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“Not unworthy of his hand”: Crossing Borders in Benjamin West’s *A Drayman Drinking*.

By Lauren Lessing and Terri Sabatos

In May 1797, Benjamin West—President of the Royal Academy, Historical Painter to the Court of King George III, and Surveyor of the King’s Pictures—exhibited a small genre painting titled *A Drayman Drinking* at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy in London. It was one of seven paintings West exhibited that year, and the only one overlooked by the reviewer for the *Times*. The critic’s oversight may have stemmed from the unprecedented number of paintings on view (nearly twelve hundred, four hundred more than were hung the previous year) and the resulting overcrowding of the principle exhibition room. Through his elision, he may also have politely signaled his disapproval of the painting, which depicts men and women of various classes and occupations mingling on a city street. Such scenes of daily life, influenced by seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and the works of William Hogarth, were becoming popular in England at the end of the eighteenth century. Still, as another reviewer of the 1797 exhibition noted, “rigid critics” were likely to ask, “...whether the subject of [*A Drayman Drinking*] is suitable to the historical pencil of the President.”¹

West painted *A Drayman Drinking* during a period of cultural and personal flux. In the 1790s, the English art viewing and art buying public was expanding to include more members of the merchant classes, who tended to value novelty and visual pleasure

¹ “Royal Academy,” *Times* (London), 3 May 1797, 3; “Royal Academy, Number III,” *True Briton*, 25 May 1797, 3.

over the pomp, imposing scale, and heavy-handed moral lessons demanded by George III and his court. The King's oldest son and heir, the Prince of Wales, similarly eschewed his father's taste for large, historical compositions and instead avidly collected seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes and genre scenes. The fifty-eight-year-old West had built a stunningly successful career by pleasing the King and British aristocrats of his own generation, but he understood that tastes were changing. His patrons were also changing. In particular, the increasingly ailing and paranoid George III ceased to commission paintings from the American-born artist. *A Drayman Drinking* is one of several intimately scaled, humbly themed pictures that West painted in the 1790s, hoping to attract new audiences.² Significantly, the painting itself is about change and liminality—qualities that characterized the artist's life and career. In her recent exploration of West's Anglo-American identity, the art historian Sarah Monks observed that, "...he was the first artist to have been nurtured in the colonies and grafted onto the metropolis, during a period when the relationship between those two spaces was fundamentally redrawn." As a result of his liminal position within the shifting cultural geography of eighteenth-century British colonialism, she notes, "West seems often to have situated himself *between* different

² Other genre scenes painted by West in the 1790s and early 1800s include: *A Woman Selling Rosemary* (1793); *Gentlemen Fishing* (1794); *Reapers with a View Near Windsor* (1795); *Sheep Washing* (1795); *Mothers with their Children Dabbling in a Brook* (1798); *Three Ladies Making Music* (1798); *The Milk-Woman in St. James Park* (c.1801); *Children Eating Cherries* (c.1801); and *An Assembly* (1806)—all discussed in Helmut von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 414-423.

genres, positions, manners, and selves...” the artist’s “sheer mutability” is, in Monks’s view, the key to understanding his art.³

West’s extraordinary ability to transform himself is evident in his meteoric and unlikely rise from humble beginnings in the American colonies to preeminence within the highly competitive eighteenth-century British art world. He was born in 1738, the son of a tavern keeper in the village of Springfield, Pennsylvania, ten miles west of Philadelphia, at the far edge of the British Empire.⁴ His Quaker-born parents had both left the Society of Friends before they married. Freed from religious proscriptions against graven images, they encouraged Benjamin—the youngest of their ten children—to become a painter. Still, opportunities to study art were limited in America. West read biographies of famous artists, painted copies of European prints, and took lessons with various painters working in his vicinity, including the English-born portraitists William Williams and John Wollaston, the American Robert Feke, and the German-trained artist John Valentine Haidt.⁵ Soon, he was supporting himself by painting portraits—an occupation that could have become a lucrative, lifelong career. West, however, was ambitious. He began studying classical literature, and in 1755 painted an elaborate, multi-

³ Sarah Monks, “The Wolfe Man: Benjamin West’s Anglo-American Accent,” *Art History* 4 (September 2011), 654, 653-73.

