On the walls of the Museum there hangs a picture symbolic of one of the strangest phenomena in the history of modern art. It shows five painters gathered in a studio. One is commenting on a drawing by a second, while the other three look up from their work to listen. Painted in London during 1765 by the Pennsylvania-born portraitist Matthew Pratt, the canvas was exhibited a year later at the Society of Artists of Great Britain under the title The American School. The exact identity of the figures shown is a subject of debate, but everyone agrees that we see a group of Americans working in the London studio of another Pennsylvania-born painter, Benjamin West.

This agreeable conversation piece depicts the general headquarters of an American invasion of England which placed our painters at the forefront of artistic evolution in the Western world. Amazingly enough, the first generation of American artists to escape from colonial limitations and cross the Atlantic were as a group more influential and successful abroad than any subsequent group of American artists has ever been. One after another the colonials arrived from the provinces, rummaged briefly in the storehouses of traditional art, and then startled England and the Continent with new and exciting forms that resulted from the mingling of American thought with European skill. At the very moment when the United States was stepping on the stage of history as a separate nation, our painters were conquering Europe.

Should we, in the manner of conservative connoisseurship, attempt to separate art from life, this phenomenon would be completely inexplicable. But when we recognize that painting, like every other human activity, expresses the environment in which it is produced, we can see obvious reasons why, during the last third of the eighteenth century, American artists imagined forms which were at a later date to appear in European brains. The New World was at the very head of social development. The same generation that produced The American School produced the American Revolution, which was recognized by republicans everywhere as a forward step for all mankind.

In a famous letter to Dr. Price, written in 1778, the French statesman Turgot remarked of the Americans:

"This people is the hope of the human race. It may become the model. It ought to show the world by facts, that men can be free and yet peaceful, and may dispense with the chains in which tyrants and knaves of every colour have presumed to bind them, under pretext of the public good. The Americans should be an example of political, religious, commercial and industrial liberty. The asylum they offer to the oppressed of every nation, the avenue of escape they open, will compel governments to be just and enlightened; and the rest of the world in due time will see through the empty illusions in which policy is conceived."

Even the English liberals fought the American fight in Parliament and threw their hats in the air with joy when military defeat at Yorktown put an end to the dictatorship of George III at Westminster. General Washington became the most popular man in Europe: his features were multiplied endlessly in English wedgewood and French porcelain. Among liberal esthetic circles, Benjamin West, the commander-in-chief of the American artistic invasion of Europe, was almost equally revered.

Son of a tinsmith turned innkeeper, West was born in 1738 in Chester County, Pennsylvania, on what is now the campus of Swarthmore College. Brought up in that revolutionary sect the Quakers, he was a birthright member of the Protestant middle class which fought equally against religious and political hierarchies. He made so great a reputation as a self-taught por-
traitist in Philadelphia that the local merchants took up a subscription to send him to Europe. In 1760, at the age of twenty-two, he reached Rome, the first American artist of any importance who is known to have studied abroad.

West soon found himself in a terrible quandary. He had been taught in his provincial homeland that the art of the Old Masters would prove so great that he would imitate it without question: and his eyes told him that the pictures were indeed beautifully painted. Yet their subject matter—miracles and saints and apostles dressed like peers—shocked the emigré from a Protestant land. He concluded that the Old Masters had used their skill “to inflame bigotry, darken superstition, and stimulate the baser passions.” The resulting conflict drove him temporarily into a nervous breakdown.

However, West’s problem was not purely a personal one; there were other bourgeois Protestants in Rome, men from all the countries of Europe, who were struggling with the same confusion. Under the leadership of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a famous critic who was the son of a German shoemaker, they worked out a method of using traditional techniques to serve their contemporary ends. But they put their theories only partly into practice. Thus it remained for West to paint, after he had moved on to London, the first canvas that was a complete expression of a type of neoclassicism that was to spring up all over Europe. Reflecting the Puritanism and the scientific interests of the new middle class, this style differed from earlier classical revivals by being more moral in subject matter, less sensuous in execution, and more accurate in its reconstruction of ancient times.

West’s Agrippina with the Ashes of Germanicus depicted a scene from Tacitus that exem-
plified republican family virtues. A popular hero had died in his country's cause; we see his wife sadly carrying his ashes along the quai at Brindisi while the mourning populace look on. The choice of a classical subject was not as strange as it might seem, for the eighteenth-century republicans liked to identify themselves with ancient patriots; Washington was commonly compared to Cincinnatus. Grave, emphasizing intellectual forms rather than sensuous colors, composed like a classic low relief, Agrippina seemed a revelation of modern beauty to the citizens of London, and, once it had been engraved, to young radicals on the Continent. Indeed, such pictures were to become the official art of the French Revolution and Napoleon's empire. Jacques Louis David's Death of Socrates at the Museum restates similar stylistic themes, more expertly but at a later date. French neo-classicism would undoubtedly have flourished had West never lived, yet the fact remains that Agrippina, as the first complete expression of the new taste, anticipated the movement in France by ten or twelve years. Similarly, the Virginia state capitol, designed by Jefferson in 1785, predated by twenty-two years Paris's classical monument, the Madeleine.

