The Death of General Wolfe is a well-known 1770 painting by Anglo-American artist Benjamin West depicting the death of British General James Wolfe during the 1759 Battle of Quebec of the Seven Years' War. It is an oil on canvas of the Neoclassical period. West made an additional and nearly identical painting of the same scene for King George III in 1771.[1]

Details

West depicts General Wolfe as a Christ-like figure. This painting has a triangular composition, made by the top of the flag (as the apex) and the positions of the men. It resembles Michelangelo's statue of La Pietà, where Christ is held in the embrace of the Virgin Mary.

The depiction of the Native American warrior in the painting — kneeling with his chin on his fist, looking at General Wolfe — has been analyzed in various ways. In art, the touching of one's face with one's hand is a sign of deep thought and intelligence (thus Rodin's The Thinker). Some consider it an idealization inspired by the noble savage concept (Fryd, 75).

On the ground in front of Wolfe is his musket, his cartridge box, and bayonet. Wolfe went into battle armed as his men were, although his musket was of higher quality. His dress is also of note. He is wearing a fairly simple red coat, a red waistcoat, red breeches, and a white shirt. Such dress was rather simple, especially for a commanding officer.

In the background, and to the Left of the men surrounding Wolfe, an approaching runner is depicted. He is waving his hat in one hand to attract their attention, and with the other hand carries a captured flag with the Fleur-de-lis (a symbol of France) - symbolic of the news relayed to the dying Wolfe that the French were being defeated.

The inclusion of Simon Fraser, Lieutenant Colonel of the 78th Fraser Highlanders (behind the Rogers Ranger, who is wearing green) is interesting, as General Wolfe had always spoken highly of Fraser's regiment, yet Fraser was not at the battle, as he was recovering from wounds received earlier. In the painting, Fraser wears the Fraser tartan, which was probably worn by officers in that regiment. All in all only four of the fourteen men depicted were actually at the battleground.

The clothing West depicted in this scene was highly controversial at the time. Although the event was relatively recent -- only eleven years prior -- its subject matter made it a fitting example of the genre of history painting, for
which contemporary dress was unsuitable. During the painting, several influential people, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, instructed him to dress the figures in classical attire, and after its completion, George III refused to purchase it because the clothing compromised the dignity of the event. The work, however, eventually overcame all objections and helped inaugurate more historically accurate practice in history painting.

The Death of General Wolfe is currently in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum, as well as the Clements Library at the University of Michigan. There are five known portraits by the author. Wolfe's death and the portrayal of that event by Benjamin West make up half of Simon Schama's historical work Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations (1991).

Notes


References


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