

BENJAMIN WEST AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY.

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There are quite a number of biographical articles on Benjamin West, yet I think none of them thoroughly depict certain phases of the man and his work. What is called the authorized life of West, by John Galt, is generally considered inaccurate, and another, written in 1805 and published in the May and June numbers of *The Universal Magazine* of that year, is in an extravagant vein and adds little to the record, except that it purports to give a full list of his paintings, drawings and sketches up to that date. I think, however, there are some that are not there listed. In *Farrington's Diary*, Vol. 3, at page 18, it appears that West said "that the biographical account of his life lately published by Phillips in his account of public characters was written by one of his (West's) sons and another person." This article is in "Public Characters of 1805," printed for Richard Phillips. I have found copies of it in the Library of Congress and the British Museum. Here is also to be found a list of his pictures, which is practically the same as the preceding one to which I have referred. In *William Dunlap's Book of Painters*, Vol. 1, a rather extensive sketch is given, though few new incidents are elucidated. A scholarly article on West was lately delivered before your Society by its president, and the biographical dictionaries and histories contain copious references to him.

I, however, do not propose to dwell upon the general features of his life. My purpose is to call attention chiefly to his relation with the Royal Academy, of which he was so long the distinguished head, and

also in a lesser way to some of his pictures and his own conception of them. On these points, the Diary of Joseph Farrington, lately published, throws much light, and West's own letters in this Society and notes from other sources are of considerable importance. In the British Museum, I could find but six letters of West's, and these of a minor character; and enquiry in the Congressional Library and the New York Public Library disclosed none.

Benjamin West landed in London on August 20, 1763. Though only twenty-five years old, he brought with him considerable reputation from Rome. He had there painted two pictures, "Cimon and Iphigenia" and "Angelica and Madoro," and had composed several other subjects from poets and historians, which were approved by connoisseurs. In 1767, he was introduced to George III, the reigning King of England, by Dr. Drummond, Archbishop of York, for whom he had painted "Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus." The King then commissioned him to paint the picture "Regulus," which was exhibited in 1769. In 1772 he was regularly employed as Historical Painter, and in 1790 as Surveyor of the Royal Pictures.

In 1768, West, with a few others, started the Royal Academy, and in this organization lay his chief interest during the whole of his career. The Incorporated Society of Artists preceded the Royal Academy, the former having been established about 1760. He was elected a member of it in 1765. That organization had become the scene of feud, intrigue and cabal, and at last the malcontent fellows, at the general meeting on St. Luke's Day of 1768, procured the rejection of sixteen of twenty-one directors whose terms at that time expired. They then filled up the vacant places from the ranks of the outsiders. Accordingly, the eight directors who were left, one of whom was West, on No-

vember 10, 1768, resigned, though on the books of that Society, after the names of these gentlemen, is marked the word "expelled."

It was then that Sir William Chambers, West, Frank Coates and George Michael Moser formed the outline of an Academy, and petitioned the King to adopt it. Towards the end of November, Chambers in person waited upon the King, to explain the design of the proposed institution and to present the memorial for his sanction. On December 7, Chambers had a second interview with the King, at which a definite scheme of a new academy was submitted and approved. A meeting of the artists was fixed for December 9, at the house of Joseph Wilton, who was a sculptor, and who afterwards became Keeper. The King had named the next morning to receive the lists, and on that day, December 10, 1768, the Royal Academy was established. It consisted of forty members. On Sunday, December 18, 1768, the president formally submitted to the King the proposed officers, council, visitors and professors, and these were approved under his sign manual.

At the time of the death of Sir William Chambers, on May 8, 1796, West spoke of him "as the first mover to obtain the institution of the Royal Academy." He said: "It was after Sir William had settled the mode of proceeding with His Majesty that a meeting was held at Mr. Joseph Wilton's. It was agreed that Mr. Chambers, Frank Coates, George Michael Moser and West should attend His Majesty with a paper to solicit him to establish an academy under his immediate patronage. The paper was presented by Mr. Coates to the King, and the King's answer was gracious and approving." At the meeting at Wilton's, Sir William Chambers seemed inclined to the presidency, but it was decided that a painter ought to be president, and the position was offered to Mr. Reynolds (afterwards Sir Joshua Reynolds), though he had not attended any

of the preliminary meetings. West was appointed to call on Sir Joshua and bring him to the meeting, and this he did; but Mr. Reynolds replied that he desired to consult his friends, Dr. Johnson and Mr. Burke, upon it. He, however, shortly thereafter, did accept the position, and he served in it until his death in 1792.

