



GRAAT On-Line issue #4 October 2008

**Visual History? Jefferson, Lord Kames, and the Crisis of Historical Aesthetics**

Hannah Spahn

John-F.-Kennedy-Institute for North American Studies

Free University Berlin

Thomas Jefferson is often described as a “forward-looking” thinker – quoted for his professions of faith in the future, his conviction of American “newness,” his preference for the “dreams of the future” over the “history of the past,” and his rejection of the “Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind.”<sup>1</sup> However, most of his political writings contain elaborate references to history, and most of his personal writings are at least as concerned with reminiscences of the past as with prospects of the future. In this essay I will examine Jefferson’s approach to history as a crucial part of, rather than deviation from, the forward-looking orientation of his thinking. Taking the visual emphasis of the expression seriously, I will argue that if Jefferson looked ahead, it was less as a visionary who tended to reject the past altogether than as a historical thinker who stressed the *visual* qualities of historical experience. Within his enlightened conception of philosophical history, he tried to imagine himself as a forward-looking historian gaining a Thucydidean foresight based on his study of the past.<sup>2</sup> He expected to learn historical lessons and pass historical judgments on the foundation of universal moral examples from the past that appealed, not mainly to reason, but to the senses—in particular, the sense of sight. In Jefferson’s early years, this aestheticized approach to history was comfortably located within his empirical frame of mind. Yet it soon began to cause problems: presupposing the enlightened tautology of a universal human nature that basically remained the same, “in all nations and ages,”<sup>3</sup> it proved too inflexible to explain the great historical upheavals of the revolutionary period. Like

many contemporaries, Jefferson began to question the assumptions of philosophical history in the late eighteenth century. In the 1790s especially, his enlightened historical vision was obscured by a growing uncertainty whether the historical examples under his eyes would prove reliable guides into the future. This crisis in Jefferson's historical outlook transformed his attitude to historiography as a genre, causing skeptical remarks even in the progressive narratives of American history that he constructed in his nineteenth-century writings.

In the following pages I will approach the changes in Jefferson's conception of history by examining the analogy which he and many contemporaries established between historiography and the visual arts. This analogy was illustrated by Jefferson's metaphors for history, which were frequently connected to the domain of mimetic painting. Based on the premises of his early philosophical history and its goal of political foresight, Jefferson liked to refer to the historical events themselves as well as to their representation in writing by expressions involving the sense of sight and implying a fixed extension in space, rather than change in time. Although he began to use more dynamic and fluid images for separate historical phenomena—like the “wave of public opinion,” the “flood of paper money,” the “stream of overflowing population,” or the “rivers of blood” that can be found in his later writings<sup>4</sup>—he usually did not speak of a unified “stream of history.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of an overpowering flow or stream, Jefferson's ideal historical experience came closer to a visit to a painting or portrait gallery. The historians and biographers mentioned in his writings did not have to come to terms with a sublime “stream of history” as subject matter, but could engage in the more regulated activity of mimetic painting—giving “lustre,” in his words, by “delicate touches,” to the “portraits” of historical personages on the historical “canvas.”<sup>6</sup> Historical agents, according to Jefferson's metaphors, could also directly fill the historical canvas by their own actions—either eventually to become part of an accomplished history painting (as Jefferson frequently implied in the case of American and sometimes of French revolutionaries), or to become a “blot” on the historical record, like George III.<sup>7</sup>

While visual metaphors can obviously still be employed today to illustrate the “big picture” of historical events and their representation in writing, as I see it, they

had a far more literal meaning in the eighteenth century. For Jefferson and his contemporaries, they were still tied to serious reflections on the relationship between historiography, poetry and the visual arts. According to the arguments that shaped his early version of philosophical history, the production and reception processes of all modes of representing history were essentially similar. Historical writing, literary writing, and painting shared two major characteristics: their universal mimetic function (“mimetic” in the narrow Aristotelian sense of the imitation of the probable), and the aesthetic reception processes they were assumed to incite (“aesthetic” in the wide original sense of being transmitted by sense impressions rather than reason). In the course of Jefferson’s long life, contemporary thinkers began to question both the universal mimetic aim and the mainly non-rational reception of historical writing.

