from Panzetta’s perspective, was not its conception from an aesthetic perspective or its narrative thrust. Yes, it was grand and monumental, and it worked to bolster contemporary British history in tactile, permanent ways. But for Panzetta, the meaningful work behind the object occurred when he took West’s sketches from two-dimensional paper to three-dimensional form. The AGBI application for assistance betrays the significant effort that was dedicated to the realization of such a massive, technological challenge. Panzetta’s perspective provides us with an alternative paradigm for not only the production of the Nelson pediment, but also for the way(s) that late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century sculpture is framed within the canon of western art history.

Building from this position, are there ways that this case study of *The Grand Model of Neptune* might be used to rethink the development of a sculptural or monumental tradition in the late colonial or early national periods in Britain and America? As noted in the introduction, the historiography of American art history has been relatively slow to take up investigations of sculpture and its influences during the long eighteenth century. While a handful of excellent texts have investigated British commemorative sculpture from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth-centuries – Joan

²⁶¹ Application for assistance for Mr. Joseph Panzetta, July 27, 1830, Artists General Benevolent Institution, London.

Coutu's *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (2006) and Malcolm Baker's *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (2000) are two preeminent examples – few comparative studies of American commemorative practice exist from the colonial or early national periods.²⁶²

At first glance, the memorial landscape of West's London looks quite different from that of pre-1830s American cities like Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. London was the crown jewel of a vast and powerful empire that used memorial forms to concretize the visual cultures of British imperial identity and burgeoning nationalistic sentiment. The arts were largely underwritten, at least after the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1768, by government means; as memorial projects to honor populist warrior-heroes like Wolfe and Nelson grew in popularity, a growing segment of the general public subscribed to their cause. Financial security and a sense of unified nationalistic sentiment allowed these ideas to become reality. Generally speaking, young American cities lacked the financial underpinnings that the established metropolis of London enjoyed. Moreover, the populations in these nascent urban cities had not yet developed the strong personal identifications with place and

²⁶² The area most thoroughly examined in early American sculptural production has been that of gravestones; see for example Sally Promey, "Seeing the Self 'in Frame'": Early New England Material Practice and Puritan Piety," *Material Religion* 1:1 (2005): 10-47. For engagement with other early memorials, see Sally Webster's forthcoming book, *Liberty Enshrined: The Nation's First Monument and the Origins of the American Memorial Tradition* (Ashgate, April 2015).

nation that were required for a unifying sense of nationalism to take hold. America, at least during the colonial and early national periods, did not have the financial resources to commemorate her heroes just yet.²⁶³ Obvious locations for secular monuments were few, and even if they had existed there were few native artists who had access to sculptural materials or possessed the technical skills necessary to bring three-dimensional projects from the planning stages through to their final realization.

As a final note, I would like to suggest that West's slippery (inter)national identity positions the artist to move a sort of transatlantic, colonial discussion of British and American sculpture forward. Is it possible that West's work in three dimensions was as influential for early American sculptural practice as his work in contemporary historical subjects had been for artists like John Trumbull and John Singleton Copley? It is my hope that this study will contribute to future work in the fields of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century American and British sculptural practice, bringing together two separate but complementary fields of study that are just waiting to be explored in more intimate detail.

²⁶³ The decades-long effort by the United States Congress to raise a monument to George Washington is good evidence of this. For an overview of this struggle see Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., The National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 25-60.

FIGURES

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