In the Annual Register for 1768, it was said: "The principal object of this institution is to be the establishment of well regulated schools of design, where students in the art may find that instruction which hath so long been wanted and so long wished for in this country. For this end, therefore, there will be a winter academy of living models of different characters to draw after and a summer academy of living models of different characters to paint after. There will also be laymen with all sorts of draperies, both ancient and modern, and choice casts of all the celebrated antique statues, groups and basso-relievos. Nine of the ablest academicians shall be elected annually, from among the forty, to attend the schools by rotation, to set figures, to examine the performance of the students, to advise and instruct them, and to turn their attention towards that branch of the arts for which they shall seem to have the aptest disposition." The secretary, treasurer and professors received yearly or per diem compensation, and provision was made to assist promising young artists in their studies abroad, and also to aid the families of any deceased associates, according to their requirements.

During the last years of Sir Joshua Reynolds' occupancy of the presidency, unpleasant circumstances arose, which led to the tender of his resignation. A vacancy occurred for the degree of associate, and it happened that a Mr. Bonomi, a native of Rome and an ingenious architect, had placed his name on the list as a candidate. He was advocated for the place by Reynolds, who thought it should be filled by some one

who was capable of filling the position of Professor of Perspective, which had long been vacant. The vote was a tie, and the president then cast his ballot for Bonomi, thus bringing about his election. This caused considerable feeling among certain of the members. Soon after, there was a vacancy in the Academy, and the president again espoused the cause of Bonomi, and he permitted the candidate to bring to the meeting of the council certain of his drawings for inspection. Some of the members deemed this to be a violation of the rules of the society, and on motion of John Tyler, it was directed that they should be removed from the room. Sir Joshua took umbrage at this action of the council, and sent in his resignation as president. However, at the request of the King and upon a commendatory resolution having been passed by the members of the society and a disavowal having been made of any intention on the part of the members to offer him any insult, the resignation was withdrawn.

Sir Joshua Reynolds died on February 23, 1792, and Mr. West was unanimously elected as his successor in the presidency. He delivered his inaugural address before the Academy on March 24, 1792. He was thereafter regularly elected up to and including 1804 and 1805: but on December 2, 1805, he presented his resignation and it was accepted. On December 10, 1805, James Wyatt, an architect, was elected president, but he did not seem to grasp the situation and was not a success in the place. As a consequence, Mr. West was, in 1806, re-elected, and he remained president of the society until his death. He died on March 11, 1820.

The troubles of Sir Joshua Reynolds' time became more acute after Mr. West occupied the chair, and this was especially so during the years 1803 and 1804. At the exhibit of 1803, West presented his picture, "Hagar and Ishmael." The same picture had been formerly exhibited; but, as was his practice in many

cases, he had afterwards changed it to such a degree that it was practically a new picture. While he was ill, and without consultation or notice to him, certain members of the council, consisting of Sir Francis Bourgeois, James Wyatt, John Yenn and John Singleton Copley, caused it to be rejected. On March 15, 1803, the matter was brought before the council, and the following resolution was adopted: "Resolved, that the general meeting seeing strong grounds to disapprove of the proceedings of Sir Francis Bourgeois, James Wyatt, John Yenn and John Singleton Copley, as members of the council, do request the president to call a general assembly to take their conduct into consideration." Ultimately, these gentlemen were suspended by the president.

On July 8, 1803, Mr. West, on his return from Windsor, told Farrington that, "on first seeing His Majesty, he asked the King if he had been informed that there was some difficulty among the members of the Academy. The King said he had. A conversation then took place. West said he thought it proper he should inform His Majesty that there was a question now before the Academy as to the priority of powers, whether it existed in the council or the general assembly; that there was jealousy in the Academy; some members were indolent, others but little competent to business, and others active, able and zealous. Of the last, the former were jealous, on account of the lack of influence they had in the society, which he considered as the ground of the dispute. The King said he was afraid the Academy would be injured by it, to which West replied, "There was no danger of it." Thereupon West said: "Permit me to place in your hands this paper:" It read:

"In the year 1767, Your Majesty was pleased to notice my efforts in Historical painting, and in the year following I received Your Majesty's command by Mr. Chambers, afterwards Sir William Chambers,

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to wait on Your Majesty with him, Mr. Moser and Mr. Coates to present a plan for an Academy which a few artists in conjunction with ourselves had drawn up, and to pray Your Majesty to sanction and to protect it with your Royal patronage. Your Majesty was graciously pleased to approve the plan, and we were honored with your commands to carry the same into effect.

