

Homage/Image: John Flaxman, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and the Modern Weight of Classical Figures

Near the end of the eighteenth century, the young sculptor John Flaxman took on several sequential projects to generate some extra cash. For a series of private patrons, Flaxman created drawings that retold Homer's *Iliad*, followed by *Compositions on Aeschylus*, and finally a book of images based on the *Odyssey*. Flaxman did not think of these as great artistic projects, preferring to fancy that his ultimate fame and fortune would come from his sculptural career. Nonetheless, the aesthetic form that he devised in these drawings was radical and would have a great impact on the subsequent development of neoclassical design in the nineteenth century. In these drawings, Flaxman reduced the figures to outlines, within spare architectural settings, and incorporated minimal decorative details. This austere aesthetic was drawn from his own study of ancient pottery and his interest in creating purified images that distilled their visual messages to the essence of the ideas and emotions conveyed by the texts. Though Flaxman's images from ancient epic and tragedy are well known, little attention has been paid to the way in which the visual content of these images interprets and engages with the ancient texts, revealing the young sculptor's ability to think critically about the close relationship of visual form to ancient text. One element of this paper will, therefore, be to offer close readings of Flaxman's images, in order to consider the interpretations made through Flaxman's modern embodiment of ancient figures.

Shortly after Flaxman's books of images began to circulate, the young British architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who had recently immigrated to Virginia, began to create his own watercolor views in which he inserted figures copied from Flaxman into landscape views of the southern state. To date, scholarship has considered Latrobe's copies of Flaxman to be the

derivative products of an amateur artist, interested in neoclassicism but with no mastery of the human figure. This paper takes a different interpretive approach, by considering Latrobe's images as homages both to Flaxman and to the original ancient texts. Latrobe, who was highly educated and was a sophisticated reader of ancient texts, found that the appropriation of figures from Flaxman allowed for a visually and intellectually engaging way in which to refer to the art of his contemporary, to make comments built on the original ancient texts, and to offer his own interpretive criticism of these texts by building on Flaxman's scenes.

Latrobe's use of Flaxman's figures is precise. Through the insertion of classical figures into Virginian scenes, I argue that Latrobe integrated critical commentary into his images. By peopling the Virginian landscape with Helen, Orestes, and other figures drawn from ancient epics, and associated via poses and forms drawn from Flaxman with precise moments and themes in the accompanying ancient texts, Latrobe sought to make his viewers aware of subtle intellectual content built on reflections, concerns, and visions for the future of the young nation. Without Flaxman's images from which the figures are borrowed, such commentaries would have been impossible. Through artistic homage to Flaxman, however, Latrobe was able to generate a visual form that inserted lessons learned from the ancient world into the struggles of the modern present.