⁴ Biographical information about West is primarily drawn from Robert C. Alberts, *Benjamin West: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

⁵ See Ann Uhry Abrams, “A New Light on Benjamin West’s Pennsylvania Instruction,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (Winter 1982), 243-57.

figure canvas depicting the death of Socrates for the Lancaster, Pennsylvania gunsmith William Henry.⁶ This naïve painting, which West based loosely on an engraving by the French artist Hubert François Gravelot, is a testament to the young artist's aspirations. By the age of eighteen, he had already decided to become a painter of moralizing historical compositions—a class of artworks that ranked at the top of the hierarchy of genres promulgated by eighteenth-century European art academies.

In 1760, with support from a group of elite Philadelphia patrons, West sailed for Italy to complete his education. Rome was then the art capitol of Europe, and West found it crowded with young men who were striving to make a name for themselves as history painters. He was far from being the most accomplished art student in the city, but he was the only one from North America and he was clever enough to make the most of his novelty. West began describing himself as a humble Quaker from the woods of Pennsylvania. At a dinner party shortly after his arrival, he invented a story that he would continue to tell for the rest of his life—that American Indians had taught him how to mix paints. When the influential Cardinal Albini invited him to the Vatican to view the second-century Roman copy of a Greek statue known as the Apollo Belvedere, West delighted the watching crowd by declaring, “How like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!” In Pennsylvania, West had striven to appear cosmopolitan by mimicking the

⁶ West's painting *The Death of Socrates* is now in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection at the Atwater Kent Museum of Philadelphia. See Scott Paul Gordon, “Martial Art: Benjamin West's *The Death of Socrates*, Colonial Politics, and the Puzzles of Patronage,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (January 2008), 65-100.

compositions of European artists; in Rome he began to define himself as an innocent, self-taught child of the American wilderness.

West spent three years in Italy, where he studied a rich array of artworks including ancient Roman sculptures and Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings. He also mastered the frigid, neoclassical style popularized by the German history painter Anton Raphael Mengs, who was then living in Rome and who took a friendly interest in the young American. West arrived in London in 1763 expecting to stay for only a few months before returning to Philadelphia. He found, however, that his fame had preceded him to the British capitol. Flooded with lucrative portrait commissions and perceiving that his professional opportunities in England far outstripped anything awaiting him back home, the young painter sent for his American fiancé to join him in London. The couple married and moved into a large, elegant house equipped with a painting studio on Castle Street. They also acquired a country home four miles to the west, on the banks of the Thames, in the village of Hammersmith. During the eight months of every year that his family lived in Hammersmith, West (a firm believer in the healthy benefits of physical exercise) walked or rode back and forth between his house and his London studio each day, passing through the rapidly expanding borders of the city.

In a portrait that West painted of his growing family in their Hammersmith home in 1772, the artist celebrated his personal and professional rise from modest beginnings in rural Pennsylvania to the status of an educated, elegant, London professional. *The Artist's Family* depicts West's wife, Elizabeth Shewell West, seated in a damask armchair,

wearing a white robe and cradling her infant son, Benjamin, in her lap.⁷ The Wests' older son, five-year-old Raphael, leans against the arm of his mother's chair and gazes at his brother. Light floods through a window at left, passing across the rapt, angelic face of the little boy and falling on Mrs. West and her baby like a sign of divine grace. Renaissance altarpieces depicting the Madonna and Child with Saint John (particularly those by his son's namesake, Raphael) were West's obvious sources for this vignette. In the right half of the composition, he depicted his father and older half-brother seated with their hands folded in their laps, calmly contemplating the young mother and her children. Although neither man was a practicing member of the Society of Friends at the time, West painted them wearing Quaker hats and suits and observing a moment of silent worship—a Quaker form of prayer. At the far right edge of the composition, only partially contained within its margins, West included himself wearing a loose, lavender silk jacket, gold jewelry, and a powdered wig. While his father and half-brother sit stiffly in their plain clothes, the handsome and fashionable young painter stands above them, leaning gracefully against the back of his father's chair with the tools of his profession held easily in his hands.⁸

⁷ *The Artist's Family* is in the Paul Mellon Collection of the Yale Center for British Art.

⁸ West's odd placement of himself within this portrait was likely influenced by shifting attitudes about the family. As the eighteenth century progressed, members of the middle and upper classes increasingly viewed women and children as focal points of attention within the domestic sphere. Unlike his young family and his older (somewhat feminized) father and brother, West is only half contained by his home. See Margaretta M. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 141, 156, 162-63. See also Jules David Prown, "Benjamin West's Family Picture: A Nativity in Hammersmith," in Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 117-132.

