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R E V I E W

Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*

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REVIEWS

Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley. *The Paintings of Benjamin West*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986. xiii + 606 pp. \$85.00.

Reviewed by
Dennis M. Read

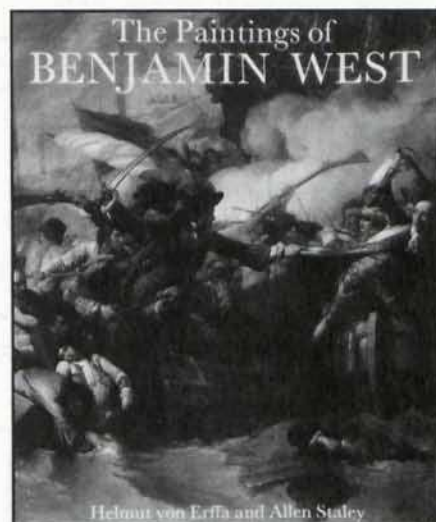
This volume is the product of a lifetime of research—in fact, more than one lifetime. Helmut von Erffa worked on this project for more than thirty years, and in the 1970s, when he realized that he would not live to finish it, he selected Allen Staley as his successor. Staley took over the project in 1976 and completed it after another decade of work, seven years after von Erffa's death in 1979. The result is a complete catalogue of West's paintings, from his *Landscape Composition* (c. 1746) to his *Bacchante Boys* (1819), a total of 739 works produced over more than seventy years.

The collaboration is, in every significant way, a successful one. Staley has taken the vast accumulation of von Erffa's research and shaped it into this volume. He also has written a short history of West's career (157 thoroughly illustrated pages), which precedes the catalogue. Throughout the volume Staley conducts discussions in the first person plural to indicate his agreement with von Erffa on matters of interpretation and opinion, with rare moments of individual dissent. One occurs in the discussion of *Chryseis Returned to Her Father* (no. 161). Staley writes that von Erffa did not think West painted the picture, but then argues

that its dimensions correspond to that of a painting on the same subject sold by West's sons in 1829, that details in the painting are of West's hand, and that three central figures are similar to those in West's drawing of the same subject. These items lead Staley to include the painting in the catalogue, although he concedes that the work "was largely painted, or repainted, by another hand" (248).

The catalogue is breathtakingly complete, including 255 works whose present location is unknown—35 percent of the total. It could be said, in fact, that the catalogue is *more* than complete, since von Erffa and Staley list works which West may have only intended to execute. The very first entry, in fact, *Sappho*, seems to have been no more than a twinkling in West's eye. It is listed with a group of paintings West offered for sale to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1809, of which about half had not been painted at the time. West sometimes sought assurance that a painting would be bought before actually producing it; the practice is a curious application of Blake's dictum that conception and execution are one. In this instance, since nothing more is known of the painting, it seems likely that West got no further than the title.

Other peculiarities in West's artistic habits also interfere with the goal of producing a totally coherent and conclusive catalogue. For example, West's five separate paintings of *Cupid Stung by a Bee* (nos. 131-35) provide various problems. The paintings were executed over a period of thirty-nine years, the first in 1774 and the last in 1813. The first and second versions differ significantly from each other, with the subsequent paintings following the second version. The third version involves the hand of another artist, Ann Jemima Provis, the daughter of Thomas Provis, with whom West was conducting experiments to learn the "Venetian Secret" of oil painting. Ann Jemima's contribution is known because her fa-



ther complained vigorously to the diarist Joseph Farington when West gave her no acknowledgment (or payment) after completing the work. How much of the painting is Ann Jemima's is impossible to determine. The fourth version was begun as early as 1796 but reworked and completed in 1813. What of the painting is old and what is new cannot be successfully sorted out. (During the last decades of his life, West often chose to rework earlier paintings, rather than undertaking new works.) This version, much larger than the others, occasioned Hazlitt's remark that West "is only great by the acre." The last version is known only through an auction catalogue of 1829; it is listed as an unfinished work and was sold to an unidentified buyer. Nothing more is known of it. Different paintings of *The First Interview of Telemachus with Calypso* (nos. 181-84) present similar problems, with "hopelessly confused" histories resulting in von Erffa and Staley's "tentative attempts, based on insufficient evidence, to sort them out" (259). Perhaps it is reassuring that even a work as thorough as this leaves scholarly tasks to be done.

