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## ***Glorious Lessons: John Trumbull, Painter of the American Revolution***

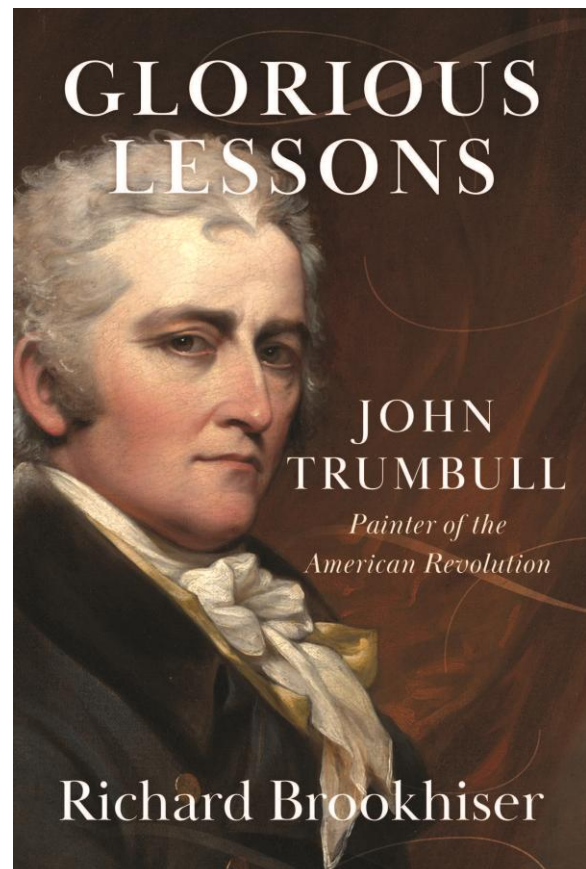
By Richard Brookhiser

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Richard Brookhiser, senior editor at the *National Review* and author of biographies of Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, James Madison, John Marshall, Gouverneur Morris, and George Washington, as well as a memoir of his early career under the tutelage of conservative commentator William S. Buckley Jr., has ventured into the art world with *Glorious Lessons: John Trumbull, Painter of the American Revolution*. As is consistent with his compact biographies, Brookhiser's aim in *Glorious Lessons* is not so much to change our perception of Trumbull or even to add significantly to the existing knowledge as it is to perfectly summarize the person's life and work in a legible yet complete way. Art histories of Trumbull tend to deal briefly with his personal life and more expansively with his professional works. Brookhiser inverts that strategy.

Brookhiser's historical framing of Trumbull is solid and succinct. For example, after outlining his early life and education, he moves into the narrative of Trumbull's time with Thomas Jefferson in Paris (56–69). In short order, he deals with Jefferson's nudging of Trumbull toward a picture of the drafting committee of the Declaration of Independence, narrates Trumbull's role as a go-between in Jefferson's romance with Maria Cosway, and tells us of how the Trumbull family in Connecticut had spearheaded independence from Britain before Jefferson ever penned a single word of the Declaration. Brookhiser fluidly moves Trumbull back to America in 1789, charting the artist's initial excitement, followed by his eventual alarm, over the French Revolution, which, he came to believe, would undercut the idealism he was promoting in his pictures of America's revolution. Brookhiser



reminds us that Trumbull honestly believed his job was “to preserve and diffuse the memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man; to give to the present and future sons of misfortune, such glorious lessons of their rights, and of the spirit with which they should assert and support them” (67). The Terror would cast a pall over Trumbull’s sweet visions of the all-good revolution for human rights.

Similarly, Brookhiser compactly captures Trumbull’s engagement with President Washington and his administration. Out of that time came military portraits of “the great man” and some superb miniatures and pencil sketches, including a masterful drawing of the charismatic Creek leader Alexander McGillivray (1790; Fordham University Libraries). Brookhiser journeys with Trumbull on his quest for portraits to fill *The Declaration of Independence* (1787–1820; Yale University Art Gallery), followed by long passages on his turn to diplomacy in the 1790s. In the ramp up to the Rotunda paintings, he accurately points out that it would take the War of 1812 to clear “the mephitic air” of congressional partisanship, which, in turn would allow Trumbull’s project to proceed (121).

Brookhiser is especially interested in Trumbull’s unhappy personal life. Trumbull was always embarrassed to accept John Ray as his illegitimate son and felt chronically put upon to help him, even at a distance. He became downright mean-spirited on hearing Ray’s refusal to take up farming, angry at his decision to marry without approval, and offended over Ray’s requests for money. Eventually, father and son reconciled.