West had good reason to be proud of his attainments. By the early 1770s, he had three years of Italian study under his belt—an accomplishment shared by few English-born artists at the time.⁹ Despite being much in demand as a portraitist, he was also celebrated as a painter of religious, mythological and historical compositions. One of the earliest of these was *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus*, which the Archbishop of York commissioned in 1767 and which West exhibited to great acclaim in London the following year.¹⁰ The imposing canvas is based on an episode of Roman history related by Tacitus. West presented Agrippina, the widow of a popular general who had likely been poisoned at the command of the emperor Tiberius, traveling to Rome with an urn containing her husband's ashes. With her head modestly bowed and her young children clinging shyly to her mantle, she disembarks at the Adriatic port of Brundisium and sets out to confront the Emperor with his crime. West demonstrated his knowledge of classical art by basing Agrippina and her entourage on marble figures adorning the first-century BCE Roman Altar of Augustan Peace (commonly known as the Ara Pacis). His mastery of the contemporary neoclassical style is evident in the principal actors' stately movements and calm, dignified expressions, and in the painting's shallow, stage-like composition. Despite its historical subject, West's painting expresses his very modern conception of urban space as both theatrical and transformative. As crowds of

⁹ Susan Rather, "Benjamin West, John Galt, and the Biography of 1816," *The Art Bulletin* 86 (June 2004), 324.

¹⁰ *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* is now in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery.

grief-stricken supporters look on, the virtuous widow traverses the space between her ship and the city and, in the process, becomes a political actor in a civic and imperial drama.

West's emergence as a history painter was well timed. The young King George III was passionately interested in art and hoped to found a national school of painting that would rival the Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris. In 1768, he invited West to bring his painting of *Agrippina* to Buckingham House, the royal residence in London, where he and Queen Charlotte could view it privately. The King might well have eyed West's picture with suspicion. After all, it was painted by an American with well-known democratic sympathies and depicted a subject preparing to demand that her corrupt sovereign submit to justice. At the time, George III faced rumblings of rebellion not only in the American colonies but also at home. His political enemy, the anti-government MP John Wilkes, had just returned from exile in France and was inciting riots against the monarchy in London. Nevertheless, the King admired *Agrippina* and promptly commissioned another historical composition from West's hand.

Over the course of the next two and a half decades, West's career unfolded in a nearly uninterrupted series of successes. Having established his reputation by working in the accepted neoclassical style, he transformed the definition of history painting in 1770 with *The Death of General Wolfe*, a painting that endowed a recent event (the death of the British general James Wolfe in the 1759 Battle of Quebec) with a heroic grandeur

previously reserved for scenes of ancient or biblical history.¹¹ *The Death of General Wolfe* was a smash hit at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1771, and the King commissioned a second version of the painting for the Royal Collection. In the wake of this triumph, George III appointed West the official painter to his court—a position that netted the artist a thousand pounds each year in addition to the money he earned from a steady stream of murals, decorations, and portraits commissioned by the Royal Family and other British aristocrats, and from the sale of prints reproducing his better-known paintings. By the time he was elected President of the Royal Academy in 1792, West had also mentored a generation of younger artists, including the Americans Matthew Pratt, John Trumbull, John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, and Gilbert Stuart.

Despite the seemingly unstoppable momentum of his career, by 1797 West was experiencing serious professional difficulties. His problems had begun in 1788 with George III's first prolonged bout of mental illness. West, who considered the King a close friend, visited him several times during his four-month confinement for insanity and witnessed various distressing "symptoms of disorder" as well as brutal treatments by the King's physicians.¹² The ailing monarch temporarily recovered in 1789 but never again sat easily on his throne. Across the channel in Paris, the French Revolution had begun, and Queen Charlotte feared that rumors of her husband's mental instability could spark a similar revolution in Britain. She knew that West counted among his friends several

¹¹ The first version of *The Death of General Wolfe* is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.

