



Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada: Level 1, Weston Family Wing

## *The Death of General Wolfe*

Date: 1776, retouched 1806, Material: Oil on canvas, Artist: Benjamin West, Accession number: 931.26.1  
Purchased with the assistance of Col. Alexander Fraser

This famous document of Canada's military and colonial history is the last of five large versions painted by Benjamin West's own hand. It remained in the artist's London gallery until it was purchased at auction in 1829 by a descendant of Brigadier-General Monckton, Wolfe's second-in-command at Quebec.

A visual marker of the pivotal moment in 1759 when Britain could begin to claim New France as its own, the painting is not a realistic representation of the actual event as it contains figures we know were not present. Rather, it is a highly stylized version, infused with ideas of heroism, the idealized "noble savage," and even Christ-like undertones.

Since it first caused a sensation at the Royal Academy of London in 1771, *The Death of General Wolfe* has spawned countless copies, securing its status as an icon of Canadian history, and earning the American-born artist Benjamin West an international

reputation. West was the first artist in the court of King George III to portray subjects in their "true clothes," as opposed to the classical tradition of clothing subjects in Greek and Roman dress.

After the battle, a boulder was rolled to the site of Wolfe's demise. Successive monuments have been erected over the years, including, most recently, a column outside the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, on the Plains of Abraham, bearing the inscription "Ici mourut Wolfe le treize Septembre 1759/ Here died Wolfe September 13, 1759."