For the most part, however, von Erffa and Staley have succeeded in what they have undertaken to do. The catalogue is arranged under nineteen different categories, beginning with historical

subjects, moving through biblical subjects and saints, genre subjects, landscapes and animals, and culminating with portraits. The arrangement has its defects. Each category dictates a different organization, only one of which is chronological (historical paintings). A reader therefore cannot form a sense of how West's artistic career developed from the entries, which skip all over his chronology. Each entry provides full information about the work: present ownership, medium, dimensions, provenance, exhibition history, engravings of the work, other catalogues and inventories which include it, and discussions in other literature. The greatest value, however, lies in the discussion of each work. One can gauge the relative importance of the work by measuring the length of discussion; a paragraph or less indicates an incidental work, whereas a page or more (in reduced type; a page runs over 2,500 words) indicates a major work. Dozens of paintings have such lengthy discussions. The volume is copiously illustrated with color and black-and-white photographs; virtually every work of significance is reproduced.

Some may presume that a volume such as this is strictly a reference tool and not a book to be read from cover to cover. While it certainly provides ready access to all available information about, for instance, West's eight versions of his *Death of General Wolfe*, reading it only to glean specific information deprives one of the book's greatest strength: its intelligent discussions not only of the paintings themselves but also of their genesis and stages of completion, of comparable or related works by other artists, of West's motivations and intentions, of all the scholarship published on the work, and, most valuable, of a judicious weighing of conflicting pieces of information. For instance, von Erffa and Staley escort the reader through the "considerable confusion" surrounding *Jacob and Rachel* (no. 247), which West painted in 1775 but never exhibited. Nor is the painting referred to

by West or any contemporary during his lifetime. This neglect can be explained if the painting is in fact a commissioned portrait of Mary Thompson, since a private commission might be omitted from an artist's list of works. But von Erffa and Staley point out that West did include his portrait of Lord Buckinghamshire's wife in his 1805 catalogue under the biblical title, *Isaac's Servant Tying the Bracelet on Rebecca's Arm* (no. 243), and, because they can find nothing to confirm that *Jacob and Rachel* indeed is a portrait of Mary Thompson, von Erffa and Staley conclude that the identification is "traditional." They confirm that the painting is of the biblical pair and by West. These discussions also present much information about West's patrons and purchasers and the history of his relationships with them, West's friends, relatives, and critics, the reception the paintings received; in sum, the vicissitudes of West's career.

Like Blake, West came from a humble background and received little formal education. Born in Springfield, Pennsylvania in 1738 to a working-class family, West showed artistic ability at an early age. Unlike Blake, however, West early in his life enjoyed the support of benefactors, who enabled him to travel to Italy in the 1760s, where he studied works of the Renaissance masters and practiced painting in their style. (West named his first son Raphael in homage to the master.) He settled in London in 1763 and by the end of that decade had become the leading historical painter in England, practicing a neoclassical style. His artistic position was assured through the patronage of George III, for whom West painted nearly sixty pictures during his career. For no clear reason, however, the King ended his patronage of West at the beginning of the nineteenth century. West was elected President of the Royal Academy in 1792 and, except for a single year (1805), retained the office until his death in 1820. West's major triumph was painting the figures of the *Death of Wolfe* (1771) in contemporary dress rather than classical robes, thus

moving the neoclassical style of historical painting to a more "natural" and less anachronistic mode, but later in his career he moved to a style akin to Fuseli and Blake with paintings of apocalyptic subjects employing dramatic effects of light and shade. An early example is his *Saul and the Witch of Endor* (1777).

West was the first American painter to be recognized as a successful artist. He followed conventional lines in achieving that success, carefully cultivating the fashions of public taste and developing connections with the nobility. When his career was in full flower, his paintings commanded huge prices: 1,000 guineas for *Christ Showing a Little Child as the Emblem of Heaven* (1810), 1,300 guineas each for *Edward III with the Black Prince after the Battle of Crecy* (1788), *The Institution of the Order of the Garter* (1787), and *Edward, the Black Prince, Receiving John, King of France, Prisoner, after the Battle of Poitiers* (1788) and 3,000 guineas for *Christ Healing the Sick* (1811), at that time a record price for a single commission. In what seems an uncharacteristic gesture, West refused the offer of knighthood; perhaps his allegiance to the United States never ended, even though he felt constrained from expressing it openly. Although he never returned to his native land, he always welcomed American painters who came to London and provided many of them with training. His advice to aspiring artists was succinct: "Study the masters but copy nature."