In order to reconstruct a part of the intellectual background of the visual quality of Jefferson’s historical imagination, I will begin the following three parts of this essay by summing up the potential similarities of the three modes of representing history in enlightened historiography, poetry, and painting—most influentially theorized, in Jefferson’s case, by Lord Kames. I will go on to discuss the reasons why these similarities became matter of dispute, and conclude, in good eighteenth-century fashion, by giving a historical example supposed to illustrate the resulting transformation of Jefferson’s larger historical vision.

### *One*

How could Jefferson be serious in employing the painting metaphor for history—that is, how exactly was an identification of historiography with the visual arts possible in his conception of history? The identification of historical writing with painting that made Jefferson’s optic metaphors plausible really consisted of two identifications: the first, of historiography with poetry, and the second, of poetry with the visual arts. Historical writing could be understood as similar to poetry, in the first place, because eighteenth-century theorists of history, from Bolingbroke to Hume, tended to level the Aristotelian hierarchy between poetry and historiography. In their emphases on the literary qualities of historical works, they tried to transcend

the division between historical writing as the simple narration of accidental historical events in their contingent temporal order, on the one hand, and mimetic poetry as the more philosophical imitation of nature according to universal laws of probability and necessity, on the other. Thus, the theories of philosophical history that shaped the young Jefferson's frame of mind described historical writing as essentially similar to the mimetic art of poetry. In opposition to Aristotle, these arguments underlined that historical writing was also the imitation of the probable and the morally instructive, rather than "merely" the narration of what had actually happened. Connected to this anti-Aristotelian understanding of historiography as a literary genre approaching mimetic poetry, Jefferson's historical painting metaphors relied on the frequent comparisons of poetry and painting in Enlightenment texts. In a misunderstanding of Horace's *Ars poetica* that had been widespread since the Renaissance, the phrase *ut pictura poesis* had become a formula for the basic (prescriptive or descriptive) similarity assumed to exist between the two mimetic sister arts of poetry and painting. With the stress on sense impressions in Lockean epistemology, eighteenth-century art critics had not only ancient or Renaissance, but also contemporary empirical arguments at their disposal for likening the reading process of literary works, including works of a literary historiography, to the aesthetic experience of viewing a painting.

The enlightened theories of effect available to the young Jefferson—most significantly, *Elements of Criticism* (1762) by the Scottish lawyer and philosopher Henry Home, Lord Kames<sup>8</sup>—accordingly failed to distinguish fundamentally between the reception processes of painting and writing, of fictional and of historical works. The stress in each case tended to lie on sense impressions, rather than rational activity. Like paintings, fictional and historical writings were thought to produce visual images in the mind, images that were expected to cause exactly corresponding emotions in the reader. In a mimetic learning process, these emotions were in turn expected to shape the reader's actions. According to Kames, a historical writer seeking to have an impact on his readers had to turn them into "spectators" because, as he put it, "even real events, entitled to our belief, must be conceived present and passing in our sight."<sup>9</sup> The ability of a piece of writing or painting to produce

corresponding emotions and actions in the reader or spectator depended, not on the degree of its historical accuracy, but on the visual intensity achieved by its artistic mastery. As Kames explained (and the young Jefferson paraphrased him), if the painting or narrative was stylistically accomplished, the spectator or reader had no means to decide whether what he saw was history or fiction.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the reader's emotions and actions depended entirely on the craftsmanship of the historical master-artist. The better this neoclassical artist was able to create an illusion of reality and conceal the artfulness of his art (according to the maxim *ars est celare artem*), the more successful was his work of art in throwing the reader into "reveries," according to the young Jefferson, or into a "waking dream," according to Kames.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the moral effect of a historical work imagined as an illusionistic mimetic painting was essentially the result of the self-control and potential insincerity on the side of the master-writer, and the passivity and lack of rational reflection on the side of the spectator-reader.

It was this basic asymmetry in philosophical history of a passive and non-rational reader, on the one side, and an active and potentially insincere master-artist, on the other, which was ultimately responsible for Jefferson's increasing worries about a politically correct American historiography in his later years. In a train of thought that has been lost today, he saw historical writings based, like paintings, on the "design" of a master-artist, in the two major senses which the term "design" had since the Renaissance: an intentional scheme or plot, and a visual plan of a work of art. Jefferson thought that the design of a work of history would influence readers, like a painting, aesthetically, that is directly through the sense of sight. As this influence was not significantly mediated by reason, he expected the historian's design to cause a physical imitation mechanism that was ultimately beyond the reader's control. If the historian's design was benevolent, then history could become an instructive Bolingbrokean "philosophy teaching by examples"<sup>12</sup> and promote the progress of civilization and republicanism. If, however, the historian's design was morally and politically questionable, then, Jefferson feared, historical works would do great harm and could even lead to the downfall of the republic.

