Beyond the Mohawk Warrior: Reinterpreting Benjamin West's Evocations of American Indians

Julia A. Sienkewicz

Few narratives are as iconic to the field of American art as the description of Benjamin West's (1738-1820) first encounter with ancient art, published in John Galt's *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West, Esq., President of the Royal Academy in London, Prior to his Arrival in England, Compiled from Materials Furnished by Himself* (1816).[1] In the dramatic episode the young West, newly arrived in Rome from the British Colony of Pennsylvania, exclaimed upon encountering the *Apollo Belvedere* (**see fig. 1**), 'My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!'.[2] West's evocative comparison of the ancient god to a contemporary American Indian warrior has captured the minds of readers since the nineteenth century and the narrative was calculated to have precisely this effect. As Susan Rather has demonstrated, Galt and West collaborated in the compilation of the book, in order to create a semi-autobiographical narrative that would re-fashion West's identity and legacy within an international context.[3] Reflecting the intended transatlantic discourse of the work, the biography was published contemporaneously in London and Philadelphia and the result, according to Rather, was a 'public relations effort of enormous consequence for the history of American and, arguably, also of British art.'[4] Considering *The Life of Benjamin West* as a transatlantic

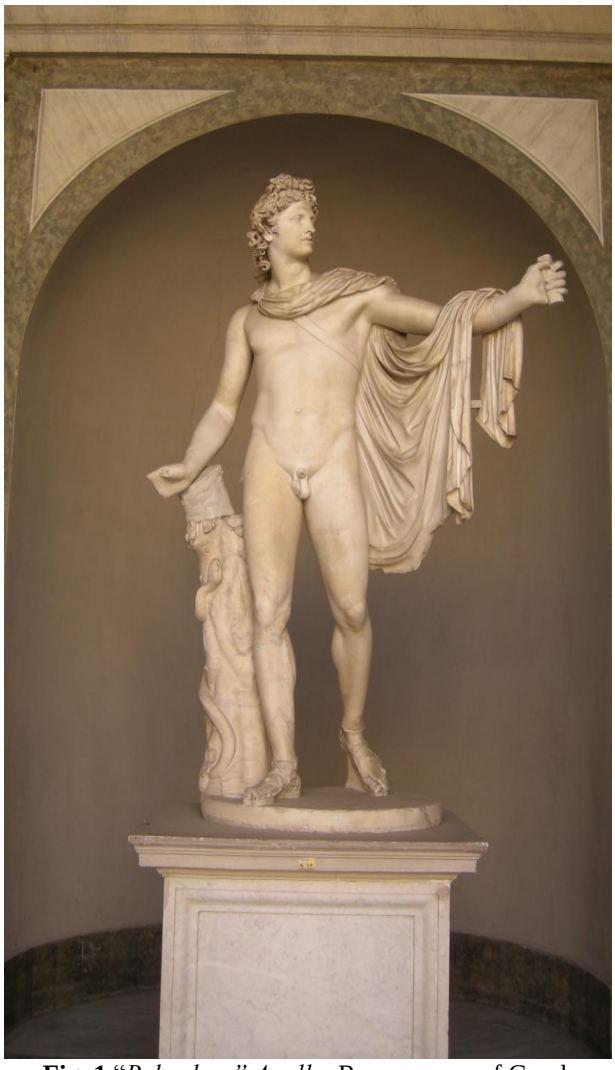

Fig. 1 "*Belvedere" Apollo*, Roman copy of Greek original attributed to Leochares of Athens, ca. 330 BCE. Vatican Museums, Vatican City. Photograph © Víctor M. Martínez.

'public relations effort' necessitates examining how its narratives were constructed to produce specific reactions in readers in both Britain and America in 1816.

This article contributes to the ongoing task of unraveling the myths that surround West by staging a detailed critique of the two primary narratives in the biography that describe his encounters with, or evocations of, American Indians. Only through such critical dismantling can we hope to gain a more nuanced sense of British and 'American' art in this period. By doing so, this essay participates in a larger process of deconstructing the origin-myths of American art history: what Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw has termed its *Ur-stories*. Shaw calls for the field to deconstruct and re-examine its origins in order to remain relevant:

> If such fields as American art history, and the various hyphenated micro-fields that it contains, are to continue to expand and prosper in the twenty-first century, it will only be through the re-examination of the problematic myths that have been formed out of a necessity to assuage a misplaced sense of national, racial, or cultural inferiority. Art historians must turn their attention to finding the fragments that have been ignored and reconnect them.[5]

Reinterpreting Galt's narrative through the lens of transatlantic theory allows for a constellated understanding of West's life and counters the mythic and univocal narrative that has held sway for nearly two centuries.

Such a critical task has ramifications beyond concerns with West's biography. In identifying 'fragments' of American Indian history within West's narrative, and weaving these pieces together as a counter-current to West's own legacy-building process, this article performs a small, but significant, act of deconstruction. It battles the national, racial and cultural foundations of the field by positioning the significance of the narratives within a transatlantic context. As recent scholarship has shown, the role of American Indians (both as historic figures and as abstract entities within cultural discourse) in both Britain and North America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was culturally complex. This role transcends the familiar narratives of the Romantic savage so often applied to West's paintings and to Galt's biography.[6] Critical examination of these narratives allows for an understanding of the text within the context of American Indian history rather than solely within the biography of West. Furthermore, by questioning whether West actually did liken the *Apollo Belvidere* to a Mohawk warrior in 1760, and instead linking the narrative to concerns of audience and politics in 1816, this study

attempts to remove the iconic narrative from the hazy lens of romanticism. This essay offers a multifaceted model for interpreting the narrative in which a British-Colonial citizen addressed the interests of an audience informed by political and social events on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than the naïve exclamation of a provincial visitor to a European metropolis, West's remark, at least as it was retold within Galt's narrative, was the astute reflection of a cosmopolitan intellectual on matters of intercultural and transatlantic concern.