With the strange inconsistency typical of his nature, George III was so moved by the sentiment and piety of Agrippina that he overlooked its republican flavor and became West's enthusiastic patron. The American was now one of the most famous artists in England, rival of Reynolds and Gainsborough, but he was not really at ease in the manner he had done so much to create. Brought up under the shade of primeval trees, he was more familiar with red Indians than classical heroes; he was not really moved by togas and Tacitus. Thus his American background encouraged him to slough off the most artificial part of the formula he had worked out in Rome. He resolved to apply the neo-classical canons of accuracy to a contemporary event that had taken place in his own

*Agrippina with the ashes of Germanicus by Benjamin West. In the Yale University Art Gallery*
The Death of Wolfe, by Benjamin West (1738-1820). In the National Gallery of Canada

world. He painted a scene from the British conquest of Canada, The Death of Wolfe, as it might actually have looked. The participants are all dressed in regulation army uniforms, and a half-naked Indian sits in the foreground.

This was revolution! For generations critics had preached that the “grand style” was distinguished from ordinary art by its avoidance of contemporary details that would soon go out of date; the “universal” was achieved by painting the nude or, when that was impossible, the amorphous, pseudo-classical draperies with which our imaginations still clothe angels. Annually in his Discourses Reynolds propounded this doctrine from his rostrum as president of the Royal Academy. What West intended would have been suitable for a genre painter or popular illustrator, but it was shocking in the academician most famous for working in an elevated style. Reynolds remonstrated with him, and even his friend George III disapproved.

Yet The Death of Wolfe quickly became the most popular painting England had ever produced, for West had tapped the market for news pictures that was more than a century later to create the prosperity of such magazines as Life. Connoisseurs joined the public in filling to suffocation the room at the Royal Academy where it was exhibited; innumerable engravings after the canvas were best-sellers all over Europe. Naturally other artists were encouraged to imitate West’s invention of what has been called “the popular history piece.” Although Reynolds continued to thunder against the innovation, on his death in 1792 West succeeded him as president of the Royal Academy, a post he held for twenty-seven years.

So far, West had been strengthened by the radicalism of his American background, but when the Revolution actually broke out, his development was impeded. An ardent republican, he worshiped Washington and Napoleon, yet his principal patron remained George III. It became impolitic for him to paint contempo-
rary history. He was forced to hand over to his pupil John Trumbull his scheme to glorify the events of the American Revolution. And he allowed leadership in the depiction of English history to pass into the hands of a third American, John Singleton Copley. This most brilliant of our early painters had for years been creating great portraits in Boston. Dislodged by the Revolution, he traveled on the Continent and then settled in London, where he surpassed West in West’s own historical style. He carried it a long way towards the romantic movement.

West was fundamentally cold, an intellectual citizen of the eighteenth century who, so his pupils tell us, could give a reason for every stroke his brush made. Copley’s nature was more irrational and emotional. Dominated by his impulses, he never had the slightest idea why he painted the way he did. He added to West’s formulas color, movement, excitement; and he also brought new subjects into the range of historical art.

On one hand, he brought it closer to home. West had in his news pictures always shown remote events, which the viewer could only visualize through the use of imagination, either his own or the painter’s. But Copley depicted the fatal seizure of the elder Pitt in the House of Commons. Staged at a spot which Londoners passed every day, his Death of Chatham demonstrated that historical drama existed here and today. The picture thus stood at the headspring of another rivulet, which, as it flowed through the nineteenth century, was to turn into a torrent.

At the other extreme, Copley sought pure sensationalism. In his Brook Watson and the Shark, the original sketch for which is in the Museum, he painted a grisly happening merely because of the horror it invoked. Art historians have postulated that an engraving after his picture may have inspired the Frenchman Géricault to paint his famous Raft of the Medusa, which, although it postdates Watson by forty-four years, is generally considered an important milestone in the development of romantic art. As a matter of fact, the American’s picture, although almost half a century earlier, was in an important respect more advanced than the Frenchman’s. Géricault recorded a historical event of great popular interest, but Copley’s scene had no historical or news significance. That he considered the identity of the chief protagonist of little relevance to the effect of the picture is shown by the title under which it was exhibited at the Royal Academy: “A boy attacked by a shark, and rescued by some seamen in a boat; founded on fact which happened in the harbour of Havannah.” We are asked to sympathize with a tragedy not because it involved a great man or a significant occasion, but because the victim was a human being like the rest of us. The aristocratic emphasis on eminent people has given away to an interest in the common man.

