

John Trumbull: Visualizing American Independence

One of New England's wealthiest patriots, Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth was a key figure in the Revolutionary War. Wadsworth hosted George Washington in his home, which stood on Main Street in Hartford, on multiple occasions between 1775 and 1789. As Commissary General to the Continental Army and later a political leader, Wadsworth used his influence to help contribute to the establishment of our young nation. His only son, Daniel, was a groundbreaking patron of the arts and created the Wadsworth Atheneum, on the lot where his father's house once stood, in 1842.

Of greatest importance to Daniel Wadsworth, as he proposed the establishment of a gallery in Hartford, were John Trumbull's celebrated paintings of the Revolutionary War. Even Wadsworth's lawyer, who often acted for him, recognized the historic value of the paintings, which he described as "beautiful memorials of American patriotism." The two also had a strong family connection: Daniel Wadsworth had married John Trumbull's niece, Faith, in 1794. The trustees of the Wadsworth Atheneum purchased five Trumbull paintings and proudly displayed them when the

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museum first opened in 1844.

There were few opportunities in the American colonies for painters to study. John Trumbull attended Harvard University, where he was interested in European art history and the American portraits that hung in the halls of buildings on campus. Upon graduating, Trumbull returned to his





ABOVE: John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776, 1832, o/c, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee.

RIGHT: Sidney L. Smith, after Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre in King-Street*, March 5, 1770, 1908, published by Charles B. Goodspeed, Boston, Massachusetts, hand-colored engraving, bequest of William B. Goodwin.

LEFT: Claude Regnier, after Junius Brutus Stearns, *Life of George Washington: The Farmer*, 1853, hand-colored lithograph on paper, Amistad Center for Art & Culture.

hometown of Lebanon, Connecticut, where he continued to practice painting.

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Trumbull served briefly in the Continental Army as an officer of the First Regiment of Connecticut and witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill. He contributed to the war effort by applying his drawing skills to map-making. After leaving the army, Trumbull traveled to London twice (in 1780 and 1784) to study painting un-





ABOVE: Herculaneum Pottery (Liverpool, England), *Peace, Plenty, and Independence*, c. 1810, Creamware with transfer-printed decoration, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, The Stephen Terry Collection, gift of Mrs. Stephen Terry.

LEFT: John Trumbull, *Portrait of a Gentleman, an Artist*, c. 1801, o/c, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, bequest of Daniel Wadsworth.

BELOW LEFT: John Trumbull, *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775*, 1834, o/c, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee.

ABOVE RIGHT: John Trumbull, *The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton, December 26, 1776*, 1831, o/c, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee.

RIGHT: Allen Lewis, *The British Evacuate Boston*, 1932, from the portfolio *The Bicentennial Pageant of George Washington*, etching on paper, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, anonymous gift from Yale University in honor of Dr. George C. F. Williams.



der the well-known painter Benjamin West. While history painters traditionally depicted allegorical and religious subjects to con-

vey bravery and martyrdom, West encouraged Trumbull to pursue a project based on contemporary events. Trumbull ex-

pressed a desire to depict “the History of our Country” and created a series of eight paintings on the Revolutionary War, which showed real people engaged in key battles. Trumbull explained once to Thomas Jefferson that he hoped the paintings would “diffuse the knowledge and preserve the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever dignified the history of



man.²⁷ After completing a second edition to adorn the rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., Trumbull began a third and final series in 1831. Due to his failing health Trumbull was only able to complete five of the paintings.

Trumbull's Revolutionary War scenes were some of the Wadsworth's inaugural objects, and were displayed when the first gallery opened. Three of those five paintings, *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775*, *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* and *The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton, December 26, 1776* are included in *Visualizing American Independence*.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed the thirteen colonies' decision to sever ties with Great Britain. In *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* chief author Thomas Jefferson presents the document to John Hancock, President of the Second Continental Congress. Trumbull based his painting on firsthand accounts of the proceedings in Philadelphia and, when possible, sketched each figure from life. He did take artistic liberties, most notably portraying an event that occurred on June 28, not July 4, and including representatives who were absent as well as those who opposed the Declaration.