The Life of Benjamin West

In *The Life of Benjamin West*, Galt self-consciously crafted a mythic persona for West. The volume presents the young West as an untrained American artist who through innate genius rose to meteoric success in the upper echelons of the British art world. Rather has lucidly demonstrated that the volume strategically emphasized West's American identity, in contrast to the Britishness on which he had previously insisted. The construction of West's American persona as part of the biographical project of 1816 required the elderly artist to retell his biography, a process that likely consisted in the embellishment and repositioning of biographical details, memories of childhood and youthful events, or the wholesale invention of narratives. As Rather has reflected with regard to the Mohawk Warrior narrative in particular, 'his response was overdetermined, plotted in advance, perhaps, and surely embellished later.'[7]

The accuracy of *The Life of Benjamin West* was questioned by West's contemporaries, even as they were inspired by its mythologizing narrative. The poet Henry Pickering, for example, published the poem *The Belvidere Apollo*, which, while partially about the Apollo Belvidere, was also about the momentous encounter between painter and statue. Indeed, the final lines of Pickering's verse reflect directly on West:

> As amid the courtly throng he stood,
> And ardently thy mien majestic view'd
> Mark'd thy keen eye –and saw the fateful dart
> Drink the warm life-blood in the monster's heart
> Th'untutor'd painter saw in thee, and smil'd
> The youthful warrior of his native wild[8]

Pickering had been so inspired by the image of an 'un'tutor'd' American painter looking at a Classical statue and seeing an American Indian warrior, that he evoked the poignancy

of this encounter in verse. In a footnote, however, Pickering commented that while Galt's biography was 'an amusing work', had it not been 'written under the eye of the venerable President [of the Royal Academy] we might be inclined to doubt the truth of some of the facts stated in it'. He further remarked that 'an authentic life of the great Painter, accompanied by a just and candid criticism, and faithful analysis of his principle works, is still a desideratum'.[9]

Perhaps because West wrote relatively little about himself, scholars have consistently relied on Galt's problematic biography as the best source for the artist's life, despite the obvious pitfalls of the text.[10] The difficulties of the volume are compounded by the fact that few archival sources corroborate, or contest, Galt's claims. Indeed, though several monographs and many articles have been written about West, few read Galt's narrative in a critically nuanced fashion, perhaps for fear that critical deconstruction would leave very little of the great artist.

Yet, it is necessary to recognize that both West and Galt were thoroughly aware of the constructed nature of this biographical project. West was a willing participant in the volume's biographical manipulations, a claim that Rather has furthered by arguing that West hoped the book would speak to audiences in both Britain and America. Its emphasis on West's untutored and 'natural art' could convince 'the British art world to read his American origins as closer to nature, a quality more valued in 1816 than academic credentials'. Furthermore, by reclaiming his 'American' origins after a lengthy absence, West could accentuate the legacy of his mentorship of numerous American students and recreate himself as the primogenitor figure for art in the United States. Galt, likewise, manipulated the narrative to correspond with his own personal concerns which, as Rather has noted, included highlighting that 'West was a provincial unknown who became an international success; an observer in Mediterranean lands and an exotic curiosity to be observed; an American who, like the Scottish writer, could never be English'.[11] Arriving at a more accurate understanding of what these manipulations might have been may help us to gain a closer understanding of West.

The Stuff of Legends

American Indians play a particularly valuable role in Galt's construction of West's mythic identity. Most important are the two narratives that figure as 'creation stories' for West's artistic career. The first results in West learning to grind and mix paint; in the second narrative, during which West enters the European scene as a public persona, West's indigenous knowledge is invoked as part of a larger transatlantic discourse. Both of these narratives are constructed around conceptions of cultural interaction, as well as cultural mixing and the particularities of colonial knowledge. These narratives likely teach us little about the historical truth of the artist's life. Instead, they offer rich illustrations of how American Indians could be invoked for an international audience in the early nineteenth century, in order to arrive at particular predictable outcomes.

In the first narrative West learns to mix colors from a traveling group of American Indians. Like the young Giotto in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, West's first inspiration to draw arose completely from instinct.[12] Unlike Giotto, however, the next artistic step came only when the young child, who lived in a community completely devoid of artistic models, experienced an instance of intercultural education:

> A party of Indians came to pay their annual visit to Springfield, and being amused with the sketches of birds and flowers which Benjamin shewed them, they taught him to prepare the red and yellow colours with which they painted their ornaments. To these his mother added blue, by giving him a piece of indigo, so that he was thus put in possession of the three primary colours. The fancy is disposed to expatiate on this interesting fact; for the mythologies of an antiquity furnish no allegory more beautiful; and a Painter who would embody the metaphor of an Artist instructed by Nature, could scarcely imagine any thing more picturesque than the real incident of the Indians instructing West.[13]

Galt likens this narrative to an ancient allegory, even while asserting the veracity of his tall tale. Galt even suggests that an aspiring artist could not dream up a story as pleasing. We must, however, imagine that the origin of the story was the elderly artist's calculation of the most 'picturesque' story with which to explain his artistic origins. Two important themes emerge when the passage is interpreted as an allegory rather than historical truth: the artist as 'instructed by Nature' and that of the indigenous and feminized spheres supporting, but in opposition to, masculine 'high art'.