The American School had, at first, engaged not in visionary painting but in “romantic realism”; they had used imagination to recreate the more exciting aspects of normal experience. However, after West was forced by political considerations to abandon the contemporary scene, he succeeded in breaking down the traditional Protestant taboo on religious painting. When he persuaded George III to commission him to depict the progress of Revealed Religion, an important step was taken in the emancipation of British art. That the king permitted himself to be persuaded and that the prelates followed his lead without much grumbling reflected the increased strength of Protestantism. The Church of England felt confident enough to take a step that would once have been regarded as a dangerous concession to Rome.

West, of course, painted no saints, no Virgins; he illustrated the Bible. When he imagined such scenes as Death on a Pale Horse from Revelations, he was carried away from the actual world into mystical realms. Yet he adhered to the fundamentally realistic approach of his American background, eschewing the distorted psychological symbolism of that other early romantic in London, the Swiss Henry Fuseli. He did not see angels’ wings in a vision, but made careful enlargements of the wings of parrots. However, he shattered the static organization of his neo-classical pictures, swirling his figures through space as if they were caught in a tornado. Although his cold nature kept these tur-
bult, Rubenesque pictures from being his very best, they showed that the aging man had not lost his ability to keep up with the most advanced contemporary taste.

When he was in his seventies, West met the greatest challenge of his career. The king went mad, West’s royal commissions were canceled, and for the first time in forty years he was forced to turn to the public for support. In such huge biblical canvases as Christ Rejected, he returned to the calm solidity, the completely naturalistic illustration of his earlier work, and his pictures, although they showed much of the weakness of old age, swept England and Europe. He became, so Sir Thomas Lawrence wrote, England’s “one popular painter.” The pure, explicit, and innocuous productions of West’s dotage struck a note that, for better or worse, was to be echoed and re-echoed down the nineteenth century, appearing in the woodcuts embellishing millions of Bibles as well as in the most admired canvases of mid-nineteenth century German art, which were signed with such once magical names—now happily almost forgotten—as Peter Cornelius.

More suited to modern taste as a religious painter was the last of West’s important American pupils, Washington Allston. On the rich South Carolinian rice plantations of his parents he had, as a child, imbibed a fascination with the wild and marvelous from the colored slaves who filled his imagination with voodoo and jungle witches. A true romantic, Allston believed that in the search for truth logic was an
instrument inferior to imagination; only where normal experience and the ordinary reportage of the senses ended did meaning and beauty begin. Spurning the rationalism of neo-classical theory, he used form and particularly color, not to persuade the viewer's mind but to overpower it. He wished, so he wrote, to make use of the senses to pass beyond them to that region "of the imagination which is supposed to be under the exclusive dominion of music, and which, by similar excitement, may be caused to teem with visions that 'lap the soul in Elysium'." His painting at the Museum, The Deluge, depends for its effect on mood expressed in light and color: the destruction of the world by the Biblical flood is not so much described as communicated directly from one mind to another.

Among Englishmen, romanticism was primarily a literary movement; its high priests were the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. Thus it is significant that Allston was the favorite artist of these poets. Coleridge wrote to him, "To you alone of all contemporary artists does it seem to have been given to know what nature is; not the dead shapes, the outward letter, but the life of nature revealing itself in the phenomenon." When Allston sailed from London to America in 1818, he was considered by many advanced minds the greatest painter of his generation.

While the Americans in London specialized in what were considered the higher forms of art, the Englishmen made portraits. Particularly after the generation of Reynolds had vanished, the American history painters scorned the British output. From his eminence as president of the Royal Academy, West characterized the fashionable likenesses as "mawkish, wearisome monotonies," while Allston called their creators "the damnedest stupid wretches that ever disgraced a profession." The basic reason for this disapproval was that the Americans,
most of whom had been portraitists in their native land, saw humanity with different eyes. New World society was more homely, more middle-class. An individual was valued less for his rank, more for his character and personal achievements. Thus in America artists concentrated less on costume and setting, more on faces. This difference of point of view made it difficult for the Americans to turn out portraits that pleased the British aristocracy.

Even the history painters were considered a little lower class by the most elevated social circles in London. True, the king was West's patron, but he too was looked down on by his nobles because of his bourgeois tastes and moralities. The artists made much of their income from the accumulation of small amounts paid out by many people, either for engravings or for admission tickets to see the paintings themselves. It was not a coincidence that West, in his role as official leader of British art, was much concerned with improving the design of British manufactures. Coming from a middle-class land, the historical painters served the middle classes in England.

