

# Cultural Daily

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## How Art Leads Politics; or, What Glenn Beck and the Great Awakening Really Have in Common

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, September 1st, 2010



America's artists shape America's political landscape. Glenn Beck may occasionally costume himself as Tom Paine, but Paine isn't his precedent. When Beck calls to "put God back in America" and says we are on the verge of the next Great Awakening, he's suggesting a religious lineage. That isn't his precedent either.

It's time to set the record straight – and not just about Tom Paine, who as an atheist would have detested Beck's views as much as he probably shared Beck's extrovert, heart-on-sleeve demeanor. It's time to look anew at America's Great Awakening, and the artistic impulse that formed it.

Our [Great Awakening](#) was a period of American colonial history from 1730-1760 marked by a revival of mystical religious fervor. It was popularized by evangelical Protestants like Jonathan Edwards, who threw away the Bible as a text for rote study. Edwards would have appreciated Rumi's belief that a text is unnecessary for the truly religious man. In fact, Edwards and his cohort preached the personal revelation of God, an experience that was not about book-learning or Bible-quoting, but genuine, direct, mystical contact.

Many historians contend that the Great Awakening paved the way for America's revolution, because it allowed the colonists to find their own self-expression. It was certainly a factor, although most of our founding fathers were deists or atheists.

But who paved the way for the Great Awakening? America's visual artists. For the colonists to begin thinking of themselves as "Americans" instead of British subjects, they needed to see themselves differently. American painters led the way by creating a new visual style.

Let's compare.

Here is a typical example of the British and European style from the early 1730s, painted by Hogarth:



In contrast, American painting looked completely different. American painters, although they had been trained in the European school and many had studied at European academies, *unlearned* the

dimensionality and color palette of the Old World. Instead, they founded something else – a distinctly American school. Here’s an example from Gansevoort Limner, a New York painter, in 1730:



You can see how Limner’s portrait differs from what was being painted in Europe at the same time. In comparison, the American image is childlike, naïve, flat, simple, plain, unaffected, geometric, sparingly painted. None of these are pejorative terms – they are descriptions. To develop a new way of looking at themselves, American colonial painters discovered a new way of seeing the world. Their work shifted America’s national identity – first with religious fervor, then with political self-awareness. Our artists’ new vision preceded the change in our social order. Artists always lead the way – even in the founding of nations.

Glenn Beck probably does not represent the forefront of another Awakening, but we can still find the artistic influence that set the stage for his entrance. What would that artistic influence be? Reality television, which, like American colonial painting, is flat, basic, plain, sparingly rendered. Reality television, which gets its ratings by leering longingly at the sin, while condemning the sinner. Reality television, whose most well-rendered characters thus far are Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin. Artistic shifts always precede political shifts, and the more suspect the art the more suspect the politics it engenders.

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