

Epic, Ode, Image?: Classical Reference in the Watercolors of Benjamin Henry Latrobe

Classical allusions pervaded eighteenth century art, as artists and patrons alike sought to cultivate ties to the dignity, power, morals, and romance of the ancient world. Looking back toward a golden age in Greece or Roman, such references could also offer reflections on the corruption and imperfections of the modern world. This paper considers the use of classical reference in the watercolor sketches of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, which offer a particularly fascinating and atypical approach to ancient texts. Latrobe had received an exceptional education in the Moravian schools of Europe, which included a thorough knowledge of ancient authors and which trained him to be an expert reader of both Latin and Greek. As my research is gradually revealing, Latrobe's relationships with classical texts provided him with the intellectual, emotional, and rational tools to understand his present experiences. By utilizing lines from poems and plays, Latrobe would set a philosophical or conceptual tone for his images. These pairings are often without an overlap in subject matter between his image and the text provided and, thus, the significance of Latrobe's classical allusions in landscape and *trompe l'oeil* painting has gone unnoted.

This talk will focus on the sub-set of Latrobe's images produced between 1795 and 1799, the period in which he emigrated from Britain to the United States. Here I will consider a selection of watercolors through which Latrobe attempted to make sense of human history and civilization in the particularly fraught moment we now know as the "Age of Revolutions." Latrobe's images represent American places, but through metaphor, allusion, and introspection that hang on citations of classical authors, Latrobe ties Europe to America, past to present, and personal aspirations to figures of epic and imperial history. If later artists, such as Whistler, produced works that they termed nocturnes or symphonies for their ties to music, this paper

explores the possibility of considering Latrobe's humble watercolors as images intended to be visual embodiments of epics, odes, or acts, as the artist internalized, interpreted, and responded to the ancient texts through the form, tone, and visual experience of the images that he produced.