This narrative connects West to the indigenous peoples of North America through the narrative of nature. Like the American Indians themselves, West learns from nature and is inspired by it, rather than by the classical tradition (of which he is ostensibly

ignorant). The passage suggests that the subjects of West's art – birds and flowers – are superior to the 'ornaments' produced by the indigenous population. In subsequent narratives within the biography, the American Indians also teach West to string a bow and hunt. He uses this skill to collect specimens for his art. The image of West mixing natural pigments and running through the forest shooting specimens recreates the artist as a noble savage who will rise from these origins due to his genius.

However, this narrative also draws clear cultural distinctions between the artist and the indigenous community. Galt constructs West as both different from, and intellectually superior to, his tutors. Without any attempt at cultural specificity, Galt's narrative refers to 'Indians', relying on a reader's willingness to accept this general category, and not to question how, on the eve of the Seven Years' War, during a period of tense intercultural relationships on Colonial borderlands, a young British-Colonial boy could be allowed to have unsupervised interaction with American Indian men. Further, despite their technical knowledge, these American Indians are not 'artists'. While the knowledge they supply is useful, it is incomplete. They can only offer two primary colors, and it is only through the assistance of his mother that West attains blue paint. West's mother, though, produces tints for utilitarian dyes rather than for use on canvases. Only West is inspired to mix these three colors with one another, such that art is created through the creative genius of the white, male child. This passage validates the European imperial project by linking the Native American community with conceptions of transient wilderness, and with artisanal knowledge long-since made passé by European artistic and intellectual traditions.

In the second passage engaging with American Indian identity, West encounters the *Apollo Belvedere*. The young artist is given the privilege of visiting the Vatican's renowned ancient art collection, accompanied by Cardinal Albani, an esteemed Italian connoisseur.[14] Curious about the North American artist's reaction, the Italians create the greatest possible spectacle for West's first sight of ancient art:

> When the keeper threw open the doors, the Artist felt himself surprised with a sudden recollection altogether different from the gratification he had expected; and without being aware of the force of what he said, exclaimed, 'My God, how like it is to a young Mohawk warrior!' The Italians, observing his surprise, and hearing the exclamation, requested Mr. Robinson to translate to them what he said; and they were excessively mortified to find that the god of their idolatry was compared to a savage. Mr. Robinson mentioned to West their chagrin, and asked him to give some more distinct explanation, by informing him what sort of people the

> Mohawk Indians were. He described to him their education; their dexterity with the bow and arrow; the admirable elasticity of their limbs; and how much their active life expands the chest, while the quick breathing of their speed in the chace, dilates the nostrils with that apparent consciousness of vigour which is so nobly depicted in the Apollo. 'I have seen them often,' added he, 'standing in that very attitude, and pursuing, with an intense eye, the arrow which they had just discharged from the bow.' This descriptive explanation did not lose by Mr. Robinson's translation. The Italians were delighted, and allowed that a better criticism had rarely been pronounced on the merits of the statue.[15]

Rather than a vague reference to an 'Indian', here the young West speaks specifically of a 'Mohawk warrior', laying claim to extensive personal knowledge about the Mohawk. While West may have interacted with American Indians when living in Pennsylvania, no evidence exists that he had any contact with the Mohawk until a decade after visiting Rome. Even then, he interacted with several Mohawk men in London rather than Pennsylvania. It is possible that West may have had isolated interactions with a 'Mohawk warrior' or two prior to his departure for Italy, but surely the easy familiarity suggested in this passage is literary posturing, not biographical fact.

Mr. Robinson, a British gentleman and antiquarian who joined the party as a translator, is also noteworthy since he takes on the role of cultural mediator.[16] Robinson mediates between the naïve colonial artist's reaction to the statue, and the Italian audience's blind admiration for the classical tradition. The passage suggests that Robinson understands why West might invoke the Mohawk specifically, rather than some vague romanticized Indian, and he presses West to explain this point. The implication is that the British audience would know a great deal about the Mohawk, while the Italians would know little to nothing.

This narrative implies that readers will be able to call to mind an image of the *Apollo Belvedere* and that they will have a simultaneous conception of a 'Mohawk Warrior'. For most readers, whether in the United States or in Britain, knowledge of both the *Apollo Belvedere* and the Mohawk Warrior would involve information gathered only from textual references. As Kevin Mueller has argued, with the prominent role of the Mohawk in the Seven Years' War, European leaders became arguably more familiar with them than with any other North American indigenous group.[17] The young West would also have had personal exposure to the literary discourses surrounding the Mohawk through his instructor and mentor William Smith. Smith, who was Provost of the College

of Philadelphia, educated the young artist in Classical History.[18] Not coincidentally, Smith was also the author of two books on North American colonial and military history in which the Mohawk were featured.[19] These books, available to both European and American markets, would have created a shared knowledge of the Mohawk in an international sphere. It is perhaps worth noting that this knowledge would not have been as immediately culturally relevant to an Italian as to a British audience, further evidence that Galt's passage was more likely doctored for a readership in the British Atlantic world, rather than spontaneously offered by West to an Italian audience.