"Thus the foundation of the Royal Academy was laid, and forty Academicians were nominated by Your Majesty as persons in whom Your Majesty could confide, that the plan proposed would prosper. The first act of the body of Academicians when assembled was to elect officers to form a Council to do the current business of the Society, and visitors to attend the models.

"The duty of the Council was declared to be to frame all new laws and regulations, and to do the annual business of the Academy, but the laws and regulations were to have no force till approved of by the General Assembly and sanctioned by Your Majesty.

"In the General Assembly was also vested the superintending power without limitation of hearing complaints and redressing grievances, and to do any other business relative to the Society that might be necessary.

"Under these laws and regulations, which have been from time to time established, the Academy has greatly prospered, and it is my duty to say that from the period when I first had the honour of being appointed to fill the chair of the Academy, those Academicians, whose names appear in the address now presented to Your Majesty, have, when they have come into action, exerted their utmost abilities for the honour and interest of the Institution. By their endeavors, united to others, within and without the Academy, it has, under Your Majesty's patronage and protection, become flourishing to a degree unknown in every other establishment which had the same object in its view.

"I never have had but one conception of the nature of the Council of the Royal Academy. It is formed out of the body at large for purposes specified, and, like the officers and visitors, has particular duties assigned to it. If in executing those duties the Council or any others of those so appointed either wilfully or ignorantly act in opposition to the interest of the Society, the General Assembly is declared by the laws to be competent to secure the Academy from injury by having, without limitation, the power to hear complaints and redress grievances. While laws so well provided are allowed to operate, the Academy will, I am convinced, continue to prosper, and no longer.

"The motion made in the Council of the Academy on the 24th of May last by Mr. Copley, and seconded by Sir Francis Bourgeois, was as follows, viz.:

"That much difference of opinion having lately risen in the Academy relative to the respective powers of the Council and the General Assembly, the Council has considered itself under these circumstances in duty bound to declare, and record it, as its deliberate opinion, that the Council, being by the laws of the Institution invested with the entire

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management and direction of all the business of the Society, is in no respects whatever subordinate to the General Assembly, and that the Members of the Council are not responsible either collectively or individually to the General Assembly as to their proceedings in Council.'

"The above declaration was intended to be carried to Your Majesty without the knowledge of the General Assembly, and to prevent a measure so repugnant to the laws, my duty to Your Majesty and to the body at large caused me to postpone the further proceedings of the Council in that business, and to state to the General Assembly the declaration which had been made, that they might know their situation and determine what it would be most proper for them to do.

"Awful as I feel my situation to be while the Academy is thus circumstanced, I have endeavored to act in that manner which has appeared to me to be most prudent, and with that integrity without which I should be unworthy of the notice of Your Majesty and of the confidence of the Academy.

"Your Majesty will be graciously pleased to permit me thus to deliver my sentiments, and humbly solicit that the Academy may continue to be regulated by those laws under which it has risen to its proud elevation of distinction among the Societies of the world.

"BENJ. WEST, Pres't R. A."

After further conversation between them, ^{the} King asked whether long speeches were not frequently made at the meetings, and West smilingly answered, "Yes, and that often when they caused the sittings to be protracted to twelve and one o'clock, it was rather fatiguing . . ." He told the King that he had no doubt that the Academy would appeal to him.

On August 8, 1803, West told Farrington that "last night" he and Richards, the Secretary, had returned from Windsor; that at one o'clock on Sunday the King received them graciously; that the King said he was apprehensive there might have been extremes on both sides. West referred to Richards for particulars, and the King pressed him to name the men who were most active in it. Richards named Copley and Bourgeois. The King said "it was an ill-natured conduct." He (the King) expressed a wish to restore harmony. He hinted at dissatisfaction in the Academy, but West and Richards declared it was not so. His Majesty talked about patronage and the state of the arts in this

country, and sarcastically about noblemen being picture dealers. He told West that he understood that he was an encourager of those who looked only to works of old masters, to which West said it was owing to their bringing pictures to him to obtain his opinion, as they expected by it to enhance the value of their purchases, and when he saw fine works of art, he had that feeling that might be expected, and expressed himself accordingly; that he did really think the introduction of fine works of art to be of great consequence, as they raised the minds of artists, and without seeing them artists could not be expected merely by force of their own conceptions to carry their practices so far as with fine models before them.