¹² Alberts, *Benjamin West*, 189.

signers of the Declaration of Independence and the radical English pamphleteer Thomas Paine, and she was alarmed that the artist had seen the King at his lowest point. It is not surprising that the Queen and eventually the King too began to view West with suspicion. In November 1793, the English painter and diarist Joseph Farrington noted: “Remarks are made at Windsor [Castle] that [West] does not go there as usual.” A few months later, West himself lamented to Farrington that his rivals within the Royal Academy had informed George III that he harbored “democratic principles.”¹³ Although West retained his official titles, his royal commissions ceased, leaving the artist in desperate financial straights. Hoping to win back the King’s favor, he continued painting a series of large, religious murals intended for the Royal Chapel at Windsor Castle; however, he also courted new patrons.

In 1789, West began painting scenes from Shakespeare for his friend, the engraver and publisher John Boydell. A Shakespeare revival was underway in London at the time, and Boydell hoped to foster a love of history painting among a broad popular audience and make a profit in the process by commissioning leading British artists to paint scenes from Shakespeare’s best-known plays. He exhibited these paintings in a dedicated gallery in Pall Mall, charging visitors a modest admission price. West undoubtedly hoped that his collaboration with Boydell would introduce his work to new patrons who were

¹³ Kenneth Garlick, Angus Macintyre, and Kathryn Caves, eds. *The Diary of Joseph Farrington*, 26 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978-1984), vol. 1, 99, 270. West had also allowed the King to retain fifteen thousand pounds of his savings—money that West never recuperated. James Thomas Flexner, *America’s Old Masters* (New York: Dover, 1967), 81.

unaffiliated with the British aristocracy. Beginning in the early 1790s, West again expanded his repertoire by painting a series of small genre scenes depicting peddlers, farmers, mothers and children, gentlemen fishing, and workmen landscaping the lawns surrounding Windsor Castle. *A Drayman Drinking*, which West painted in 1796, is part of this series.¹⁴ West's genre scenes are all small and it seems likely that he intended to have them printed and sold as engravings, for which there was great popular demand.¹⁵

Searching for an advantage in the crowded British art world of the 1790s, West also experimented with new materials and techniques. In 1795, he fell prey to a pair of con artists named Thomas and Mary Ann Jemima Provis—a father and daughter who claimed to have discovered the long-lost formula for mixing pigments that, supposedly, had allowed the sixteenth-century Venetian painters Titian and Giorgione to imbue their pictures with luminous color. Initially, West was quite taken with the results of this “Venetian secret.” All of the paintings he submitted to the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1797 (including *A Drayman Drinking*) were painted using the Provis's formula. After seeing his pictures installed on the Academy's walls, however, West was forced to concur with most critics that they appeared too cold and purple, and that the formula (for which he had paid a thousand pounds) was fraudulent. West was not the only victim of the

14 That West conceived of his genre paintings as a series is evident from his remark to Joseph Farington on 21 May 1797 that, although he had an opportunity to sell *A Drayman Drinking*, he intended to create a collection of similar works to sell together as a group. Von Erffa and Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, 415.

15 The earliest known genre painting by West, *Woman Selling Rosemary* of 1793, is now known only through a stipple engraving by R. Hunt titled “The Flower Girl.”

scam. Reviewers for the *Times* and the *Monthly Magazine and British Register* noted the pervasive presence of the Provis's distinctive palette in the 1797 Royal Academy Exhibition.¹⁶ That same year the English caricaturist James Gilray published a satirical print titled *Titianus Redivivus; or the Seven Wise Men Consulting the New Venetian Oracle*. It depicts a crowd of Royal Academicians (including a prominently placed caricature of West) so absorbed by paying homage to the buxom Miss Provis that they fail to notice her father surreptitiously urinating on their canvases. That so many experienced artists succumbed to what was, in retrospect, an obvious fraud speaks to the intensely competitive atmosphere in which British painters worked during the last decade of the eighteenth century.