## *Two*

This uncertainty at the heart of eighteenth-century historical aesthetics was a major reason why Jefferson and many contemporaries began to criticize philosophical history, at best as an ineffective educational tool, at worst as a dangerous political weapon. From today's perspective, Jefferson's existential worries about the destructive potential of historical works like David Hume's *History of England* or John Marshall's *Life of George Washington* have lost their self-evidence and seem rather exaggerated. With our more active and rational, historical-critical concept of the reading process, we have mostly left behind the mimetic "design" of history and obviously no longer expect that reading stylistic masters makes us directly imitate their opinions—for instance, that reading Hume produces Tories, or that reading too much Jefferson produces slaveholders. Yet to Jefferson, who still mostly tended to imagine history as an aesthetically conveyed, masterfully "designed" painting, rather than as a narrative interpretation that could be rationally questioned and criticized, the habits involuntarily created by the illusions of a well-crafted style could appear a vital danger to the republic.

Jefferson's evolving skepticism against the visual lessons of philosophical history had its origin, it could be argued, in the outbreak of the American Revolution. In 1774, he had still asked George III to learn the moral lessons of Anglo-American history by the historical "view" he offered him in the *Summary View of the Rights of British America*. As Jefferson made clear two years later with the Declaration of Independence, however, the king had utterly failed to learn the lessons of this visual impression, denying the didactic potential of philosophical history by becoming, rather than a shining example of an enlightened ruler, a "blot in the page of history." Although Jefferson tried to republicanize philosophical history in the 1780s by promoting its study for all Virginian citizens (having them literally "turn their eyes" at the negative example of the Republic of Venice, for instance<sup>13</sup>), the crises of the 1790s made him, to some extent, uncertain of the benefits of this visual historical instruction. The "paranoid" dimension of his visual history moved to the foreground when he experienced the emerging party politics in America as a problem of epistemology. Indeed, he believed it was a problem the American "public eye" temporarily had with its political vision due to the "delusion" created by the

Federalists, before Republican counter-narratives enabled American citizens again to open “their eyes” and to “recover their true sight.”<sup>14</sup> It was plausible for Jefferson that if Americans could not rely on their sense of sight, they could easily be misled by malignant “designs” behind treacherous representations of American history. As he later warned in his *Autobiography* and the introduction to the *Anas*, historical portraits could be “painted” in false colors, and “history may be made to wear any hue, with which the passions of the compiler, royalist or republican, may chuse to tinge it.” In many historical works, the “outlines” of the subject matter might be correct, “but the incidents and coloring are according to the faith and fancy of the writer.”<sup>15</sup> It was in the epistemological crisis of the 1790s, accordingly, that Jefferson most conspicuously denied the historical aim of political foresight, claiming that the future—especially the future of the French Revolution—“cannot be foreseen.”<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the problem of the unreliability of sensory impressions in a mimetic reading process and the resulting tensions between the demands on style and historical accuracy in philosophical history, the painting analogy became problematic also in another context during these years. The similarities between literary writings and paintings condensed in the formula *ut pictura poesis* were increasingly questioned during the eighteenth century as European thinkers from Shaftesbury to Diderot, Kames and Lessing, began to stress qualitative differences between the two forms of mimesis. As the crucial element distinguishing narrative works from the visual arts, they began to stress the factor of time. Kames and other enlightened critics expected paintings not to depict a “succession of incidents” (as in medieval and Renaissance paintings, when different moments in the life of a saint or a battle could be united in one painting), but to be “confined to a single instant in time.”<sup>17</sup> Whereas paintings and sculptures were based on contiguity in space and limited to the depiction of a single moment, literary works were increasingly defined as consisting in a series of linguistic signs concerned with narrating human actions that were consecutive in time.

To judge from Jefferson’s use of the painting metaphor for historical works in his middle and later writings, he partook, to some extent, in the transnational skepticism against the identification of a literary historiography with the visual arts.

