



General Theodore Kosciusko, 1797
 Benjamin West (American, 1738-1820)
 Oil on panel | 12 3/8 x 17 7/16 in. (31.5 x 44.3 cm.)

- Compare this painting to other portraits by West, or from the Revolutionary Era. How does West create a more intimate portrait of his subject?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

The painting depicts an interior scene with a man reclining on a couch, his papers and belongings strewn about him. The room is very dark: the walls are covered with dark green-blue and green stripes, and the couch is also a darker green, accented with white which gives it the look of sea foam. The only source of light in the room is a window in the back right corner of the scene. The window frames the view of a distant *cityscape*—the sky is blue and clear, and the scene is vibrant in

comparison to the dark interior. The window and its light provide a contrast to the drabness of the room—the window is heavily curtained with a red cloth, pushed aside to allow in the light. The lighter colors—the reds and the whites—are echoed in the carpet of the room and in the red and white pillows at the foot of the couch.

The subject is lying prostrate on the couch—he is on his side, with one arm tucked under him as support, and the other hand touching his forehead. The man is dressed in dark dignified clothes. He looks fairly young, with curled brown hair and a beardless face, and he wears a strange smile that seems more tired than happy. Different items lie haphazardly around him—on a table there is a blue

- What effect do the contrasts in lighting have on the mood of the piece and the interpretation of the character of the figure?
- What are some ways that West could have “romanticized” the story of General Kosciusko?
- In what ways would it have been difficult for West to be in England, working for the King during the Revolutionary period?
- What issues surround the creation of art during a time of turmoil? What responsibilities does an artist have?

bag and a rapier, a crutch is leaning against the wall behind him, and there is disarray of papers and writing utensils.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

This painting is different from others that West painted. He was famous for his large-scale, romanticized interpretations of history, in which he depicted grandiose and epic heroes in the most poignant moments of their lives. This painting, however, strays away from heroic *Romanticism* and presents the General with a more realistic persona. It was also painted on a much smaller scale, which reduces the impact of the painting as an object of awe and wonder. These features suggest that West painted this portrait for his own pleasure, as a study of a person in whom he was interested. The more modest setting could also have been motivated by respect for General Kosciusko’s condition. He had been severely wounded in battle and it would have been inappropriate for West to glorify the things that had harmed Kosciusko. The painting hung in West’s home until several years after his death.

Cultural and Historical Importance

Thaddeus Kosciusko was Major-General in the Polish army and moved to America to escape political turmoil in his own country. He offered his services to George Washington’s army, and served as an engineer and an Officer of the Line. After the victory of American forces, he returned to Poland and fought in an uprising against Austria. There, he was severely wounded and jailed in a Russian prison for two years without medical attention. This painting was done while Kosciusko was en route back to America, where he expected to find peace, far away from the tumultuous political environment in Europe. The setting of this painting is his room in the Sablonière Hotel in London, with a view of St. Paul’s Cathedral. The different objects seen positioned around the room indicate some important aspects of Kosciusko’s life. The sword on the smaller end table was a gift from the Whig Club of London celebrating his efforts in the war and the hat was characteristic of those worn by Polish cavalry officers. Also shown is the crutch

VOCABULARY

Cityscape: A view of a city, especially a large urban center.

Neoclassical: A trend or movement prevailing in Europe, America, and various European colonies during the late 18th and 19th centuries. It is characterized by the introduction and widespread use of Greek orders and decorative motifs, the subordination of detail to simple, strongly geometric overall compositions, the presence of light colors or shades, frequent shallowness of relief in ornamental treatment of facades, and the absence of textural effects.

Raphael: An Italian painter (1483-1520) whose works, including religious subjects, portraits, and frescoes, exemplify the ideals of the High Renaissance.

Romanticism: An artistic and intellectual movement originating in Europe in the late 18th century and characterized by a heightened interest in nature, emphasis on the individual’s expression of emotion and imagination, departure from the attitudes and forms of classicism, and rebellion against established social rules and conventions.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Government; Economics; Citizen Rights and Responsibilities; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

Kosciusko needed after his injuries, along with some sketchbooks and papers.

This painting relates to not-often discussed aspects of the Revolutionary War—those Americans who were abroad, but still associated with the war in some ways, and those participants in the war who had not lived in America for extended periods of time, such as Kosciusko. As an American working in England during the American Revolution,

Benjamin West needed to allow himself some flexibility—he painted portraits of British officers along with heroes from the former American colonies. This painting depicts West’s artistic versatility, in that he could paint both *Neoclassical*, overtly dramatic depictions of moments in history, and then paint a portrait such as this, on a much smaller scale with a greater adherence to realism. Finally, this painting showcases the openness of

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Without discussing the painting in advance, have students write a vignette about General Kosciusko. Afterward, read the actual biography about Kosciusko, and have a discussion about why the students chose to write about the General as they did. (*Middle and High School*)

MATHEMATICS: Painters use different techniques within their paintings to let the viewer know how far away things are from one another. What distance does the scene outside the window seem to be from the hotel room? What would be a reasonable unit of distance to measure that distance (in the standard system and the metric system)? What if you wanted to convert that distance to inches/centimeters? (*Elementary School*)

SCIENCE: While he was growing up in colonial America, legend has it that Native Americans taught West how to mix colors from materials in nature. Go on a nature walk to find things that could be used to make different pigments for painting—blackberries, currents, dandelions, and mud are all examples. Study how Native Americans or early settlers used things from nature to color their objects. For example, early settlers would make dyes for wool and wood by boiling black walnuts to create a dark brown color. Have students mix colors with different classrooms materials, such as paint, overhead transparencies, markers, etc. (*Elementary School*)

Start a unit on the visual color spectrum and the color wheel. Why would West choose to paint red curtains and a blue-green room? How does West use white light in his painting? (*Middle and High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Study the biographies of both Benjamin West and General Kosciusko—what was their involvement in the Revolutionary movement or the War, if any? (*All ages*)

VISUAL ARTS: Draw portraits of other historic figures that served in the American Revolution. West painted important works belonging to Kosciusko, which symbolized events in Kosciusko’s life and different parts of his personality. Include personal items in the work, and depict the figures in a more informal, intimate way, as West has done here. Compare these works to some idealized portraits of Revolutionary figures. (*All ages*)

West's philosophy, he could paint for both the King of England and for veterans of the Revolutionary War, and the uniform demand for his work on both sides of the Atlantic.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin West was the tenth child of a Pennsylvania housekeeper. Though he had no formal education, legend has it that he received lessons from the Native Americans on how to grind red and yellow pigments from elements in nature for use in painting. At the age of 18, West went to the College of Philadelphia to study art. There, he met John Wollaston, a painter who would influence West's technique for some years thereafter. When in his twenties, feeling that he had no future in America and that his current path was leading him nowhere, he earned

enough money to charter a place on a boat headed to Rome. From there, West moved to England, where he was taken in by Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy. It was at this point that he met and began to paint for King George III. In 1768, he became a founding member of the Royal Academy, and soon became England's Chief History Painter, using both his Quaker upbringing and his exposure to classic European works for inspiration of content and style. Because of his ornate style, West was sometimes referred to as the "English *Raphael*." Despite his friendship with King George III, West painted many portraits of Americans after independence was won, in addition to his regular European clientele. He continued to work in England until his death in 1820.