The annual exhibitions at the Royal Academy showcased the competition among British artists, and also the heterogeneity of the late eighteenth-century art viewing public. In 1780, the Academy moved to New Somerset House on the Strand—a neoclassical building in a fashionable London neighborhood. While the Academy's library, offices, and classrooms occupied spaces on the lower floors, its exhibitions took place in a sky-lit top-floor gallery known as the "Great Room." The gallery's walls were divided into two principle registers by a horizontal line placed eight feet above the floor. Large history paintings and full-length, grand manner portraits hung above the line. Smaller portraits, landscapes, still lifes, and genre scenes hung below it. Despite this

¹⁶ "Royal Academy," [London] *Times*, 1 May 1797, 3; "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, for 1797," *Monthly Magazine and British Register* 3 (May 1797), 385.

attempt to impose visual order, the Great Room was simply not big enough to contain the ever-growing number of paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy each year. To accommodate as many pictures as possible, the Academy's Committee of Arrangement filled the gallery to capacity and converted classrooms into overflow spaces.¹⁷

Adding to the visual confusion of the Royal Academy exhibitions were the crowds of visitors who filled the galleries, pushing their way toward the walls to look closely at smaller paintings, or clustering in the center of the Great Room to better view larger artworks hanging above the line. The Academy charged a shilling admission price in order to keep the poorest members of the public away; however, exhibition audiences remained varied. As art historian David Solkin has pointed out, "Newspapers periodically aired complaints about the oppressive heat, the foul odours and the unwelcome jostling that greeted visitors to the Great Room; and while public decorum may have only rarely been disturbed, the spectre of disorder was never far away."¹⁸ Although the line dividing the walls of the Royal Academy's principle exhibition room separated paintings of noble subjects from those with less elevated themes, no such separation existed between the audience members on the gallery's floor. There, as on the London street that West depicted in *A Drayman Drinking*, men and women from many walks of life met, jostled,

¹⁷ John Murdoch, "Architecture and Experience: The Visitor and the Spaces of Somerset House, 1780-1796," in David H. Solkin, ed. *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1736* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 17.

¹⁸ David H. Solkin, "Crowds and Connoisseurs: Looking at Genre Painting at Somerset House," in Solkin, ed. *Art on the Line*, 157.

and exchanged gazes. The spectacle of a diverse and comingling crowd was part of the entertainment that visitors to the Royal Academy exhibitions paid to see—a fact that the English caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson wryly pilloried. In his etching of 1800 titled *Exhibition Stare Case*, Rowlandson depicted visitors to a Royal Academy exhibition pushing past one another on the grand, circular staircase leading up to the Great Room. The press of the crowd has caused an avalanche of bodies to tumble down the stairs, throwing men and women into one another's arms, exposing several ladies' plump thighs and buttocks, and delighting both male and female onlookers.

Although *A Drayman Drinking* might easily have been overlooked among the many pictures and eager viewers crowding Somerset House in the spring of 1797, West's position as Historical Painter to the King and President of the Royal Academy insured that the small genre scene would receive some critical attention. Interestingly, the very fact that West *was* a celebrated practitioner of grand-style history painting was the issue that created the most tension for critics. Reviews of *A Drayman Drinking* that appeared in the London newspapers the *True Briton* and the *Monthly Mirror* highlight West's liminal position between different genres and audiences.¹⁹ The critic for the *True Briton* began his review pondering whether such a subject was fit for West's talents:

Whether the subject of this Picture is suitable to the historical pencil of the President we shall leave the rigid Critics to decide; but we will venture to pronounce the Picture itself not unworthy of his hand. Perhaps in all representations of life it would be proper to have some moral purpose in view; but the greatest minds require some relaxation, and we know not why Mr. WEST may not be permitted to indulge himself in displaying a

¹⁹ "Royal Academy, Number III," *True Briton*, 25 May 1797, 3; the *Monthly Mirror*, 3 May 1797, 280.

familiar incident. There is a happy mixture of light and shadow in this Picture, and an air of truth and freedom through the whole. The figures are easy and well disposed; the mechanical execution is very neat, and the brick-work exhibits even a Dutch accuracy. Those who are not fastidious, or who are not always inclined to stretch the imagination in pursuit of great objects, will consider this an amusing, and not uninteresting performance.

This foray into genre painting, then, was not perceived as a new direction for West, but rather a holiday from his customary and more demanding history paintings. In the end the reviewer concedes that viewers who were not particularly high-minded (in other words, enthusiasts of genre painting) would find the picture both interesting and amusing.

The reviewer for the *Monthly Mirror* had almost the opposite response to West's genre scene:

This picture proves the versatility of the artist's talents; but in this class of painting Mr. West must give place to Moreland, [sic] Wheatley, &c. Here we have still the historic manner; no soiled or tattered garments; but every thing [sic] regular in good order. Mr. West does not find this in real life.

