

### Background to Trumbull's Painting

John Trumbull (1756–1843) was an American artist, architect, diplomat and soldier. Although he was an officer in the Revolutionary Army, after the war he studied and worked in England for many years and he married an English woman. *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill* is the first in a series of paintings by Trumbull about the American Revolution. The battle of Bunker Hill, fought near Boston in June 1775, was the first formal military confrontation in the war between the American Colonies and England. The British had attempted to secure key locations near Boston. In response, the Americans built military defenses on Bunker and Breed's Hill. The British reacted by bombarding and then by attacking these sites. After two unsuccessful rushes British troops finally forced the Americans from their positions. Capturing the hill cost the British over 1000 soldiers, nearly three times the American casualties.

Trumbull's painting depicts the battle as the British, on their third attempt, successfully overrun the American defenses. In the front-left of the painting, British Major Small is preventing a soldier from thrusting a bayonet into American General Warren. In the background, American General Putnam has raised his sword to order the American retreat. In the front-right corner, American Lieutenant Grosvenor, with sword in hand, is just about to retreat. The black man behind Grosvenor is not his slave but Peter Salem, the person believed to have shot British Major Pitcairn seen dying in the middle of the painting.

The painting is not offered as a historically accurate account—not only was it painted 10 years after the battle, but a number of scenes which had neither occurred at the same time nor exactly as depicted were fused into one painting. In various preliminary sketches, Trumbull moved figures around. For example, Trumbull altered the central focus to include Major Small's stopping of the soldier from stabbing General Warren. To emphasize this noble gesture, Trumbull changed the poses of Lieutenant Grosvenor and his companion who were initially shown to be in retreat. In the final painting they appear frozen with awe, not running away in fear—Grosvenor looks to be astonished at Major Small's behaviour. Despite these “pictorial liberties”—the visual equivalent of poetic license—the painting is thought to have an authentic quality. Trumbull had actually witnessed the encounter from a distance, and he had first-hand knowledge of the area and of the officers who fought in the battle. As well, he had heard details of the fighting from his fellow officers.

It was popular around this period to distinguish different kinds of truth. The simple truth, which was the way things actually appear to the eye, was contrasted with perfect truth—the depiction of things not simply as they appear but revealing their deeper virtue. It was thought that perfect truth was often “more true than truth itself.” Trumbull's motive in altering the factual details was to honour the noble behaviour—particularly the self-sacrifice and generosity—of both British and American officers. Major Small had described General Warren as an officer “equally distinguished by acts of humanity and kindness to his enemies, as by bravery and fidelity to the cause he served.” And Major Small had himself been praised by Trumbull as an officer who was “distinguished by his humanity and kindness to American prisoners.” Trumbull was actually

criticized by some American patriots for his handling of this “glorious” battle because they regarded Warren’s death as a “minor incident” compared to the impressive showing of the untrained American militia against the professional and more experienced British soldiers. Trumbull rejected the nationalistic attitude of favouring one side over the other because he wished to show the ideal of patriotism—the noble act of self-sacrifice for one’s country regardless of country. When *Bunker’s Hill* was completed in 1786, a famous artist of this period, Benjamin West, described it as “the best picture of a modern battle that has been painted.”

## **Credits**

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Burton Beers, “An Age of Revolution,” *Patterns of Civilization*, Volume 2 (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1984).