Later in the book, Brookhiser sensitively explores Trumbull’s late marriage to Sarah Hope, his bubbly, alcoholic wife, whose binges ruined friendships. Rufus King wrote a spectacularly gossipy letter to Christopher Gore (both US senators) describing Sarah’s drunken charm at a Washington party, at which Trumbull had to spirit her away. Alas, the damage was done. Brookhiser also gives space to Trumbull’s growing desperation over indebtedness and highlights his rewarding late-life friendship with young Benjamin Silliman, a chemistry professor at Yale. The latter led to Trumbull’s generous gifts to Yale in exchange for a lifetime annuity and to the establishment of one of the earliest public-access museums in the country. All in all, Brookhiser paints a sympathetic portrait of Trumbull.

Throughout the book, Brookhiser is necessarily reliant on Trumbull’s mythic story of himself, namely the artist’s 434-page *Autobiography* of 1841, in which he exaggerated, softened, or omitted some difficult life passages. These include Trumbull’s ugly mid-life betrayal of Benjamin West, who had done so much to boost his early career, and the degree to which Trumbull’s theme of compassion in his battle pictures is historical bunk. There is also the puzzling episode of Trumbull’s abrupt resignation from the Continental Army in 1780, which was followed by a move to, of all places, wartime London, where he was stunningly wrongheaded to think an American Revolutionary colonel could just quietly meld into the artistic firmament without consequences.

Brookhiser acknowledges the lacunae in Trumbull’s account of himself, wittily concluding that “instead of solid structure” in the *Autobiography*, “he patched up tar paper” (197). But because of his dependence on the *Autobiography*, Brookhiser’s Trumbull comes across as Trumbull’s Trumbull, rather than the complicated, contradictory, charisma-challenged person who lacked in generosity, humility, and self-reflection and who, increasingly as he

aged, evolved into a creaky and infuriatingly brittle Federalist, painfully out of touch with the new direction of American politics and art. Brookhiser endorses the mythic figure at the same time that he recognizes the problem with the mythic tendencies in Trumbull's narrative of himself.

In a similar vein, Brookhiser minimizes the artists—especially Charles Willson Peale and Gilbert Stuart—who were equal to Trumbull in the nation-building project in the visual arts. One gets the impression from *Glorious Lessons* that Trumbull alone stood out as the creator of founding images. In effect, by underestimating Trumbull's colleagues, Brookhiser has followed Trumbull's assessment of his own importance, in which he dismissed the achievements of his peers this same way: "From among all these [artists] you find not one instance of any attempt to record the glory of our country" (181). Overall, Brookhiser has taken a figure from the Founding, smoothed but not eliminated his rough edges, and represented him precisely the way he might like to be represented. Brookhiser needed to wrestle some more with Trumbull.

*Glorious Lessons* is an extension of Brookhiser's widely respected writings on the Founders, but, as it turns out, writing about the paintings of a major artist such as Trumbull entails special skills beyond the basics of picture narration. Brookhiser fully understands that Trumbull's paintings and drawings *are themselves* essential documents, but he does not quite know how to navigate his way through them to see their eighteenth-century Anglo-American art-historical context or to extract fully their ideological undercurrents.

Brookhiser has his moments. He nicely walks us through Trumbull's *Sortie Made by the Garrison of Gibraltar* (1789; Metropolitan Museum of Art). In Trumbull's adapting *The Dying Gaul* to the expiring figure of the Spanish officer Don Jose de Barboza, he acutely notes that "Trumbull has made the pose his own, infusing it with pride and pain, despair and disdain" (63). Regarding Trumbull's later work, Brookhiser articulates what went wrong with his *Alexander Hamilton* (1805; New York City Hall): "Hamilton's standing figure in this portrait is as stiff as marble, more suited to a billboard than a painting. His right hand, instead of resting on his desk, as it had in 1792, is flung out in a gesture as if he were hawking merchandise" (104). Brookhiser justly praises Trumbull's *General George Washington at Trenton* (1792; Yale University Art Gallery), a great picture in which an "iconography of catastrophe" surrounds the towering hero (182). Brookhiser cannot resist a jab at art historians, however, who make too much out of the fob that hangs below Washington's waistcoat. Can US historians make peace with US art historians who are truly engaged in the same historical projects?

For the most part, Brookhiser's art talk is fair but incomplete, especially regarding Trumbull's Revolutionary suite at the Yale University Art Gallery. He does catch all that is artistically problematic with *The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton* (1789–1831), *The Surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga* (1822–32), and *The Resignation of General Washington* (1824–28). More difficult for him are the truly great pictures. In opening his discussion of *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill* (1786), he is momentarily sophomoric: "This is a painting of a wave, breaking. The wave is the enemy; it is breaking on the defenders, and on us, the viewers. . . . You are there—and there, and there, and there" (140–41). It is important to remember that Brookhiser is not writing for professional art historians, and that is all right, but that

picture's extraordinary vibrancy and riveting drama needs richer treatment for any audience.