This critic recognized *A Drayman Drinking* as proof of West's versatility, but ranked West below more accomplished painters of genre scenes such as the artist's contemporaries George Morland and Francis Wheatley. Surely this was a slight to West, who had reached the heights of artistic success as a history painter. Moreover, unlike the critic for the *True Briton* who praised the "air of truth" in the picture, this critic questioned *A Drayman Drinking's* authenticity. In this reviewer's opinion, West merely transferred the tidy figures and orderly, invented composition typical in a history painting to a scene of everyday life. He falls behind Morland and Wheatley because his picture lacks the necessary verisimilitude to please connoisseurs of genre painting.

To be fair, West's drayman slouching on his horse in his wrinkled smock, unbuttoned knee breeches, and loose stockings, thirstily guzzling from a tanker, hardly

recalls the elegant figures in *The Death of General Wolfe*; and West's own boyhood experiences working in his father's Pennsylvania inn surely informed his portrayal of the pot-boy in this image, lending an air of truth to the depiction. Nevertheless, the *Monthly Mirror* reviewer's comments seem legitimate if one considers the bricklayer standing to the left of the drayman. Handsome and solidly built, he leans confidently against a full hod of bricks. His right arm lies across the hod, with his left arm bent and his hand casually resting on his hip. West depicted the man's work smock pulled up to reveal an elegant contrapposto stance worthy of Polycleitus' *Doryphorus* or Michelangelo's *David*.²⁰ Although West set out to paint a genre scene, the American-born President of the British Royal Academy and History Painter to George III was unable to completely leave behind the concerns of history painting. Consequently, like the artist himself, *A Drayman Drinking* defies easy classification.

As contemporary reviewers of *A Drayman Drinking* noted, West drew inspiration from the work of several popular, contemporary genre painters.²¹ George Morland was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy from 1784 to his death in 1804. His pictures depict rural working folk in bucolic landscapes, or sitting in homey rustic interiors. Many of Morland's images, such as *The Bell Inn*, (late 1780s) feature the exteriors of country inns with various rural workers and villagers conversing and imbibing outside.²² By

²⁰ Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 156.

²¹ See also Allen Staley, *Benjamin West, American Painter at the English Court*, Baltimore Museum of Art, 1989; 97, 100.

²² Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

focusing on a drayman and his horse, West likely borrowed from genre scenes by George Garrard depicting Samuel Whitbread's brewery in London. The dray horse at the center of *A Drayman Drinking*, unhitched from the dray and standing in profile, recalls a similar horse in Garrard's *Loading the Dray at Whitbread's Brewery, Chiswell St, London* (1783).²³ In what may be an overt homage to Garrard, West included a sign advertising "Whitbread's Entire" on the brick above the doorway to the inn.²⁴

West likely also took inspiration from the urban genre scenes of Francis Wheatley. Born in Covent Garden and familiar with the variety of street sellers in the city, Wheatley featured them in a series called *The Cries of London*, which was exhibited from 1792 to 1795 at the Royal Academy. Paintings such as *Knife Grinder* and *Cherry Seller* highlight specific street sellers as they hawk their wares in London. In particular, Wheatley's painting *Strawberries* seems to have inspired West, as the dainty maiden in her rustic garb with a basket balanced on her head is clearly similar to West's raspberry seller, who is coming out of the inn doorway at the extreme right of *A Draymen Drinking*. Wheatley, however, generally employed London only as a backdrop—a way of identifying the urban environment in which his hawkers operate. His figures seem to interact in front of the city rather than within it. West's focus on London in *A Draymen*

23 Private Collection.

24 Stephen Deuchar, *Paintings, Politics and Porter: Samuel Whitbread II (1764-1815) and British Art* (London: Museum of London, 1984), nos. 5, 6, 20, and 21; as referenced in Staley, *Benjamin West, American Painter*, 111. For more information on the popularity of "entire" in England see H.A. Monkton, *A History of the English Public House* (London: Bodley Head, 1969), 68-70.