This narrative presents West as offering a new sphere of knowledge to the European art community. Though they are initially skeptical of his remark, the Italians soon learn to understand West's comment as both perceptive and integral to creating an increased understanding of Classical art. Through Colonial exploration and encounters with 'savage' peoples, Europeans can learn more about their own past and artistic traditions. Such knowledge is less about the truths of the culture of the 'other' and more about the reification of European ideologies. Thus, West refers specifically to a Mohawk warrior, rather than, say, a Pequot warrior, because the Mohawk were allied with the British and could, therefore, be given a benign allegorical role. Such cultural specificity is only necessary to elicit a certain response in Galt's readership, for the narrative then focuses on cultural stereotypes about the indigenous group rather than on historically accurate information about the Mohawks, as Muller has so decisively demonstrated.[20] Finally, the ultimate significance of the vignette in the context of West's career is its ability to connect Classical art ideals with modern figures, history and concerns, a project that parallels the artist's own revolutionary shifts in history painting. However, West did not develop, or even approach, such a theoretical and practical artistic platform until a decade later, with the completion of *The Death of General Wolfe* in 1771, a point that West emphasized in his own attempt at an autobiography, written in 1805 (**see fig. 2**).[21]

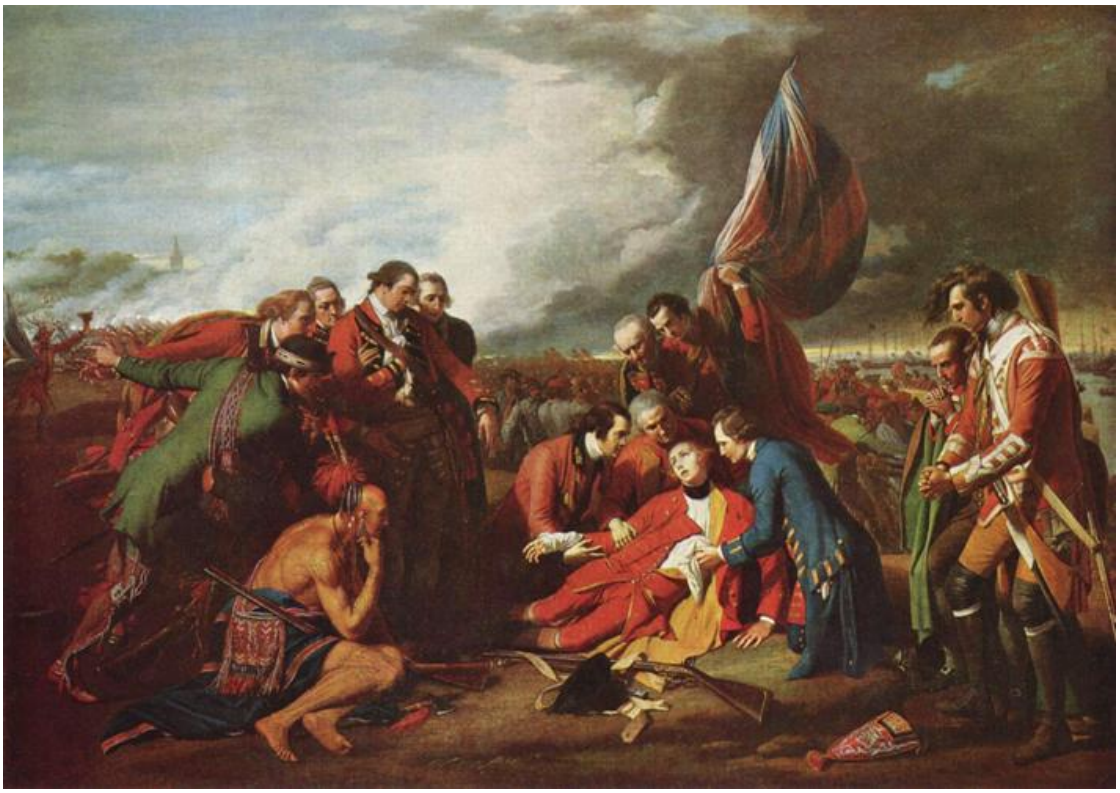

Fig. 2 Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), oil on canvas. Held by the National Gallery of Art, Ottawa, Canada.

Both passages suggest that the use of American Indians in the biography is strategic. At one level, West's familiarity with American Indians is used to accentuate his Americanness, a point that supports Rather's argument and that needs little further elaboration. These passages also contribute to two other important projects. First, by drawing on concepts of American Indians that were *au courant* in 1816, the biography uses these indigenous figures to help build certain aspects of West's intercultural and transatlantic identity, as framed by Galt and West. The generic 'Indian' of West's origin myth compliments the predilection in the United States for a conception of American Indians as aligned with nature, without physical roots on the continent. This romanticized Indian is a benign figure of the past. West's later reference to a Mohawk warrior, by contrast, alludes to a specific tribe with powerful contemporary associations, which would be particularly sympathetic to a British audience. Second, the use of the American Indian in both passages supports West's interest in arguing that his work was innovative for its emphasis on nature and historical accuracy, rather than the blind adoption of classical form. At all levels, these interpretations of West's biographical vignettes make more sense

in the social and historical context of 1816 than they do in the eighteenth-century moments to which Galt attributes the stories.