In his proto-historicist crisis at the end of the eighteenth century, when historical events appeared to accelerate into an uncertain future, his optic metaphors became more complex as he tried to include temporal processes into the static space of a historical painting. He endeavored to make his visual history more dynamic by describing recent events as a painter's work in progress. In a letter to Madison from 1788, for instance, he described the Federal Constitution as "a good canvas, on which some strokes only want retouching." As in the famous *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* by his friend Condorcet, Jefferson's progressive interpretation of history was better illustrated by an unfinished sketch than by the frozen moment of a completed history painting. Jefferson also employed the "sketch" metaphor in the contexts of the history of the French Revolution, the progress of natural philosophy, and Western expansion. When he wanted to stress the theme of open-ended historical change, he often spoke of a canvas, which as yet contained merely a sketch and still needed to be filled with colors.<sup>18</sup>

This more dynamic visual imagery for the universal spread of republicanism and scientific progress corresponded both to technical innovations in the historical portraiture of the Early Republic (as in the more "sketchy" portraits of the founding generation by Gilbert Stuart) and to a transformation of historical theory. As Jefferson's progressive sketch-metaphor for history began to emphasize change in time rather than simply a static, unchanging moral lesson, he became increasingly skeptical of the painting analogy implicit in philosophical history. When the aesthetics of the literary, anti-Aristotelian historiography of the Enlightenment became problematic, he tended to embrace a neo-Aristotelian concept of historiography. He started to attach divergent functions to historical painting and historical writing, expecting historical writings to tell the narrow truth of events in their accidental order in time, while allowing mimetic history paintings a greater amount of liberty in their depiction of general and philosophical truths. As a mimetic art, history paintings could legitimately condense events in space and conflate events in time. In an Aristotelian concept of historiography, by contrast, the representation of historical events in their accidental succession in time was central. What was poetic license in a non-linguistic work of art could therefore easily become a "fable"



and a lie in the words of a historical text which Jefferson increasingly expected to tell what had actually happened—correctly naming historical agents, accurately referring to historical places, and, in Aristotelian manner, describing events in their historical sequence in time.

### *Three*

The developing divergence in Jefferson's approaches to historical painting and historical writing—the widening gulf between historical art and historical science from which the “painting” of philosophical history had distracted—may be briefly illustrated by the early visual history of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's changing attitude is condensed in three letters which he wrote, the first two in Paris on two consecutive summer days in 1787, and the third one in America a quarter of a century later. The first letter was addressed to the French editor of the *Journal de Paris*, the second to the American painter John Trumbull, and the third to a grandson of Samuel Adams, Samuel Adams Wells.

In the first letter, Jefferson vented his indignation at a review of a recent French history of the American Revolution, *Les Lignes achéenne, suisse et hollandoise, et révolution des Etats-Unis de l'Amérique, comparées ensemble*—as the title suggests, a typical work of eighteenth-century philosophical history in its generalizing, comparative approach to different historical republics. In the *Journal*, however, the reviewer had praised the book for fulfilling the Aristotelian function of historiography, presenting particular details of the American Revolution (“des particularités qui sont peu connues”<sup>19</sup>). He mentioned one of these little-known historical particulars: the individual who had according to this historical work earned eternal fame by making possible the passage of the Declaration of Independence, “fut John Dickinson. L'Amérique lui doit une reconnaissance eternal [sic]; c'est Dickinson qui l'a affranchie.”<sup>20</sup> As Jefferson's uncommonly emotional language in this letter reveals, this misrepresentation was too much even for his studied republican modesty. He sent his “Adieus to History” and claimed to be so disillusioned by what appeared to be the inevitable “fables and falsehoods” of this genre that he planned to take leave from historical reading altogether.<sup>21</sup> Instead of

enlightening the French public in regard to his own major role in the history of the Declaration, however, a cautious Jefferson did not refer to his own activity and eventually even decided against mailing the letter. Instead, he changed the field of battle, from historiography to historical painting. On the very next day, he wrote to Trumbull urging him to leave London at once and visit him in Paris as soon as possible: "You have only to get into the Diligence and in 4 days you are here."<sup>22</sup>