Drinking owes more, perhaps, to earlier images by William Hogarth, who used the city as a featured player in many of his satirical paintings and prints. In two popular engravings titled *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* (1751), Hogarth not only compared the salutary effects of imbibing beer to the evils of gin drinking, but also demonstrated how the city itself fares as a result of each beverage. The good, honest Englishmen of Beer Street, who are drinking English beer, are prosperous and industrious and the city thrives with them; however, the poor wretches of Gin Lane, who gulp down the foreign alcohol, are disease-ridden and slovenly, and deteriorate as the city collapses around them. While West does not explicitly link the health of the city with the drinking of beer, his placement of the tavern sign reading “George III” in proximity to recruiting posters declaring that Englishmen have “Hearts of Oak” and the sign advertising “Whitbread’s Entire” visually links the monarch and the health of the nation with this popular English drink, creating an undercurrent of nationalist sentiment.²⁵

A Draymen Drinking, then, might be viewed as a pastiche of already familiar characters, settings, and themes; however, West did more here than merely appropriate from other artists. He also captured London in a state of flux, just as the city was emerging as the center of a great Empire and a thoroughly modern metropolis—a transformation driven, in part, by the new, urban self-consciousness of the burgeoning middle class to which West himself belonged.²⁶ As in Hogarth’s images of London, the

²⁵ Staley, *Benjamin West, American Painter*, 97, 100.

²⁶ Dana Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis: Architecture, Urban Experience and Social Life in London 1800-1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), xv-xvi. Although Allen Staley questions whether the painting shows a specific location, it is clear that West depicted London, not a generic city. Von Erffa and Staley, *Paintings*, 415.

city is a key figure in West's genre painting. In the rather hazy distance, the dome of St. Paul's dominates the skyline. As architectural historian Dana Arnold has argued, during this period St Paul's functioned as a symbol of the nation as well as a symbol of modernity. The building's great dome served "as an *axis mundi*, linking London and the country with the rest of the empire," and its very presence indicated the triumph of a city able to rebuild itself after the great fire of 1666.²⁷ Natives and visitors alike could look down from this lofty pinnacle and see the city as a single, unified entity—one that could be taken in visually and comprehended rationally despite its monstrous size. The sweep of London's history was also on view from St. Paul's dome. Older sections of the city in the east, for example, could be seen along with new sections that were expanding London's borders to the north, south, and west.²⁸ But while the presence of the dome in the background of *A Drayman Drinking* alludes to the possibility of a panopticon's expansive and encompassing gaze, West chose to depict a street-level view of the city—a perspective opposite to that offered by the dome.

It was at street level that West could best represent London in its current state of transition. Fed by a constant stream of young men and women from the country seeking work, the population of the city swelled from around seven hundred and fifty thousand residents in 1760 to more than a million Londoners by 1800. During this same period,

²⁷ Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis*, 1. Note that West also used the dome of St. Paul's in the background of his portrait of *General Tadeusz Kosciuszko*, 1797; see von Erffa and Staley, *Paintings*, 133, 415.

²⁸ Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis*, 1-24.

the city expanded rapidly into the surrounding countryside, transforming open fields and villages into neighborhoods and suburbs.²⁹ West set *A Drayman Drinking* in what appears to be a border area on the fringes of the metropolis—an interstitial space where the rural and the urban do not have defined boundaries, but overlap. The quaint inn with its thirsty patrons, the pot-boy who hustles to bring them pipe and pint, and the chickens lazily pecking at the cobblestones may remind viewers of bucolic scenes by Morland; however, West’s workmen are not stopping by for a drink after a long day in the fields. They are only pausing momentarily in the process of building the city outward into the countryside. West’s abrupt cropping of the picture along the right edge, where we see only a portion of the inn and the young raspberry seller stepping from its doorway, anticipates the compositional techniques of later, modernist painters, who depicted fragmented views, buildings, and figures in order to recreate the constant movement and shifting rhythms of modern urban life.

West further underscored the liminality of the space in *A Drayman Drinking* by highlighting one of the most discussed characteristics of eighteenth-century London life: the jumble of social classes and variety of types one might find jostling together as they traversed the streets and parks of the metropolis. According to the historian Roy Porter, visitors to the city in the mid eighteenth century were amazed “by the extraordinary

²⁹ For a discussion of rural and urban spaces in London during this period see Elizabeth McKellar, “Peripheral Visions: Alternative Aspects and Rural Presences in Mid-Eighteenth-Century London,” in Dana Arnold ed., *The Metropolis and its Image: Constructing Identities for London, c. 1750-1950* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 29-47.

degree of social mixing and the ease of intercourse possible in this monster city...”³⁰