West and the American (Indian) Dream

If West once likened the *Apollo Belvedere* to a Mohawk Warrior, he also once imagined himself as an Aztec artist. Writing from London in 1772 to his cousin Peter Thomson in Pennsylvania, West lamented:

> The truth [is] that I don't like writeing – it is as deficulty to me as painting would be to you – every man in his way, I could as soon paint you a description of things on this side the water as write –I belive I should have made a Figure in South America in the time of that conquest when we find the natives of that country communicated with each other by Painting the Images of their amaginations and not in writing charectors to describe them.[22]

In this passage West self-identifies with the Aztec, suggesting that he might be a misfit in European (or even Euro-American) society. While West clearly does not believe himself to be Aztec, and does not even remove himself from a colonial viewpoint in this statement (note how he writes 'we find the natives of the country'), he does demonstrate an interest in, and personal association with, American Indian society. Written twelve years after his departure from North America, but nearly forty years before the publication of Galt's biography, West's comment demonstrates that he was thinking about American Indians, and also identifying with them. Written from London, the center of the British Empire, to a relative in Pennsylvania, in the tense years before the American Revolution, this reflection on American Indian civilization may also have allowed West to contemplate his own displaced position between Britain and America. Indeed, West alludes to the distance that separates Britain, his new home, from North America where his cousin resides. West is conscious that his words will fail to accurately represent the world in which he now finds himself. The distance that separates such words and images from lived experience is, literally, a vast ocean and much will certainly be lost in transit. Only by alluding to the South American Indian does West hope to create a metaphor powerful enough to capture the degree of his cultural misfit within this transatlantic situation.

By the time that West penned this letter to his cousin, he had been living in Europe for more than a decade, beginning with three years in Italy, a brief study tour of France

and then eight years in London. Stephanie Pratt has characterized these years between 1761 and 1772 as West's 'Indian decade', because the artist completed six paintings and engravings containing Native American figures during those years.[23] West's first representation of a Native American, *Savage Warrior Taking Leave of His Family* was completed while in Italy, ca. 1761, as West's contribution to a piece representing the four regions of the globe.[24] Yet, as Pratt has argued, these American Indian figures were all variants of a type. Rather than representing specific tribes or individuals, they were 'generic Indians', such that 'a plucked scalp and topknot of hair decorated with feathers, a beaded pouch, a blanket or animal skin, and body paint appear […] as the markers of the figure's identity and […] reappear on other figures of Indian males in subsequent design.'[25] This generic Indian type lacks the specificity of the artist's excited comparison of the *Apollo Belvedere* and the Mohawk Warrior, despite the fact that Galt's narrative dates West's exclamation to 1760 prior to the execution of these paintings.[26] Indeed, West's generalized Indians support the suspicion that the 'Mohawk Warrior' was manipulated at a later point in West's life rather than exclaimed on his Roman tour.

Upon arrival in London in 1763, West would have encountered a country deeply interested in the transatlantic dynamics of interaction with American Indians, though always seen through an imperial lens.[27] Furthermore, the Mohawk were exceptionally powerful in the international sphere in the years preceding and spanning the American Revolution. Since, as Troy Bickam has argued, 'American Indians' power, not their exoticism, placed them at the front of the British imagination' between 1754 and 1783, it would have been natural for the Mohawk to become of interest to West in London.[28] It was during the 1770s that West acquired a collection of Native American objects, which he used to give material authenticity to his paintings.[29] Furthermore, it was in 1776 that West met representatives from a Mohawk delegation to Britain and painted his resulting *Portrait of Colonel Guy Johnson and Karonghyontye (Captain David Hill)* (**see fig. 3**).[30] During the American Revolution, the Mohawk were powerful allies of the British. After the war, much of their land was ceded to the United States and many Mohawk followed Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea) to new territory in Canada. Brant returned to Britain in 1786 in an attempt to regain Mohawk land and power through diplomacy. Despite these efforts, after the Revolutionary War, Mohawk prominence was significantly reduced, and their international cachet would be revived only with their military support of the British