This was also the case with the American portraitists. When in London Copley executed such a likeness as Midshipman Brine in the Museum collection, he did his best to duplicate the bravura work of Reynolds, yet somehow his portraits were most admired by business men from the City. Sticking more closely to his American preconceptions, Gilbert Stuart achieved in portraiture what the historical painters had achieved in their mode: he combined sophisticated Old World techniques with New World vision. His portraits were considered amazing likenesses but hardly elegant. A critic thus summarized his London career, "When we speak of him as the most accurate painter, we mean to say that, having a very correct eye, he gave the human figure exactly as he saw it, without any attempt to dignify or elevate the character; and was so exact in depicting its lineaments that one may almost say of him what Hogarth said of another artist, 'that he never deviates into grace,' and from all of which we may fairly infer that he was never a favorite painter with the ladies." Other critics, more sympathetic with Stuart's downright art, considered him, during the interregnum between the death of Reynolds and the rise of Lawrence, the leading living portraitist. Indeed, had not his debts forced the improvident American to flee London in 1787, he might well have become the leader of a rival portrait school to that of the elegant, courtly, flattering Lawrence.

The influence of the American School was greatly widened by West's activities as a teacher. Since the Royal Academy taught only drawing, Englishmen who wished to have their paintings criticized flocked to West's studio, among them those leaders of the next generation Lawrence and Constable. Far from trying to force the young to imitate his work, the American tried to help them materialize their own visions; thus he had a hand in many a pie he could not himself have baked. Although West thought Lawrence's mature style flashy, Lawrence was willing to be considered his disciple; and Constable admitted his debt to West as a teacher even after he came to disapprove of him as an artist.

We have been concerned here with those of
West’s American pupils who practiced professionally in England; actually, they were a minority. Like Matthew Pratt, most of the transatlantic students sailed, as soon as their studies were over, back to their homeland, where they were eventually joined by such veterans of London exhibitions as Allston, Trumbull, and Stuart. Almost every important painter who worked in the United States during the two generations between 1775 and 1830 was a graduate of West’s London studio.

The American School was in its own generation very famous and vastly influential all over the Western world; but today the ideas and pictures of those once so mighty artists are completely out of style. In judging the pictures, we must attempt to compensate for this change in point of view, remembering that the wheel of aesthetic fashion continues to turn in our own times as it has in the past, and that the moment will come when the taste of today will seem as misguided and peculiar as the taste of the eighteenth century to so many of our current critics. We must try to see the pictures in context.

Benjamin West, the most famous and influential of the artists was the least successful aesthetically. His paintings are admirable less for what they are than for what they led to. Originality of thought and depth of artistic insight sometimes go hand in hand, but they need not do so. Indeed, in West’s case we feel that the cerebral approach, the very intellectualism that made him so important an innovator, stood between him and the sensuous medium that is paint. His contribution was to state coldly and explicitly ideas into which later and greater artists breathed fire and beauty.

Copley, on the other hand, was so naturally gifted that it is impossible to judge what he might have achieved had he been exposed to the great art traditions of the Western world during his formative years. He was thirty-nine before he saw a single painting by a major artist. From one point of view, we may be grateful for the long delay in his European trip, for it enabled him to work out for himself the powerful, direct, and moving portrait style of his American years; yet it is possible that his decades of isolation kept him from being one of the world’s few truly great creators, a real rival of his transcendent contemporary Goya. Even as a middle-aged man, Copley proved so sensitive to the lessons of the Old Masters that the pictures to which he applied his new discoveries are brilliant, strong, and beautiful. Certainly they rank with the very best paintings to come out of late eighteenth-century England.

Allston’s talent, although genuine, was less robust. The beauty of the world opened to him most fully before the sun of maturity shone really warm. Like many another lyric poet, he passed through his greatest flowering in the springtime of life, before he was thirty. Yet the fragile blossoms of his early years have their authentic fragrance, their haunting beauty.

True child of utilitarian and bourgeois America, Stuart was less interested in painting than in people. He did not regard a man as raw material for a picture, but thought of a picture as an opportunity to show a man. Although in London he was driven by competition to create decorative portraits which show considerable brilliance, he was basically a painter of heads, one of the most narrow specialists in the history of art. In his specialty, he was marvelously skillful.

Surveying as a whole the American School in London, we see that they both gained and lost by their colonial origin. Stemming from a region where social evolution was the most advanced in the world, they came naturally by advanced aesthetic conceptions. They found it easier to apply these ideas because they had no deep-seated artistic traditions to unlearn, no inbred conservatism to keep them from trying to record what they saw and thought. Yet, although they succeeded amazingly in absorbing new techniques when they were already mature men, their work could not help showing a lack of richness, reflecting the thin aesthetic soil in which their first, most basic roots had grown. The American artists who worked in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London were not among the greatest painters of all time, yet they played an important role on the stage of aesthetic history, and left behind them pictures whose quality contributes a minor yet valid richness to the storehouses of Western art.