

James Barry was born in Water Lane, Cork in October 1741. He had a controversial career that marked him out as a great but troubled artist. Barry studied under the landscape artist John Butts, who he said imparted to him a true love of painting. In early 1760, he went to Dublin to study at the Dublin Society Drawing School. Around this time he met the statesman Edmond Burke, who was a Cork man and an outspoken idealist. Burke was an advocate of the 'artist in society', his belief was that art and artistic work was the ultimate achievement of mankind. In 1771, Burke published his work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, which was to have a profound effect on James Barry. Burke was impressed by the talent of the young artist and became Barry's patron. This enabled Barry to continue his studies, first in England and then in Paris and Rome.

Barry was an avid and driven student. He was greatly influenced by Classical art and by the painting techniques of Titian whose use of colour he sought to emulate. In Paris, he studied the works of Le Sueur and Poussin who both had a love of biblical and classical subject matter. His aspiration was to be the greatest history painter of all times; he aimed to combine the best of the antique with the contemporary, to revive the art of history painting. However, the taste at the time was for the more light-hearted and a decorative Rococo style. Fiercely stubborn in his quest for truth in art, Barry refused lucrative commissions for portraits and other work he did not consider worthy of his time. He displayed an argumentative and eventually paranoid nature. Even as his patron sent lords to Rome to commission portraits, he stubbornly refused to entertain them.

He returned to London in 1771 and was elected to the Royal Academy two years later. He worked at a furious rate and painted more than fifteen complex works over the next five years. He was recognised as a great history painter, yet his disagreements with his patron Burke and with the Royal Academy led to constant clashes. In 1775, he published *An Inquiry into the Real and Imaginary Obstructions to the Acquisition of the Arts in England*, which was a condemnation of the running of the Academy by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Even though he had great respect for much of the works and writings of Reynolds, Barry felt history and idea-based painting rather than "safe" landscape and portrait painting should be encouraged. Barry used his paintings as well as his writing to advance his theory of the noble and ideological artist. In 1775, he exhibited *The Death of Adonis*, a scene showing the slain hero in a glade, surrounded by two cupids and his love, Venus. Even the dogs in the painting howl mournfully at his passing, the beautiful landscape setting serves to reinforce the tragic events that had occurred. Adonis represents the proud hunter, a metaphor for the searching and inquisitive mind. Venus, the goddess of love, mourns this death for us all. Barry felt the role of the artist was to be at the centre of culture and civilisation, and that the work of the artist was to educate and enlighten.

In 1779, he was appointed Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy and his greatest achievement was a cycle of neo-classical paintings on the walls of the Great Room in the Society of Arts in London. Five large canvasses depicted *The Progress of Human Knowledge and Culture* and included portraits of contemporary artists, politicians and scientists set in ancient contexts in Barry's own particular complex blend of mythology. This ambitious mural project depicts the birth of civilisation in ancient Greece in the first painting and culminates in a painting showing the work done by the Royal Society to progress the arts. Barry was not happy with the response to the murals. In 1790, with a portrait of the Prince of Wales that he expected would win him approval, he was again disappointed and further dejected. Following expulsion from the Academy in 1799, Barry became reclusive and his mental health declined rapidly. He died, alone and paranoid, in 1806. Only in death was he commemorated as the great artist he always felt he was, and interred in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral beside his old friend and adversary, Sir Joshua Reynolds.