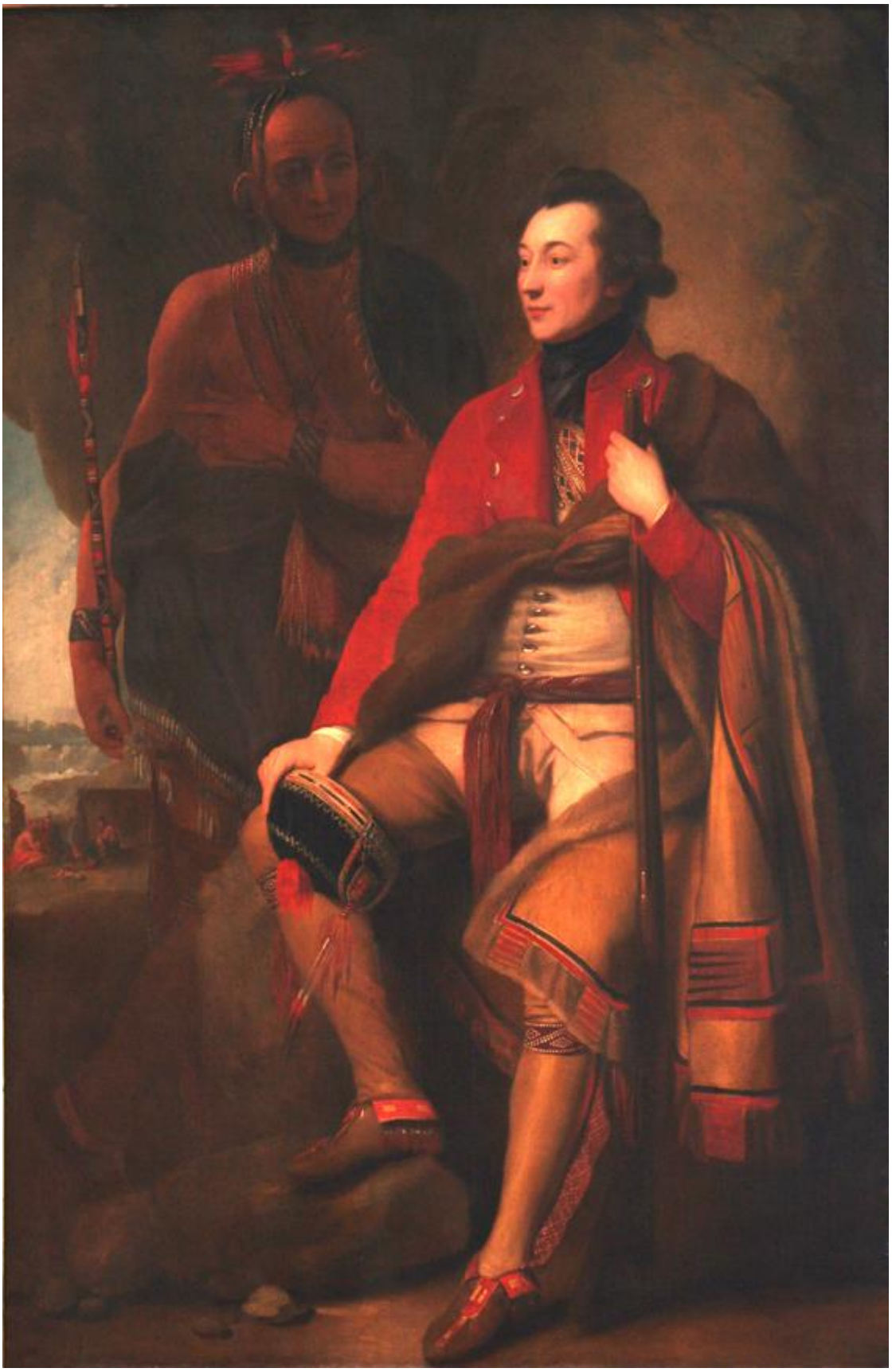

Fig. 3 Benjamin West, *Colonel Guy Johnson and Karonghyontye (Captain David Hill)* (1776), held by the Andrew W. Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

during the War of 1812 which had recently come to a close when *The Life of Benjamin West* was published.[31]

Situated within the context of this history, West's likening of the *Apollo Belvedere* to a Mohawk Warrior gains a multivalent and transatlantic meaning. Rather than a vague allusion to a 'savage warrior' or an 'Indian', West's comparison belongs most properly to the complex cultural dynamic of the final decades of the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth. West's evocation of the Mohawk, rather than the Cherokee or the Creek, adapts his comparison to the predilections of a British audience amply familiar with sympathetic Mohawk figures, like Joseph Brant. In likening the *Apollo Belvedere* to a Mohawk Warrior, West's words called to mind contemporary Native American figures of importance in the international sphere with whom West was personally familiar.

Indeed, it was only after his contact with the Mohawk delegates of 1776 that there is evidence for West circulating stories about his association of the *Apollo Belvedere* with a Mohawk Warrior. Perhaps the first reference to West communicating a similar story by word of mouth was made in Richard Payne Knight's *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem in Three Books* (1794). In a footnote supporting his description of the 'grace' and 'natural beauty' that characterizes 'savage' bodies whose movements remain free because of their 'unfettered mind', Knight cited personal conversation in which West had averred that 'when he first saw the Apollo Belvidere, he was extremely struck with its resemblance to some of the Mohawk warriors whom he had seen in America.'[32] Published well after the American Revolution and, consequently, the visit of the Mohawk delegates to London, Knight's reference offers evidence that West was beginning to circulate versions of the Mohawk Warrior narrative in this period.

