

The Killing of Richard II

Interdisciplinary lesson: Art, ELA and Social Studies



The Killing of Richard II
by: Francis Wheatley

Art can illuminate a work of literature.
Art techniques change as society changes.
Art gives a window into another time and place.

ELA Standards 2, 3
Arts Standards 2, 3
Social Studies Standard 2

The Killing of Richard II by Francis Wheatley illustrates an event in the life of a 14th c monarch by details drawn from a 16th century Shakespeare play. It was commissioned in 1792 for one of the first public galleries of art in a project to heighten British pride in their history.

Commissioning the Painting:

In 1792 Robert Bowyer determined to open a public gallery of 60 history paintings commissioned to commemorate significant moments in Great Britain's history. Selections were chosen from *A History of England* written by David Hume in 1762; engravings of the 60 paintings would then be used to illustrate a new edition of the book. Patrons would pay to enter the gallery and to buy serialized chapters of the new book. Engravings suitable for framing could also be purchased. Unfortunately the public gallery was not a success and the individual paintings were sold in 1807. The prints were popular as a new middle class became interested in decorating their homes with "works of art."

The Artist:

Francis Wheatley (1747-1801) was a successful genre painter in England. A very gifted draftsman and versatile painter, he was well known for his graceful style and charm, and his expert draftsmanship. The style of his history painting reflects his interest in the theater and the dramatic effects designed to produce maximum visual and emotional impact on the viewer. "Romanticism Sublime" or "The Grand Style" relied upon dramatic chiaroscuro, color contrasts, histrionic gestures and exaggerated facial features, all looking very real but manipulated to illicit an emotional reaction rather than an intellectual one.

The Story:

David Hume described the rule of Richard (1367-1400) as a time of intrigue between the nobles and the king, the Parliament and the king, and France and England. Richard II came to power upon the death of his grandfather Edward III; as his father died before assuming the throne, Richard inherited the throne although he was only 10 years old and over the wishes of his ambitious uncles. Famous for peacefully negotiating the end of the Peasant Revolt, he squandered the popular good will through high taxes and his ostentatious life style and arrogant style. He vacillated between working with Parliament and asserting his divine right prerogatives. In 1399 his cousin Henry of Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster, overthrew Richard and imprisoned him in Pontefract Castle where he died in February 1400. Henry assumed the throne as Henry IV.

The Yorkists and Richard's supporters asserted that Richard was axed to death in prison by Sir Piers Exton and others of the guards under orders from Henry IV. Others, including later historians like David Hume, assert that he probably was starved to death since his body showed no marks of violence when it was displayed in public after his death.

Shakespeare's Version:

In 1597 Shakespeare chose to include a violent murder scene in his play *Richard II*. This portion of the play, Act V, Scene V, was not included in the first three editions of Shakespeare's play and the murder scene was not included in the performances of the play; it was too risky to show the deposition and assassination of a monarch in Elizabeth's England. Elizabeth, like Richard, faced untrustworthy advisors and politically ambitious nobles, as well as problems with Parliament about the extent of her powers. In 1601 the Earl of Essex was accused by other advisors of fomenting

rebellion against the Queen. In an effort to expose the issue of corrupt counselors and to build up popular support among the Londoners for a rebellion, Essex arranged for the staging of Richard II complete with the death scene.

Discussion Questions: Learning to Look

- What is going on in this painting?
- Who are the people?
- What has happened? What is going to happen?
- What details tell us the story, identify the hero and the villains?
- When is this happening?
- Why is this happening? Could anything happen to change things?
- Where is the artist?
- Is this real?

Discussion Questions: Looking to Learn

- Why in 1792 would Wheatley be commissioned to paint a huge picture of the killing of Richard II?
- Why use the Shakespeare version of the killing instead of the Hume explanation?
- Why does the picture more resemble a stage version than a realistic picture?
- What is the purpose of the painting? And how well does it fulfill this purpose?

Activities:

SS: Art as Political Propaganda

- Research the political issues faced by Richard II, Elizabeth I and George III?
- Who was the audience for this painting? Why would Bowyer and Wheatley choose the death of Richard II in their 1792 art gallery and book episode/illustration?
- What might late 18th c Englishmen learn from studying this history?
- What kind of art is most useful for political purposes?
- What might an artist do today to encourage national introspection and/or patriotism?

ELA: Art as Story Telling

- Analyze the issues in Richard II by Shakespeare.
- What stage directions does Shakespeare give? How would the death scene be presented on stage? Compare the play version with the presentation in Wheatley's painting?
- What words does Shakespeare use to describe Richard II? How does his verbal picture compare with Wheatley's visual picture?

ART: Art as Reflection of its Time and Culture

- Investigate the tradition of history painting. What are the familiar features of Wheatley's history painting?
- How does the "Romanticism Sublime" concept of history painting differ from that of the Neoclassicists of the preceding generation and the Romanticists of the next?

Source:

Stage and State: The Censorship of Richard II,

<http://www.engl.uvic.ca/Faculty/MBHomePage/ISShakespeare/Resources/Essex/default.html>



500 University Avenue ♦ Rochester, NY 14607 ♦ (585) 473-7720, ext. 3025

Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation is proud to sponsor the Memorial Art Gallery's school programs.

Additional support is provided by the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.