

# Francis Hayman's *The Charity of General Amherst* A new acquisition for the Canadian War Museum

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The art collection of the Canadian War Museum is particularly weak in the area of eighteenth century military imagery of relevance to Canada. A recent acquisition, a finished oil study entitled *The Charity of General Amherst* dated 1761, by the English artist Francis Hayman (1708-1776) goes some way towards ameliorating the situation. (See back cover).

The painting is one of two extant studies (the other is in the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, in Fredericton, New Brunswick) for a lost painting that is much larger. The lost 12' by 15' composition decorated one of four walls in the rococo-style Rotunda Saloon at Vauxhall Gardens, London, England.

Painted in direct response to the news of the capture of Montreal on September 8, 1760, the War Museum study is a fanciful portrayal of the victorious General Amherst dispensing bread to the fearful but grateful French. In its final form, the composition was an immense success when first unveiled. In our own time, both the studies, and what is known of the final painting, tell us much about popular expectations and public understanding of the British conquest of North America.

In 1760, the British Prime Minister, William Pitt, had ordered that the capture of Montreal was "the great and essential object."<sup>1</sup> As Commander-in-Chief in North America, Jeffery Amherst made typically careful plans, amassing by mid-summer a large and well-provisioned force at Oswego. The siege of Montreal followed in August, and the city finally surrendered at the beginning of the next month. With the French troops by now

much reduced in numbers, Amherst's success essentially concluded the war with France in North America.

Britain's overseas exploits had captured the country's imagination and the portrayal of such a recent and highly important event fed the public's craving for visual images illustrating Britain's imperial successes. A need to feel involved and *au courant* with events rather than correctly informed seems to have been preferred. The painter and his patron, the owner of Vauxhall Gardens, were, for commercial reasons, more than happy to oblige, a situation which finds parallels in our television age some *two* hundred years later.

Vauxhall Gardens was a pleasure garden established in the mid-seventeenth century and survived until 1859. In many ways a precursor to the theme park and museum, the public paid to stroll, both by day and night, along brightly lit tree-lined promenades, to eat overpriced food, to listen to the latest compositions by Handel, and to view the paintings of Hogarth, Gainsborough and Hayman. As a business, it depended on people, and the people had to hear and see what they wanted if they were to come back.

Over the course of some *twenty* years, Hayman was commissioned to paint an enormous number of paintings, for the Gardens. His early subjects reflected the frivolous, light-hearted tastes of the rococo era. But once Britain was at war, the public demanded more substantial narrative images involving recent heroes and their noble deeds, deeds that demonstrated British humanity and consideration to the defeated. The change

in taste was reflected in the four compositions Hayman completed for the Rotunda Saloon. Along with the Amherst painting, the artist's subjects included Clive at Plassey, Hawke at Quiberon Bay and an allegorical piece entitled, *Britannia Distributing Laurels*.

The starting point for Hayman's four paintings lay in classical historical painting. This art style was the accepted choice of the era for the recording of important national events, adding, as it did, a necessary aura of grandeur and importance. In the Amherst composition and its studies, the inspiration can be traced to the recorded exploits of the classical heroes, Scipio and Alexander, which were well-known at the time. These two generals were noted for their magnanimous behaviour in the aftermath of battle. Moreover, there is a direct compositional link to French artist Charles LeBrun's *The Family of Darius before Alexander* of 1660-1, in Versailles, where Alexander behaves charitably towards the defeated Persians.

However, Hayman brought his form of historical painting closer to the viewer by clothing his figures in contemporary dress and eschewing allegorical figures in favour of actual people. A decade later, Benjamin West followed the same route with his famous *The Death of Wolfe*. While the events portrayed in *The Charity of General Amherst*, for example, never happened, and the landscape, tent and column of the War Museum study belong to classical Rome, the use of a vernacular vocabulary where the figures are concerned presents a reality which washes over the rest of the composition. This approach allowed, in the artist's historical paintings of this type, for a suspension of belief on the part of his audiences. In other words, the artist's eighteenth century viewers were predisposed to believe what they saw as truth. As a contemporary account records of the response to the final version, the public was convinced "that clemency is the genius of the British nation."<sup>2</sup>

In the study, Hayman depicts an elegant General Amherst, holding his Instructions in his right hand, greeting the grateful citizens of Montreal who are kneeling and bowing in

obedience. French soldiers are notably absent from the group of women, children, priests, the elderly and the weak. At the rear, an English soldier protects them from a group of naked "savages" bearing weapons. Behind Amherst, a servant brings in a large basket of bread which will be distributed. We know that words on the column were to read, "Power exerted, conquest obtained, mercy shown! MDCCLX," as they appeared in the final painting.

As a piece of imperialist propaganda, the final version of *The Charity of General Amherst* seems to have been a notable tour-de-force. Painted to please the public, it presented an image of the war in North America in which the British victors were humane and generous to the defeated. In so doing it cannot but have helped garner important public support for Britain's further overseas ambitions.

In 1996, the study for *The Charity of General Amherst*, will hang in the renovated first floor permanent exhibition gallery of the Canadian War Museum. These document Canada's pre-First World War military history.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in C.P. Stacey, "Jeffery Amherst," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol.4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p.23.
2. From the *Description of 1762* as quoted in David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1993), p.195.

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