West's 'Mohawk Warrior' remark was calculated to respond to a complex inter-cultural milieu, wherein it could romanticize the American Indian while at the same time allude to specific individuals and a precise set of intercultural relations. The nuances of this interpretation can help to uncover the fragments of multicultural art history within the larger *Ur Stories* of the field. In her analysis of West's *Portrait of Colonel Guy Johnson and Karonghyontye,* Leslie Reinhardt highlighted the stakes and pitfalls of such a project, remarking that:

> Despite our best intentions, Indians in pictures remain invisible to us. Traditional historians of European or American art look at an American Indian image from the viewpoint of the artist and his culture, yet often with

> too narrow a focus. For instance, many art historians tirelessly apply to images the notion that artists equated Indians with Rousseau's 'noble savages.' Accordingly they see pictured Indians as a panoply of types deriving from the classical canon: Apollo Belvederes in Indian dress. This monocular vision blinds us to variation between depictions and flattens images individually. When applied indiscriminately, it nullifies the image. More radical art history, although it criticizes the artist for cultural bias, nonetheless arrives at an outcome curiously similar to more traditional approaches. In an attempt to view images of Indians from a broader cultural perspective, it condemns the 'noble savage' depiction as ethnocentrism. However, it still buys the premise that artists portrayed Indians only as types. Despite the best of culturally sensitive intentions, pictures of Indians are seen to vary only between the stereotype chosen- either the noble or the ignoble savage.[33]

In approaching Galt's narratives, scholars have seen the text through the sort of monocular vision that Reinhardt describes. Just as the artist's paintings have been flattened by interpretations that see 'noble savages' or ethnocentrism, so the rich intercultural context of this text has been lost. In recognizing the complexities of the transatlantic world in which West participated, we can explore the cross-cultural posturing of West, the displaced colonist, relocated to the British Metropole. Likewise, such monocular vision neglects the historically contingent relationships at play in this dynamic period. Employing an historical lens that privileges the 'winner' in subsequent struggles for cultural authority fails to acknowledge the specific nature of relationships between American Indian groups and Europeans, which were of paramount importance to the culture of the Atlantic world in which West participated. West's likening of the *Apollo Belvedere* to a Mohawk warrior was not a vague or casual evocation of a romantic savage type, but rather was a comment calculated to create a sensation in a particular transatlantic culture. This analysis does not negate the imperial lens through which West viewed American Indians.[34] It suggests, instead, that these narratives were culturally mutable and intended to appeal to the differing cultural milieu of Britain and the United States in 1816. Perhaps most importantly, it offers the opportunity of using this quotation to approach the complex dynamics of imperialism, colonialism and Native American history in the transatlantic culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Rather than settling for invisible Indians, it suggests that West's words may actually be understood through the real interaction between the British Colonial artist and Mohawk diplomats in London.

This more nuanced and historically contingent interpretation of Galt's narrative underlines that scholars have been too ready to accept such compellingly grandiose origins for the field of American art history. It suggests, instead, that we must approach even such a familiar and accessible primary text, as engaged with a culture 'other' than our own. In such a critical re-reading of Galt's biography of West, the life and accomplishments of the artist himself can only take a secondary position to the questions of social and cultural ideology present in its narratives. Realizing that West's comparison of the *Apollo Belvedere* to a Mohawk Warrior was consciously reconstructed many years after the alleged date of the event, and that this remark carries with it complex levels of social and cultural baggage, is one small step toward revising the narratives of early American Art History. By removing the mythic aura of this statement, perhaps we can open the route to a reconsideration of West and his successors through lenses that acknowledge their historical and cultural contingency. In doing so, perhaps we can likewise arrive at a reconsideration of the presence of American Indians in the art of Anglo-American artists, not as figures constantly subject to European ideologies, but as independent historical entities, acting in a cross-cultural and even a cosmopolitan sphere.

Endnotes

I would like to offer special thanks to Janet C. Berlo for her comments on an early version of this paper, and to David O'Brien for his comments on another related project, which have helped to inform this essay. I am also grateful to the anonymous reader whose astute response helped to strengthen this article. While working on this article, I have been funded by an ACLS/Henry Luce Predoctoral Fellowship in American art, a McNeil Dissertation Fellowship at the Winterthur Museum & Country Estates, and a Graduate Fellowship from the Graduate College at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I thank these institutions for the support that made this research possible. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, Anne W. Sienkewicz, for her careful editing and critique, my father Thomas J. Sienkewicz for his wise suggestions, and my husband Víctor M. Martínez for his constant intellectual companionship.

[1] John Galt, *The Life of Benjamin West* ed. by Nathalia Wright, (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1960). The 'Mohawk warrior' narrative has become iconic in subsequent scholarship on the artist, and is frequently retold with little critical commentary. The passage has been so frequently cited that it would be impossible to cite the entire range of literature. Certain essays have devoted particular attention to discussing the passage, and I list those here: Vivien Green Fryd, 'Rereading the Indian in Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe*', *American Art* 9:1 (1995), 73-86; Kevin R. Muller, 'Pelts and Power, Mohawks and

Myth: Benjamin West's Portrait of Guy Johnson', *Winterthur* Portfolio 40:1 (2005), 47-75 (pp. 62-63); Jules Prown, 'Benjamin West and the Use of Antiquity', *American Art* 10:2 (1996), 28-49.

[2] Galt, p. 105.

[3] Susan Rather, 'Benjamin West, John Galt, and the Biography of 1816', *The Art Bulletin*, LXXXVI, 2 (June 2002), 324-345 (p. 345).

[4] Rather, p. 341.

[5] Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 29.

