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Troilus and Cressida

An Oil Painting

by

Benjamin West

A NOTE ON "TROILUS AND CRESSIDA"

FRANCIS R. MAGLEBY*

Benjamin West (1738-1820) was an unsung innovator of the neoclassic style of painting. At the age of twenty-one he went to Rome to study art, and like other Americans of that time, Franklin and Jefferson to name just two, he was inspired by the democratic ideals of classical Greece and Rome. Caught up in the classical concept of ideal beauty, West turned to the image and subject of the classics and the world of antiquity for his paintings. It is interesting to note that he was painting in the neoclassic style twenty years before David and Ingres, the French painters often given major credit for the classic revival in painting.

West left Rome and went to London to live and paint. He was so successful there that he attracted many young American painters to his studio to study with him. The result was that neoclassic realism approached a national style in America during the late eighteenth century with neoclassic themes appearing in paintings by Copley, Trumbull, Stuart, Peale, and others.

Although West was an innovator in turning to the classic subject, he retained the painting techniques of the eighteenth-century masters. "Troilus and Cressida" shows that he was an excellent craftsman and understood the grand manner of that century which is characterized by rich, transparent color.

There is added interest in West as a painter for Mormons since Joseph Smith arranged to have an exhibition of his paintings in Nauvoo. It is unique that a frontier town would have an exhibition of paintings by the leading artist of the day.

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