Guidebooks like the 1802 *The Picture of London* describe how public promenades such as Hyde Park were open to all classes, and one could see “numbers of people of fashion mingled with a great multitude of well dressed people of various ranks.”³¹ Adding to the mixture of various sorts of people at the city’s edges was the constant flow of traffic in and out of London. On a daily basis, farmers and rural craftspeople entered the city in droves to sell their produce, livestock, and other wares, while Londoners with leisure time set out to enjoy the fresh air of the countryside. Taverns near the borders of the city, like the one depicted in *A Drayman Drinking*, catered to such travelers as well as local residents, and served as social centers where people mingled and shared news. In *A Draymen Drinking*, West alluded to this social mixing by depicting middle-class women promenading behind the working-class laborers in the foreground. The women—clad in the muslin dresses, hats, and veils of the bourgeoisie—amble along the street. Their unhurried activity, ornamental pets, and fine clothing are symbols of leisure and consumption. In contrast, the other figures in the scene represent various aspects of labor and commerce. West depicted the edge of London as a place where boundaries are blurred, various types of people intermingle, and work, leisure, and consumption are intermixed.³²

30 Roy Porter, *London: A Social history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 180.

31 *The Picture of London, for 1802* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1802), 66; as quoted in Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis*, 28.

By including middle-class women in *A Drayman Drinking*, West also alluded to social changes that were transforming the urban landscape. The freedom to stroll city streets and experience the dynamic and fragmentary nature of modern urban life has long been associated with the flâneur—the middle or upper-class man who moves through the city as an impersonal observer.³³ Scholars have argued that, because propriety restricted middle and upper-class women's freedom to walk in the city and to gaze at others, there was no female equivalent to the male flâneur until more than a century after West painted *A Drayman Drinking*.³⁴ As Arnold notes, however, respectable women became increasingly visible in public areas of London during the ending decades of the eighteenth century. Cultural historian Martha Jane Musgrove has asserted that the figure of the flâneuse (the female counter part to the male flâneur) should be reappraised as part of this shifting urban landscape.³⁵ The two women in *A Drayman Drinking*, then, likely represented for West and his audience a new type of respectable female urban walker.

32¹ For a discussion of the possibilities of liminal space within the city see Quentin Stevens, "Betwixt and Between: Building Thresholds, Liminality and Public Space" in Karen A Francke and Quentin Stevens eds., *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 73-92.

33¹ Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis*, 25-27.

34¹ Martha Jane Musgrove, "The Semi-Detached *Flâneuse*: Feminine Diversity in Romantic London," *European Romantic Review* 20:2 (April 2009), 159-160. Musgrove discusses Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (November 1985), 37-46.

35¹ Arnold, *Re-presenting the Metropolis*, 26-30; Musgrove, "The Semi-Detached *Flâneuse*," 159-166. See also Musgrove, "Relocating Femininity: Women and the City in Mary Brunton's Fiction," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 20:2 (Winter 2007-08), 219-244.

Just as the flâneur traversed the modern city observing the fragmented rhythms of the metropolis, these women, too, perambulate unchaperoned, taking in the sights and sounds of London. By moving beyond the boundaries of the genteel garden or shopping arcade into the street itself, they have become the objects of a working-class male gaze. The rough-looking hod carrier with his red coat (perhaps a former soldier) stares openly at them as they walk by. But in this new urban environment, where traditional behaviors are changing along with the city, the woman wearing the feathered bonnet does some staring of her own. The object of her gaze is the bricklayer leaning on his hod of bricks, whose pulled-up smock reveals his body.

As published reviews demonstrate, eighteenth-century viewers of *A Drayman Drinking* perceived that the painting represented a boundary crossing for the President of the Royal Academy, who was struggling in the 1790s to redefine himself, find new patrons, and stay abreast of current fashions. While West's foray into genre scenes did not prove as successful for him as history painting, it does demonstrate his tendency to situate himself in the gaps between genres, as well as identities. Perhaps not coincidentally, *A Drayman Drinking* seems to be about shifting, blurring, and collapsing boundaries. By depicting a liminal space between countryside and city, West documented London's growth as it became a modern metropolis. Through his commingling of classes and genders, work and leisure, he also hinted at the rapidly evolving social relations within the city's shifting borders. West's painting captures the emergent rhythms of modernity that would be more fully explored by artists in the next century.