Brookhiser's treatment reminds me of the film reviewer who describes the plot and characters of *Citizen Kane* but could have said much more about editing, lighting, and deep focus because, after all, that is what makes the film electric. Brookhiser correctly identifies the cast of British and American characters in the Revolutionary suite, narrates the actions, locates the personas, and explains the themes of sacrifice and compassion, but he says little about how Trumbull did all that. Complex visual dynamics, torturous pictorial evolution, and specific sources in art and literature are minimally addressed, all of which are topics, I suspect, that were never his aim.

Toward the end of the book, Brookhiser steps back to look at Trumbull's overarching themes across the Revolutionary suite. He states the obvious, that the pictures oscillate between war and peace, action and contemplation. But he also acutely observes that the pictures propose an epic hypothesis regarding civilian self-government and that they then prove the feasibility of that hypothesis: "The *Declaration* is theory. . . . The *Declaration* expresses the ideal" (176–77). That is to say: that which is set in motion in the *Declaration* are the terms for governing the Republic via the absolute authority of civilian representation and leadership: "The *Resignation* is practice. . . . The *Resignation* shows it being made real" (177). By voluntarily relinquishing command, Washington demonstrated the triumph of a civilian authority that assigned him supreme power and to which he knows it must ultimately return.

In this section, Brookhiser also notes the limitations of Trumbull's Revolutionary suite: scenes of great men doing great things when the reality was infinitely more complex. Could he have pushed that point further? Have not Trumbull's Rotunda pictures been *too* successful in their mythologizing propositions? I wonder, how many of the three million annual visitors to the Capitol today continue to believe that what they see in Trumbull's Rotunda pictures is the documentary truth? How many people, when asked to imagine what it was like in 1776 during debates over independence, conjure up some version of Trumbull's picture? I suspect the resulting image, whether crisp or fuzzy, would be informed by Trumbull's picture and not the chaos, improvisation, and outright antagonism that actually took place.

All of Trumbull's historical work is pure political propaganda. The questions that need to be asked of his Revolutionary pictures are: Exactly what is being proposed by them? To what end? To the benefit of what group, individual, or faction? And through what visual choices was that political project achieved by those pictures? At the heart of Trumbull's project is the manufacturing of fictions that would cohere or just plain deny the forces that could easily have torn apart a shaky, confused, inchoate confederation of hostile states. John Adams, an Old-Master aficionado and also a hard-boiled realist, believed that artworks were the supreme instruments of sophistry. His message to Trumbull was: "Let not our Posterity be deluded by fictions under the pretense of poetical or graphic Licenses."<sup>1</sup> Yet, he knew that mythmaking was an unstoppable force. The first thing that history painting distorts is history.

In the closing pages, Brookhiser finally talks about race, the inescapable elephant in the Rotunda. We cannot expect Trumbull to have painted pictures that would explore social

injustice in the late eighteenth-century United States, yet we know painfully well what it was like offstage for the disenfranchised. When looking at or writing about such pictures wherein everything is so mythically admirable, it is imperative to remind ourselves that no woman was a citizen, that Native Americans were not granted citizenship until 1924, and that one in every six people was enslaved when Washington was inaugurated in 1789.

In his concluding remarks, Brookhiser takes a glance at the MAGA occupation of the Rotunda on January 6, 2021. He imagines that the occupiers, when arrested, “might have said that they were applying Trumbull’s glorious lessons: an election had been stolen, they had stormed the Capitol to see justice done” (207). Brookhiser immediately rejects that reasoning as “illegitimate,” because they did not have the authority to take the Capitol. But did they not? Was there not a high authority exhorting them to wreck the workings of the Republic? This is a case of Brookhiser soft-pedaling the frightening sight of a de facto militia invading the Capitol and attempting to overrun the government while elected representatives ran for their lives. To state the obvious, their prize was the Rotunda, the sacred vault of the Republic. A gluttony of selfies ensued, often shot in front of Trumbull’s pictures, in order to confirm the right-wing mob’s deluded sense that they were reenacting the actions of the Founders, all of whom would have been aghast at the monstrous sight of what they would have considered a bunch of partisan rioters trying to overturn all that they had built.

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<sup>1</sup> John Adams to John Trumbull, March 18, 1817, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.