Farington records West as joining Ozias Humphry and Richard Cosway in praising Blake's *Night Thoughts* designs (19 February 1796; G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* 50). Frederick Tatham reports that West also "admired much the form of his [Blake's] limbs" (*Blake Records* 529). Blake, on the other hand, criticized West in his *Public Address* for believing "That Wolletts Prints were superior to Basires because they had more Labour & Care." Blake was of the opposite opinion. West, Blake reports, also "hesitated & equivocated with me"

over which was more essential in art, drawing or painting. Blake, of course, insisted on the precedence of drawing. It seems clear that Blake courted comparison with West through his *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (c. 1805-09) and *Death on a Pale Horse* (1817), paintings which share subject matter with West's. But in fact the two artists shared very little, and Staley's suggestion that "there does seem to have been some common

ground between the two artists at a time when it would have been most useful to them" (108) strikes me as fanciful. The common ground was that shared by all English artists of the day, and Blake's interest in West was chiefly adversarial, while West's in Blake was, at best, mild.

As with any catalogue, corrections and additions begin to accumulate before the ink is dry. This inexorable process is evident in a footnote on

page 383 which introduces three West paintings noticed by the authors only in September 1985. No doubt other paintings have appeared and other new information has come to light since then. But in its vast outlines the catalogue will remain the definitive work on West; it is undeniably a monument of scholarship.

William Blake and His Circle: Papers delivered at a Huntington Symposium. San Marino: Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1989. vi + 144 pp. illus. \$12.95 paper. (Reprinted from *HLQ* 52 [1989]); G. E. Bentley, Jr. *Blake Records Supplement: Being New Materials Relating to the Life of William Blake Discovered Since the Publication of Blake Records* (1969). Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988. xlvii + 152 pp. \$59.00; David Wells, *A Study of William Blake's Letters*. Tübingen, Stauffenburg Verlag, 1987. 132 pp.

Reviewed by
David V. Erdman

A valuable and elegantly illustrated collection of six essays (the first five from a symposium on 29 and 30 January, 1988 at the Huntington): Martin Butlin on "The Physicality of William Blake: The Large Color Prints of '1795'"; David W. Lindsay on "The Order of Blake's Large Color Prints"; D. W. Dörrecker on "The Song of Los:

The Munich Copy and a New Attempt to Understand Blake's Images"; Aileen Ward on "'S' Joshua and His Gang: William Blake and the Royal Academy"; Morton D. Paley on "The Art of 'The Ancients'"; Morris Eaves with an "Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England: The Comedy of the English School of Painting"; and a book review by Robert N. Essick of the 1987 facsimile of *An Island in the Moon*, published by Cambridge University Press in association with the Institute of Traditional Science, 1987.

Butlin examines the growth of Blake's books, first in size, "to accommodate the ever increasing weight of his content," and in the end, with the dramatic change in the proportion of illustration to text, a literal breaking free, in the "Small and Large Books of Designs" described by Blake as "a selection from the different Books of such as could be Printed without the writing, tho' to the loss of some of the best things."

Butlin scrutinizes such physical matters as the evolution of "the idea of multiple color printing," the second of two pulls from a single application of color to the plate, for example, having received a much lighter application of coloring. At the other extreme are certain pulls that were disfigured by later varnish. "David Bindman's somewhat wicked suggestion that any print bearing the date 1795 must have been executed ten years later" is found attractive.

Butlin sees this "reassessment" as only just beginning, the solution being found "in front of the object, not in the study."

WILLIAM BLAKE AND HIS CIRCLE



Papers delivered at a Huntington Symposium by
MARTIN BUTLIN • D. W. DÖRRBECKER
MORRIS EAVES • DAVID W. LINDSAY
MORTON D. PALEY • AILEEN WARD

Lindsay's essay on "The Order of Blake's Large Color Prints" (19-41) is of considerable interest but cannot be easily be summarized.

Dörrecker's extensive discussion of a little known copy of "The Song of Los" is particularly valuable in its details but difficult to summarize. (He also reports, in a note, that his M.A. thesis, "Blakes Illuminationen zu *Europe: a Prophecy*," will soon be available [he hopes] from the Insel Verlag, Frankfurt.

Aileen Ward's discussion of "S' Joshua and His Gang" is—as is her custom—studded with significant particulars and corrective interpretations. Alas, she notes, "most scholars follow Blake's lead in decrying the Academy's influence while at the same time minimizing its importance in shaping his