



Pharaoh and his Host Lost in the Red Sea

Date

1792

Primary Maker

Benjamin West

Medium

oil on canvas

Description

Pharaoh and His Lost Host in the Red Sea is a vertically organized, partially finished history painting. West created the composition with a black line drawing and added brown tones to create modeling. Over this underdrawing, West selectively added red, yellow, blue, and white to the main figures and sky. At the upper left, Moses is shown in a striding position, with his right foot firmly planted and his left lifted slightly off the ground. His head is shown in left profile, and his hair and long beard blow in the wind. The billowing red fabric in which Moses is draped is also swept to the left by the draft. Moses gestures dramatically. His left hand forms an arc above his head, and his right hand stretches on a diagonal toward the left edge of the canvas, creating a line that is continued by the staff in his right hand. Behind and to the right of Moses, Aaron is depicted with his back to the viewer. His face is

turned up, and his arms are raised toward heaven. Aaron's fervent action makes it appear as though he is falling toward the picture plane. West cloaked Aaron in a yellow cloth that covers his body, arms, and head. To the right of Aaron, a winged angel points toward the right side of the painting. The angel has yellow curls and a white robe that is secured by a belt placed high on the waist. Whereas the upper left portion of the sky is filled with dark clouds, the sky behind the angel is illuminated by brilliant red and yellow light. Below the angel's outstretched arms, West placed a group of nine closely huddled figures—three men, three women, and three children. In the upper register of this cluster of figures, two young men carry a round object and a box that is inscribed with writing. The young men move toward the right edge of the composition; to their right, an old man faces three-quarters left, thereby directing the viewer's attention back to the center of the canvas. Just below them are three women, each facing left. The one who is farthest left points toward heaven; the one in the middle extends her right arm toward Moses and Aaron; and the woman at right clasps her hands in prayer in front of herself. The woman in the middle is draped in the same shade of yellow as Aaron; she holds an infant in her left arm, and a second child reaches for her waist. A third child, whose face is framed by the sole of Moses's left foot, turns in right profile toward the women. The lower half of the canvas is filled with the pharaoh and his army, whose bodies are strewn about and whose faces show terror. The crown of the pharaoh, the most prominent figure in the lower portion, identifies his royal position. West arranged his body on a twisting diagonal from the lower left to the center of the composition. The bottom left corner depicts a wheel, presumably from the disabled chariot of the pharaoh. Just in front of the pharaoh, at the bottom center of the painting, a helmeted soldier raises his right hand in an echo of Moses's gesture and puts his left hand behind himself to brace his fall. At least five other men and three horses are also crowded into the chaotic lower half of the image. Foaming water is visible at the left and right sides, and a number of spear points below Moses suggest that many more soldiers have already been carried away by the waves. Between the upper and lower halves of the composition, a group of liberated Israelites form a procession from left to right. These figures are on a much smaller scale than the others, suggesting that they are in the distance. The Israelites include men and women carrying their possessions on their heads and backs and leading camels on their journey.

Dimensions

canvas: 96.8 × 76.2 cm (38 1/8 × 30 in.) framed: 113.7 × 90.8 cm (44 3/4 × 35 3/4 in.)