Establishing pictorial traditions where none had previously existed, history painters created an ethos with a distinctive pantheon of heroes. A collective sense of nationhood and identity was fashioned as history painters created a visual U.S. heritage. A recent traveling exhibition, "Picturing History: American Painting, 1770-1930," followed the development and alteration of historical paintings against a background of changing social and cultural contexts. Four periods of history painting in the United States have been identified, according to style, subject matter, and imagery:

1. When, in 1770, Benjamin West proposed to depict "The Death of General Wolfe" in contemporary dress, he was firmly instructed to use classical attire by many people. He did depict the scene in clothing that had occurred on the scene. Although George III refused to purchase the work, he succeeded both in overcoming his critics' objections and inaugurating a more historically accurate style in such paintings.