

Of Prophets and Pale Horses: Joseph Smith, Benjamin West, and the American Millenarian Tradition

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ON 15 JUNE 1844 JOSEPH SMITH RECORDED in his journal that “[the steamboat] Maid of Iowa come [sic] down the river about 2 or 3 o’clock While I was examining Benj[amin] Wests painting of Death on the Pale Horse which has been exhibiting in my reading room for 3 days.”¹ This brief, passing entry is one of many which record Smith’s daily cultural interactions. The significance of this particular incident is that West’s apocalyptic *Death on the Pale Horse* found an audience among one of America’s eminent millenarian groups.

West’s picture has long been discussed in the context of British apocalypticism, and, although it was met with some ambivalence at its American debut in 1836, it may have been viewed with some appreciation from American millenarian sects such as Mormonism. As historian J. F. C. Harrison has stated, “It is difficult to estimate the impact that such pictures made,” but the art of romantic painters “echoed the warnings of millenarian writers” and were indeed an aspect of the “sub-culture” of millenarianism.² One author has maintained that the apocalyptic nature

1. Joseph Smith Journal [kept by Willard Richards], 15 June 1844, 157, Smith Collection, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited LDS archives); see also Joseph Smith, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1989), 492; Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1964), 6:471 (hereafter cited as *HC*).

2. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 131-32, 196.