

Washington Allston Biography

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Biography

Washington Allston (5 November 1779-9 July 1843), artist, poet, and novelist, is an important link between neo-classical and romantic taste in America. Born in Waccamaw, South Carolina, Allston was sent to Newport, Rhode Island, at an early age, where his aristocratic family hoped the "bracing air" would discourage his artistic temperament. After graduation from Harvard College, where he was nicknamed "Count" because of his epicurean indulgences, Allston sold his patrimony and sailed for London to study painting at the Royal Academy. In 1805 he arrived in Rome where he formed important friendships with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Washington Irving. Allston lived in England during the War of 1812 and created some of his finest work. Although he was the logical choice to succeed Benjamin West as president of the Royal Academy, Allston returned to America in 1818, settled permanently in Cambridgeport, near Boston, and there, for a variety of reasons, failed to live up to his early promise. His *Belshazzar's Feast*, which he began in England and worked on for twenty-five years, was left unfinished at his death. Allston's writings, though few, are important. *Sylphs of the Season, with Other Poems* (London: W. Pople, 1813) reflects the influence of Allston's association with Coleridge and English romanticism. The title poem is important because of its description of the empathy between nature and the poet's imagination. *Monaldi: A Tale* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1841), Allston's only novel, was written in 1821 and is loaded with the "Gothic" devices that Allston admired in the work of Ann Radcliffe, including haunted castles and bizarre murders. *Lectures on Art and Poems*, ed. Richard H. Dana, Jr. (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1850), is a posthumous collection of Allston's four discourses on art. Breaking from the neo-classical tradition, Allston stated that art was not an imitation of nature, but an original product of the artist's mind. However, unwilling to commit himself completely to the sometimes formless originality of romanticism, Allston held that all artists must consider the tradition in which they work. Although Emerson often grumbled that Allston's paintings were not dazzling, that they were "fair, serene, but unreal," his own developing aesthetic owes a great deal to Allston's ideas on the role of originality in artistic creation.