

BENJAMIN WEST, P.R.A.

(Pennsylvania 1738 - London 1820)

Studies for the Ascension: Christ Ascending

Verso: Studies of Heads

black and white chalk, on grey paper
25.4 x 19 cm (10 x 7¼ in)

Provenance: The artist's family, and by descent to Mrs. P. Howard;
Sotheby's, London, 22 March 1979, lot 33.

Literature: H. von Erffa and A. Staley, *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, New Haven and London, 1986, no. 380, note 6, p. 376.

STUDIES FOR THE ASCENSION: CHRIST ASCENDING (*Recto*); *Studies of Heads* (*Verso*) are loose and confident in manner, revealing Benjamin West's chief concern with the expression of movement. The figure of Christ is roughly delineated, with bold black lines, heightened by white, indicating the swirl of drapery around him. The brashness of execution powerfully evokes the upward motion of the figure, which appears ready to rise off the page.

The studies were drawn by West in preparation for a painting of *The Ascension*, which was to be the focal point of the Chapel of Revealed Religion that King George III had intended to build at Windsor. The chapel's construction was never realised and the painting remained in West's possession, accompanied by a monochrome sketch for the work that now belongs to the Tate Gallery (fig. 1). The depiction of Christ in *Sketch for 'The Ascension'*, although more finished, is only slightly modified from West's initial conception indicated by the present studies.



Benjamin West,
Sketch for 'The Ascension',
c.1782,
Tate Gallery,
London
(Figure 1)

The Ascension was displayed in West's posthumous exhibition and sold in his studio sale in 1829, after which it was presented to Harrow School where it remained until 1854. It is now in the gallery of the Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina.

West, who is often recognised as 'the father of American painting', grew up in rural Pennsylvania and was largely untutored in academic painting. At the age of twenty-two, he was sponsored by two wealthy Philadelphia families to travel to Italy, where he studied for three years. This move has been described as an act of profound significance to American art, as West was the first of his kind to move away from the colonialist portraiture tradition and embrace new European styles of painting and subject matter¹. In Rome, he was taught by Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), and influenced by Gavin Hamilton's (1723-1798) early neo-Classical works. Afterwards he moved to London, where he soon made his mark as a painter of historical and religious scenes and was a social as well as artistic phenomenon. His patron William Allen wrote enthusiastically, 'he is really a wonder of a man, and has so far outstripped all the painters of his time [in getting] into high esteem at once... If he keeps his health he will make money very fast'.²

In London, West began painting in the neo-Classical style, but became more experimental with his most famous painting, *Death of General Wolfe*, which was acclaimed for its depiction of a historical subject in contemporary dress. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, where West was a founder member. A year later he was appointed official history painter to George III. In 1792, West succeeded Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) (see catalogue no. 72) as president of the Royal Academy, a post that he held, albeit with a brief interlude, until his death. As scholars have commented, West's remarkable and innovative place in history made him stand out: he was the 'first American to achieve an international reputation and was an inspiration to many of his countrymen'.³ West taught three generations of American artists, including Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), Joseph Wright (1756-1793), John Trumbull (1756-1843) and Robert Fulton (1765-1815), as well as his own son Raphael Lamar West (1769-1850).

¹ E. P. Richardson, *Painting in America: The Story of 450 Years* (New York, 1956).

² D.A. Kimball and M. Quinn, 'William Allen—Benjamin Chew Correspondence, 1763–1764', *PA Mag. Hist. & Biog.*, xc (1966).

³ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 3rd edition, ed. Ian Chilvers, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.



(Actual Size)