

Envisioning a Nation

John Trumbull: Visualizing American Independence is on view now at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut

Through July

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

600 Main Street
Hartford, CT 06103
t: (860) 278-2670
www.thewadsworth.org

by James D. Balestrieri

In one of the last episodes in the superb HBO series *John Adams*, based on David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of America's second president, Adams, an

old man now—played to perfection by Paul Giamatti—is taken to see John Trumbull's monumental painting, *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*, one of the most familiar images in all of American art, on display in the new exhibition *John Trumbull: Visualizing American Independence* at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.

Adams, famously, hated the painting. In the series, he rages at the inaccuracy of the work, stating something to the effect that the signers came in ones and twos, quickly, signing the Declaration and leaving without fanfare. They were wanted, hunted men, some coming

from the battlefields, all on the run. Trumbull defends his painting and the artistic license he took.

Three things are interesting about this. One is that Trumbull intended the painting to depict the presentation of the Declaration to the Continental Congress on June 28, prior to the actual signing. The second is that Thomas Jefferson gave Trumbull some pointers during the process. The third is that, whether it depicts July 4 or June 28, the scene we see in the painting never happened.

Trumbull was a hero of the Revolutionary War, one of George Washington's trusted cadre of young aides-de-camp (as was Alexander Hamilton), there at the beginning, at Bunker Hill. In 1777, after a squabble over his officer's commission, he resigned from the army and set sail for England—without, apparently, seeing any potential danger—in order to study with Gilbert Stuart and Benjamin West, American painters who lived, worked and thrived (despite their sympathies with the cause of independence). In 1780, after Benedict Arnold was exposed as a traitor and his British contact, Major John Andre, was executed for treason, Trumbull was arrested and spent seven months in jail before West appealed to the king and secured his release. Trumbull would later return to the United States and preside over the American Academy of Fine Arts. He is considered America's first history painter.



Wadsworth Atheneum Picture Gallery with view of two Revolutionary War paintings by John Trumbull, ca. 1890. Reproduction from original in Wadsworth Atheneum Archives.



John Trumbull (1756-1843), *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, 1832.* Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee, 1844.3.



John Trumbull (1756-1843), *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775, 1834.* Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee, 1844.2.



John Trumbull (1756-1843), *The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton, December 26, 1776, 1831.* Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee, 1844.4.

But, considering the story of *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*, what do we mean by “history?” What emerges from the exhibition is the deliberate merging of history with myth, as the young republic sought to create an origin story, a genesis, that paints the Revolution and the formation of the United States as an inevitability, a foreordained, divine progression, written even before it happened. The imagery of the American Revolution, as painted by Trumbull and others, is part of the fabric of America that includes Manifest Destiny, American Exceptionalism, the Shining City on a Hill and Make America Great Again. The mythical metaphor of the United States as an Eden to conquer, to inhabit, to aspire to, to fall from, to regain, is in the blood that runs through—and is shed for and because of the nation—it is also in the paint. ■



John Trumbull (1756-1843), *Portrait of a Gentleman, an Artist, ca. 1801.* Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.6.