As the frequent correspondence of Jefferson and Trumbull at that time demonstrates, the two men were engaged in a dialogue concerning the visual representation of recent American history.<sup>23</sup> It was probably only after Jefferson's suggestion that Trumbull had begun the preparations of the Declaration painting in the preceding year, under Jefferson's patronage, in residence at his Paris hotel and according to his "information and advice," particularly by the aid of a floor plan Jefferson had drawn.<sup>24</sup> The result of this patronage of the young painter was a work that centers on Jefferson as the outstanding member of the drafting committee. His tall figure is the focal point of Trumbull's arrangement of the Continental Congress, owing to the color of his hair and vest as well as to the fact that he is holding the draft of the Declaration in his hands, in the act of presenting it to John Hancock. Thus, the painting contrasts sharply both with the obscure place allotted to Jefferson's draftsmanship in the written histories of the period<sup>25</sup> and with his own taciturnity on the subject. It famously conflates different moments in time and thus fails to represent the narrow Aristotelian truth of history in its accidental temporal order. Yet it successfully tells a story that Jefferson was afraid to put into writing. It visualizes what was becoming the larger philosophical truth of his "authorship" of the Declaration of Independence.

Late in life, Jefferson was confronted by one of his many correspondents on American history, Samuel Adams Wells, who expressed his strong disapproval of the historical inaccuracies of the painting. Claiming that it "obscured" the history of the Declaration rather than shedding light on it, Wells voiced his doubts that the painting would be able to convey "a very favorable impression of the genius of the artist nor of the state of the fine arts."<sup>26</sup> Interestingly enough, the aged Jefferson replied by denying any personal connection to the painting, claiming that he had

“never seen” it—a claim that might have been literally true of the recent monumental version of Trumbull’s painting in the Capitol, but deliberately obscured facts Jefferson must have been aware of: not only had he once drawn a floor plan for the painting, but there was at that moment an engraving of Trumbull’s Declaration hanging in his own entrance hall at Monticello. Jefferson’s taking refuge in such semi-truths suggests a considerable uneasiness with the topic. Nevertheless, he explicitly justified Trumbull’s historical inaccuracies on the grounds of his *licentia pictoris*:

The painting lately executed by Col. Trumbull I have never seen: but as far back as the days of Horace at least were are told that “*pictoribus atque poetis; Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas.*” He has exercised this *licentia pictoris*, in like manner, in the surrender of York, where he has placed Ld. Cornwallis at the head of the surrender, altho’ it is well known that he was excused by General Washington from appearing.<sup>27</sup>

This defense of Trumbull’s historical paintings points to a larger trend in Jefferson’s nineteenth-century writings. In contrast to his early years, he now emphasized different rules for historiography on the one hand, and poetry and painting on the other. Painters, according to Jefferson, were not bound by a narrow historical truth and could therefore legitimately conflate time and include absent historical agents in the portrayal of representative historical moments. Yet when the aged Jefferson encountered such techniques in historiography he tended to criticize these works as “fable” or “romance”<sup>28</sup>—a criticism that would have made little sense in his early version of a Kamesian visual history that had stressed the similarities, rather than the differences, between historical writing and an aesthetically appealing poetry. In his nineteenth-century writings, Jefferson had clearly departed from his youthful nonchalance about the interchangeability of fact and fiction, of writing and the visual arts. His later narratives of American history in the *Autobiography* and especially in the *Anas* were obsessed with the dangers posed by “artfully insinuated” ideas in historical writing, lamenting the tendency by historians to use their literary talents to

gloss over the differences between “suspicions & certainties, rumors & realities, facts & falsehoods.”<sup>29</sup> Seen in this light, what has often been criticized as the literary failure of Jefferson’s conspicuously “artless” historical texts may well have been the result of his mature efforts to avoid the pitfalls of a Kamesian historical aesthetics.

## WORKS CITED

Adams, William Howard. *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997.

Bolingbroke, Henry St. John. *Letters on the Study and Use of History, Etc.* London: Ward, Lock, & Co., 1880.

Home, Henry [Lord Kames]. *Elements of Criticism*. Rpt. from the 1840 ed. Honolulu: UP of the Pacific, 2002.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Irving, Washington. *A History of New York*. By Diedrich Knickerbocker. Ed. Edwin T. Bowden. New Haven: College & University P, 1964.

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Eds. Albert E. Bergh and Andrew A. Lipscomb. 20 vols. Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903-05.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*. Ed. Paul L. Ford. 12 vols. New York and London: Putnam’s, 1904-5.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Eds. Julian P. Boyd et al. 34 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1950-2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1954.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. Ed. Lester J. Cappon. 1959. Chapel Hill and London: The U of North Carolina P, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Writings*. Ed. Merrill D. Peterson. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Series 1. General Correspondence, 1651-1827.” *The Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1606-1827* (Washington, D. C.: The Library of Congress, n. d.): [www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers).