[6] I was first introduced to the study of American Indians as cosmopolitan figures in the transatlantic context in a seminar offered by Janet Berlo at the University of Illinois in 2006. Many of my ideas on the topic were formed during classroom conversations with Janet, and I owe her a great intellectual debt for in the shaping of this essay. A wide range of literature dealing with transatlantic perception of Native Americans has been of particular use for this study: *Atlantic Lives: a Comparative Approach to Early America*, ed. by Timothy J. Shannon (New York: Pearson, 2004); Janet C. Berlo, *Arthur Amiotte, Collages, 1988-2006* (Santa Fe, NM: The Wheelwright Museum of Art, 2006); *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600*-1850 ed. by Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jack D. Forbes, *The American Discovery of Europe* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American* Indians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: the Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998); Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Leslie Reinhardt, 'British and Indian Identities in a Picture by Benjamin West', *Eighteenth-Century* Studies 31:3 (1998), 283-305; Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500-1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[7] Rather, p. 325.

[8] Henry Pickering, *The Ruins of Paestum and other compositions in verse* (Salem, MA: Cushing and Appleton, 1822), p. 8.

[9] Pickering, p. 121.

[10] This tradition of re-telling Galt's narrative can be traced into the nineteenth-century. James Thomas Flexner in *America's Old Masters* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967) canonized what would become the standard, Galt-influenced history of West's life. Scholars such as Robert C. Alverts in *Benjamin West: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), Grose Evans in *Benjamin West and the Taste of His Times* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), Helmut Von Erffa and Allen Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) produced similar narratives. Ann Abrams offered a studied first critique of Galt's narrative in her book, *Valiant Hero: Benjamin West and Grand-Style History Painting* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985).

Despite this lengthy historiography, only with Susan Rather's article has the fundamental veracity of Galt's narrative been called into question.

[11] Rather, p. 335.

[12] Giorgio Vasari, *Stories of the Italian Artists from Vasari* [1550], trans. by Emma Louis Seeley, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1908). Cimabue's discovery of the young artistic genius Giotto is a famed origin-myth of Renaissance art: 'One day Cimabue, going on business from Florence to Vespignano, found Giotto while his sheep were feeding, drawing a sheep from nature upon a smooth and solid rock with a pointed stone, having never learnt from any one but nature': pp. 6-7.

[13] Galt, p. 18.

[14] For further information on Cardinal Albani and general context for West's years in Italy see, E. P. Richardson, 'West's Voyage to Italy, 1760, and William Allen', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (January 1978), 3-27.

[15] Galt, pp. 105-106.

[16] Thomas Robinson, a young British aristocrat, became a close acquaintance and his first guide around Rome. For further information on Robinson see Richardson.

[17] Muller, pp. 47-75. For recent discussion of the Seven Years' War with regard to Native American history, and European interaction with the Mohawk specifically, see also Fintan O'Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the invention of America* (London: Faber, 2005). For texts considering the impact and reception of the Seven Years War in Europe see Matt Schumann and Karl Schweizer, *The Seven Years War: a Transatlantic History* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), and Franz Szabo, *Seven Years War in Europe, 1756-1763* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008).

[18] For more on the relationship between West and Smith see *The Life of Benjamin West*, especially Ch. 2, Sections XI-XII and Ch. 3 Section I. See also Muller, p. 63.

[19] William Smith, *The History of the Province of New York, from the first discovery to the year MDCCXXXII* (London: 1757) and *A Review of the Military Operations in North America from the commencement of the French hostilities on the frontiers of Virginia in 1753* (London: 1757).

[20] Muller, pp. 72-73.

[21] Benjamin West, Autobiographical fragment, *Charles Allen Munn Collection Relating to Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, and Benjamin West 1788-1917* from the collection of Fordham University Library, Archives of American Art, Microfilm Reel N68-20.

[22] The numerous spelling errors in this citation have been left untouched to give a clear sense of West's challenged grasp of spelling and grammar. Letter, February 23, 1772, from Benjamin West to Peter Thomson, from the collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection, Archives of American Art, Microfilm Reel P23.

[23] Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art, 1700-1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), p. 75.

[24] For further information about West's *The Indian Family* see Pratt. See also Derrick Cartwright, *Benjamin West: Allegiance and Allegory* (Timken Museum of Art, 2005) and Hugh Honour, 'Benjamin West's *Indian Family*', *Burlington Magazine* 125 (1983), 726-33.

[25] Pratt, p. 84.

[26] Pratt's otherwise astute argument positions West's 'Mohawk Warrior' comment as the spark for this 'Indian decade'.

[27] See Troy Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

[28] Bickham, p. 16.

[29] For a discussion of West's Indian artifacts see Arthur Einhorn and Thomas S. Alber, 'Bonnets, Plumes, and Headbands in West's Painting of Penn's Treaty', *American Indian Art Magazine* 21:3 (1996), 44-53 and J. C. H. King, 'Woodland Artifacts from the Studio of Benjamin West 1738-1820', *American Indian Art Magazine* 17 (1991), 34-42.

[30] For detailed discussion of the Mohawk delegation of 1762 see Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain 1500-1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For analyses of West's dual portrait see Muller; and Reinhardt.

[31] For the Mohawk role in the War of 1812 see, Carl Benn, *The Iroquois in the War of 1812* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1998).

[32] Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem in Three Books* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Company, 1794), Book 1:3.

[33] Reinhardt, p. 283.

[34] Perhaps the best source for situating West's art within an understanding of British Imperialism is Tobin. See, especially, the chapter 'Native Land and Foreign Desires: William Penn's Treaty with the Indians', in *Picturing Imperial Power*, pp. 56-80.