Again, on November 13, 1803, West and Richards visited the King. They were received graciously, and West was asked how his health was. The King observed that they were both growing old and must expect some effect from it. He then said that he had a communication to make to the Royal Academy, and that West might not say too much or too little, if it was done verbally, he had committed it to writing. He then drew a paper from his pocket, and, delivering it to Richards, ordered him to place it among the archives of the Academy; that it was proper that the president should have a copy of it, but no one else. He then ordered Richards to read the paper, who, opening it, seemed puzzled, on which the King said: "Take out your assistants." Richards was more puzzled, when West said to him: "Your glasses, Mr. Richards." "Aye, Aye," said the King, "your glasses are what we must have recourse to." After Richards had read the paper, there was a pause, until West said: "The latter part of the paper leaves me in a situation unprotected as president, and after what I have experienced in the Council relative to my picture, Hagar and Ishmael, I can have no security but that which

Your Majesty can afford." The King replied: "That was the most ill-natured action that I ever heard of, to take such an advantage of your being sick in bed, and I wish my sentiments upon it to be publicly known." West said that his situation had been very unpleasant, and that, if any other person could be proposed to fill the chair of the Academy to the satisfaction of His Majesty and the society, he would that moment resign, and continue to contribute all in his power for the honour and interest of an institution he had some share in forming and was invariably attached to. The King said: "No, no; all parties concur in wishing you to remain in it, nor can any other be proposed so proper. You have had my friendship and shall continue to have it, and make yourself easy."

What the King did in the latter part of his message to the Academy was to order the suspension of Copley, Wyatt, Yen and Bourgeois to be erased, and he included therein Mr. Soane. Thereupon West addressed him as follows:

"With all possible deference to Your Majesty's present wish, I beg to submit to Your Majesty that there is an inaccuracy in the written message the Secretary had the honour to receive from Your Majesty and to read in the Academy. In that message it is said—that all matters relative to the suspension of Messrs. Soane, Copley, Wyatt, Yen and Sir Francis Bourgeois be erased, but in all the disapprobation of the conduct of the Councils in March and April last, Mr. Soane concurred and was one of the most active in expressing his opinion against them—the words therefore of that message do not apply to any other censure than that which implicates Mr. Soane, &c., and if Your Majesty will be pleased to recollect your gracious declaration when you gave the Secretary the written message in order that there might not be too little or too much said, Your Majesty will see that the general body, Secretary and myself consider it an act of duty to adhere literally to its meaning.

"BENJ. WEST."

On January 1, 1804, West went to the King and laid before him a paper containing the election of officers. Having read the names aloud, His Majesty said it was a strong list, and that he had no doubt but that Mr.

West would get along more smoothly with the new Council, and asked when the old Council would go out. He then signed the paper.

On January 8, 1804, West visited the King and presented three papers, which the King read. West explained his motives for postponing the old Council and the King said he was right. West said he had not proposed to bring the papers to His Majesty, but in case of necessity, and the cause now was that Bourgeois had threatened the Council, and had used the King's name, as if he commanded His Majesty's will. The King said: "He is a fool." West described the abuse pressed upon him and Richards by the old Council, but said he had kept his temper, and if he and the new Council had the King's support, there would be general harmony.

On February 11, 1804, just before the King's illness, Beechey was with the King and he reported that much was said about West and that the King had called him "an ungrateful dog." Northcote said to Bourgeois that he did not believe the King used such language. Bourgeois came again and said to Northcote that he had seen Beechey, who said Wyatt was present and could vouch for the words.

On November 5, 1804, Farrington went to the general meeting of the Academy, and Tresham said to him that "the King would never again communicate or speak to West as a private person, but that official papers would be received from him." Opie told him the same thing. On November 15, 1804, Tresham told Thompson that the King would certainly not see Mr. West in private, and added that he did not believe that he would receive him even officially from the Academy. He said West had calumniated members of the Academy to the King and endeavored to establish a prejudice in His Majesty's mind against their characters. This, he said, was a violation of the privilege of his

office; in addition to that it was an act of malice, and as such was cognizable by the Academy. An impression was left on his mind that West could not be acknowledged by the King.