Lehmann, William L. *Henry Home, Lord Kames, and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Study in National Character and the History of Ideas*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.

Malone, Dumas. *Jefferson and His Time*. 6 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1948-1981.

McDonald, Robert. "Thomas Jefferson's Changing Reputation as Author of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years." *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (1999). 169-195.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson (in the following: TJ) to Dr. Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1801, to the same, January 27, 1800; to John Adams, August 1, 1816. Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), *Thomas Jefferson. Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984) 1086; 1073; Lester J. Cappon (ed.), *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (1959; Chapel Hill and London: The U of North Carolina P, 1987) 485. For TJ's opposition between "backward-looking" and "forward-looking," see, for instance, TJ to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799. Julian P. Boyd et al. (eds.), *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 34 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1950-2007) 30: 645-650.

<sup>2</sup> I have analyzed the evolution of TJ's historical thought more broadly in my *Jefferson, Time, and History* (forthcoming at U of Virginia P).

<sup>3</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 150.

<sup>4</sup> TJ to Joseph Priestley, March 21, 1801; TJ to Albert Gallatin, December 26, 1820; TJ, "Second Inaugural Address", March 4, 1805; TJ to Benjamin Austin, January 9, 1816. Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 1086; 1448; 520; 1370.

<sup>5</sup> This expression would become more popular among the next generation, for instance, in Washington Irving's caricature of Jefferson or "William the Testy" in his satirical *History of New York* (1809): "These and many similar reflections naturally arose in my mind as I took up my pen to commence the reign of William Kieft: for now the stream of our history, which hitherto has rolled in a tranquil current, is about to depart forever from its peaceful haunts and brawl through many a turbulent and rugged scene." Washington Irving, *A History of New York*, by Diedrich Knickerbocker, ed. Edwin T. Bowden (New Haven: College & University Press, 1964) 166.

<sup>6</sup> For TJ's use of the painting metaphor, see, for example, TJ to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771; TJ to John Adams, November 25, 1816; TJ to the same, January 11, 1817; TJ to William Wirt, September 4, 1816; TJ to the same, September 29, 1816. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 1: 76-8; Cappon (ed.), *Adams-Jefferson Letters* 498, 506; Paul L. Ford (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 12 vols. (New York and London: Putnam's, 1904-5) 12: 32; 36n.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America." Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 1: 134.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of Kames's work, including the *Historical Law Tracts*, which TJ commonplacated, see William L. Lehmann, *Henry Home, Lord Kames, and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Study in National Character and the History of Ideas* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, ch.2, sect. 7., rpt. from the 1840 ed. (Honolulu: UP of the Pacific, 2002) 33-40, According to Kames, “a good historical picture” was able to make “a deeper impression than words can.” Painting for Kames was better equipped to achieve a moral effect on its “spectator” than reading, while itself inferior to theater. Theater metaphors for history were also used by the contemporaries (the “stage,” “stage effect,” etc. of history), but painting metaphors were more conspicuous in TJ’s case.

<sup>10</sup> TJ to Skipwith: “We never reflect whether the story we read be truth or fiction. If the painting be lively, and a tolerable picture of human nature, we are thrown into a reverie, from which if we awaken it is the fault of the writer.”

<sup>11</sup> Kames, *Elements of Criticism* 2. 7: “Let us take under consideration (...) the passionate scenes in King Lear: these pictures of human life, when we are sufficiently engaged, give an impression of reality not less distinct than that given by Tacitus describing the death of Otho: we never once reflect whether the story be truth or feigned: reflection comes afterwards, when the scene is no longer before our eyes.”

<sup>12</sup> Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, Etc. (London: Ward, Lock, & Co., 1880) Letter II: 5. In his neoclassical justification of an exemplary historiography, Bolingbroke repeatedly stressed the importance of the sense of sight in particular, as in Letter II: 5-6: “(...) the citizens of Rome placed the images of their ancestors in the vestibules of their houses; so that, whenever they went in or out, these venerable bustoes met their eyes, and recalled the glorious actions of the dead, to fire the living, to excite them to imitate and even to emulate their great forefathers.”

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1954) 120-21.

