

Iconic – The Death of General Wolfe
Royal Ontario Museum
Arlene Gehmacher, Curator Canadian Art &
Heidi Sobol, Senior Paintings Conservator

[Podcast begins with music and Iconic logo, title reads: Iconic: The Must-see Treasures of the ROM]

[Fade to still of The Death of General Wolfe painting; Title reads: Death of Wolfe]

[Fade to satellite map of southwestern Ontario; zooms out to show animated spinning globe; zooms in and becomes a satellite image of Quebec city; Title drops in: Plains of Abraham; Music begins to fade out]

Arlene Gehmacher, Curator, Canadian Art: Historically, it's believed that only four people were there with General Wolfe when he died.

[Cut to aerial panning view of modern parkland around the Plains of Abraham] I think most people now understand to a much larger degree that it is basically a fabricated re-telling of the story for great effect.

[Music gets louder; Cut to detail of General Wolfe at the centre of The Death of Wolfe painting; zoom out to show entire painting on a black background]

[Music gets softer; cut to detail of a man's hand in a black and white engraving]

Arlene: It was a painting that was done by Benjamin West, *[quick pan up to show the man in the engraving's face]* who actually kind of turned the art historical world upside down.

[Cut to medium view of Arlene standing in front of The Death of Wolfe painting in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada at the Royal Ontario Museum] Arlene: If an artist wanted to depict an event, basically the way to do that was to make allusions to classical history, *[cut to detail of The Death of Wolfe showing male faces in a crowd]* so one, *[cut to detail of a hand holding a tricorne hat]* Benjamin West was making reference to recent events, *[cut to panning detail of General Wolfe]* but also, he didn't clothe *[cut to detail of a man wearing a green jacket; pan up to show detail of a military officer]* anything in terms of historical garb, but rather used outfits that were exactly contemporaneous to the event.

[Music gets louder; cut to panning view of a painting showing a cannon on lookout point above the St. Lawrence River] **Arlene:** As a marker of Canadian history the Plains of Abraham was basically the battle for Quebec *[pans to show a fort overlooking the river; cut to detail of a painting showing a naval battle on the St. Lawrence River]* between the British and the French and Montcalm *[cut to detail of The Death of Wolfe showing Montcalm]* led the French army and General Wolfe *[cut to detail of Wolfe's face]* led the British army.

[Cut to view of Arlene in the gallery] **Arlene:** You'll notice, if you look to the left of the painting, you'll see a messenger coming in. That messenger is quite large. *[Cut to split screen, with a detail of the messenger in The Death of Wolfe on the right and a contemporary panning aerial view of the Plains of Abraham]* That messenger is coming with news of the French having been defeated. *[Cut to close-up of The Death of Wolfe; pan to show detail of Wolfe]* Wolfe is dying happily because his campaign was a success.

[Music cuts in; cut to detail of Wolfe's face; pan out to show the entire painting]

[Cut to view of Heidi Sobol, Senior Paintings Conservator seated beside The Death of Wolfe painting, which is arranged on a work table in a ROM conservation lab] **Heidi Sobol, Senior Paintings Conservator:** The painting that was recently acquired is a smaller version, it's the same idea people use nowadays of buying posters and prints—it's an accessible way of having art. *[Cut to view of Heidi looking at the painting through a microscope]* I need to submit a treatment proposal, *[cut to close-up of a selection of tools; Heidi's hand selects a pointed implement]* what I think it needs in this case, *[pans to show Heidi working on the painting]* to get it ready for display beside our *The Death of Wolfe* painting.

[Music cuts in; cut to detail of The Death of Wolfe showing a military officer's clasped hands;] **Arlene:** When the West painting was exhibited at first in 1771 *[pan up to show the officer's face and a second man at his elbow]* at the Royal Academy in London, it was very popular.

[Cut to view of Arlene in the gallery] **Arlene:** It took off from there – a third copy, a fourth copy. *[Cut to detail of the painting showing the cracked surface of the paint and several men in a canoe]* The ROM's version is the fifth large version. *[Cut to split screen; contemporary panning aerial view of the Plains of Abraham on the right and a detail of Wolfe from The Death of Wolfe painting]* It would become a piece of British propaganda to reinforce the idea that yes, British imperialism was the way to go. For the British people that was very important.

[Music cuts in; cut to close-up of Heidi's hand as she works on the painting]
Heidi: Our painting *[pan down to show a small light aimed at the painting's surface]* is in extremely stable condition. *[Cut to view of Heidi, seated next to the painting in a ROM conservation lab]* Museums tend to strive for very safe environments. By safe environments, I mean reducing the possibility of physical damage. *[Cut to close-up of a small brush against the surface of the painting]* Through analysis of our painting and *[cut to close-up of Heidi's hand as she works on the painting]* through comparative research with the conservation records of other paintings, *[pan up to show Heidi as she looks at the painting through a microscope]* we'll be able to pinpoint stylistically what he did as well palette.

[Music cuts in; cut to a detail of The Death of Wolfe painting showing an Aboriginal warrior seated; cut to detail of a military officer; cut to background detail of a man running towards Wolfe]

[Music fades; cut to view of Arlene in the gallery] **Arlene:** I think West's *The Death of Wolfe* painting is really interesting for Canadians today because it does have so many meanings for different people. *[Cut to view of the painting]* It may be something that people don't really want to dwell on I *[cut to panning contemporary panning aerial view of the Plains of Abraham]* but I think because of its history, but art historically and in terms of how it has been used as a marker of Canadian history that it has such richness.

[Music cuts in; Chateau Frontenac becomes visible; fades to black]