On November 17, 1804, West went to Windsor officially. On his return, he said that he had got there on Saturday afternoon about five o'clock, and that the next morning at breakfast a footman of the King came to the Inn and informed him and Richards that His Majesty would see them at four o'clock that afternoon. At that hour they were at the Castle and were very soon introduced to the King, who received them most graciously and talked of his own health and his excursion to Weymouth and of the benefits he had received from the sea air. He turned his eyes to the portfolio containing the papers, upon which West said there were three, namely, Thompson's diploma, the vote for raising the salaries of the servants, and Mr. Smirke's election. The King said he much approved the raising of the salaries. The three papers were then spread before him, and, taking a pen, he said the name of Thompson had been very well written in, and he signed the diploma. He then signed that for the increase of salaries, and, having written something on that of Mr. Smirke's appointment, signed his name and said: "Upon that paper he had made up his mind six months ago." He thereupon drew a line through Mr. Smirke's name, and refused to approve the appointment. He then said something that signified that he wished the Academy to be properly regulated and would do his part towards it. He talked much about the improvements in the Castle, and took West into several rooms to show him the alterations, doing it in the most easy and friendly way. The whole time he seemed to be in great good humor.

On December 10, 1804, Lawrence, Dance and Daniell went with Farrington to the annual meeting of the

Academy. The minutes having been read and minor matters dealt with, the next business was to elect a president. Tresham arose and said he had much to say on that subject, but desired to know whether the president should not quit the chair. It was agreed that he ought to remain in it. After some preamble, Tresham said he should now be able to prove that Mr. West had not His Majesty's confidence, and he named Mr. Yenn, the treasurer, as the person who would declare it and further His Majesty's wishes respecting filling the vacancy. Lawrence then put a question to Yenn, "Whether he had His Majesty's authority for communicating to the Academy what he might say." Yenn replied that "he had no authority from His Majesty, and that he was not to use the King's name; but that he had a discretionary power to repeat what the King had said to him respecting filling the office of President." After some discussion, a ballot took place, and West received twenty votes and Wyatt seven votes, There were three blanks.

On December 28, 1804, Farrington called on West and found him and Mrs. West without company. West related an account of his journey to Windsor. On the way there he found Richards very much dissatisfied with the late proceedings of the Academy respecting the president, and fully convinced that, notwithstanding all which had been said, the King would confirm West. They arrived at Windsor about five o'clock, and, after dinner and tea, walked up to the Castle and sent a paper to Mr. Bott, the head page, to be shown by him to the King, signifying that they were at the Castle with academical papers, waiting to know when his Majesty might be pleased to receive them. On Thursday, at one o'clock, a servant came to the inn and informed Mr. West that the King was just going to dinner alone and desired to see him. West, attended by

Richards, immediately went to the Castle, and had not been long in a room to which they were conducted when Mr. Clarke said they were to go to His Majesty. Being shown into the room, there was no appearance of dinner, but the King was alone, standing before the fire. West, on entering, bowed, and as he advanced, the King came towards him and observed that the weather was very cold; that he had been out that morning, but was glad to get back to a warm room. He then began to talk about pictures, and noticed a picture of George I, which he had hung up. He said it had been found in a lumber room, and that it pleased him more than one painted by Sir Godfrey Kneller. By this time, Richards had laid upon a table the papers which His Majesty was to decide upon, which the King observing, he went towards them. West stated to him what they were. His Majesty first took up that which contained the President, Council, Visitors and Auditors, and, holding it up to read the names, he remarked that it was a strong Council. He then took up a pen and ink and immediately signed that paper. He next took up that which had the name of Fuseli as Keeper. He advanced towards West and said: "Fuseli is a man of genius." West replied: "He is a very able man." The King then went towards the window and took a pen, and, coming back to West, said: "You think Fuseli is an able man?" West replied: "He is not only an able man in his profession, but he is distinguished as a literary character and known to all Europe." The King then eagerly went to the table and signed it. After having signed both the papers, he began to talk about the Castle and his intended improvements. He said he would show them what he had done and intended to do, and went forward, recommending Richards to carry his portfolio with the papers, that they might not have to return for it.

They walked through the different apartments, and the King conversed with all the cheerfulness and familiarity that he could do. Having got to a passage which led to a particular set of rooms, he said: "Now, you must find your way out as well as you can." West said that, when he saw His Majesty's face, he knew all was well; it bore the expression of ease and kindness.

(To be continued.)