<sup>14</sup> For these expressions, see, for instance, TJ to John Taylor, June 4, 1798; TJ to Thomas Lomax, March 12, 1799. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 30: 387-390; 31: 77-8.

<sup>15</sup> See TJ’s “Autobiography” for his criticism of Burke having falsely “painted” Marie Antoinette; TJ’s explanations to the “Anas” for his views on Marshall’s portrait of Washington and his government, or TJ’s letter to William Wirt, August 14, 1814. Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 92; 662; Ford (ed.), *Works* 11: 400-10.

<sup>16</sup> TJ to Crèvecoeur, August 9, 1788; TJ to Washington, December 4, 1788; TJ to Jay, May 9, 1789, TJ to Diodati, August 3, 1789; TJ to Adams, May 10, 1789. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 13: 485-87; 14: 328-32; 15: 110-13; 325-7; Cappon (ed.), *Adams-Jefferson Letters* 237.

<sup>17</sup> Kames, *Elements of Criticism* 2.7.

<sup>18</sup> For the more dynamic “canvas”-metaphor (i.e. a canvas to be filled, rather than an accomplished painting), see, for example, TJ to Madison, July 31, 1788; to Count de Moustier, May 17, 1788; to Rabaut de St. Etienne, June 3, 1789; to C. F. de C. Volney, February 8, 1805; to William Dunbar, May 25, 1805. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 13: 440-44; 173-36; 15: 166-67; Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 1154-58; Albert E. Bergh and Andrew A. Lipscomb (eds.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903-05) 11: 74-78.

<sup>19</sup> TJ to the editor of the “Journal de Paris”, August 29, 1787. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 12: 61-65; at 65, quoted from the review in the editorial note.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted by TJ from the review. Apparently, TJ was particularly infuriated by these sentences, as he quoted them twice in the letter.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> TJ to Trumbull, August 30, 1787. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 12: 69.

<sup>23</sup> See their intense correspondence in the summer/fall of 1787: John Trumbull to TJ, August 28, 1787; TJ to Trumbull, August 30, 1787; Trumbull to TJ, September 17, 1787; TJ to Trumbull, October 4, 1787; TJ to Trumbull, November 13, 1787; Trumbull to TJ, December 7, 1787. Boyd (ed.), *Papers* 12: 60; 69; 139; 206-7; 358-59; 405-6.

---

<sup>24</sup> TJ's (incorrect) floor plan of Independence Hall, together with Trumbull's first sketch of the Declaration (with a tall figure in the center) from September 1786, during his first stay at Jefferson's in Paris, is reprinted in Boyd (ed.) *Papers* 10: 178. On TJ's influence on Trumbull, who had initially focused on military events of the revolutionary war and received a decisive impulse for the "Declaration" painting from TJ (as documented in Trumbull's "Autobiography"): William Howard Adams, *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997) 90-98.; on Trumbull's stay with TJ in Paris, see also Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, 6 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1948-1981) vol. 2: 138-141.

<sup>25</sup> On the development of the early history of the Declaration of Independence, from TJ's republican initial obscurity as mere scribe or "penman" of the Declaration to his increasing renown as its "author," see Robert McDonald, "Thomas Jefferson's Changing Reputation as Author of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (1999) 169-195.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Adams Wells to TJ, June 2, 1819: "The painting executed by col. Trumbull, representing the Congress at the declaration of independence will I fear have a tendency to obscure the history of the event which it is designed to commemorate. Nor will it give a very favorable impression of the genius of the artist nor of the state of the fine arts. I confess that I am not a little surprised at the favorable reception which this badly executed performance has met from the public. I will frankly avow that I was much disappointed (...)" "Series 1. General Correspondence, 1651-1827," *The Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1606-1827* (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, n. d.):

[www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers](http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers) (my ms transcription).

<sup>27</sup> TJ to Samuel Adams Wells (June 23, 1819). Ford (ed.), *Works* 12: 127 n. TJ referred to the exchange with Wells two years later in his "Autobiography" in the context of the history of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson, "Autobiography." Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 7; 24.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, TJ to Justice William Johnson, October 27, 1822: "I really rejoice that we have at length a fair history of the Southern war. (...) I am glad too to see the Romance of Lee removed from the shelf of History to that of Fable. (...) Yet this book had begun to be quoted as history." Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 1459-1463.

<sup>29</sup> Jefferson, "The Anas." Peterson (ed.), *Writings* 673; 662.