

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

John Singleton Copley (1738–1815)



John Singleton Copley unexpectedly illuminated America's colonial sky. The child of poor uncultured parents and only briefly the stepson of artist Peter Pelham, he became by 1760, as if by Providence, the colonies' supreme artist, a position he retained until his departure for London in 1774. His swift ascent and sustained eminence were the result of an innate ability to handle paint and produce images that eclipsed anything executed by his predecessors in America. Through his stepfather, Copley had access to a vast collection of **prints** after old masters and **English portraits**, which he employed as the basis for early historical compositions like *The Return of Neptune* (59.198), and for portraits such as *Mrs. Jerathmael Bowers* (15.128). In this way, Copley not only learned how to compose his pictures, but also catered brilliantly to the anglophile predilections of his patrons, who coveted English-style portraits but rarely, if ever, traveled to England. He worked in various media to please patrons, executing paintings, pastels, and **miniatures** with remarkable dexterity.

In addition to dazzling descriptions, Copley offered persuasive fictions. With his deft technique and social insights, he fashioned sitters into the personae they wanted to project. He adroitly choreographed bodies, settings, and objects into visual biographies that could calibrate social position. The portrait of Daniel Crommelin Verplanck (49.12) is a perfect rendering of the boy's potential and his father's wish to see his son portrayed as the precocious scion of one of New York's most prominent families. For Mrs. John Winthrop (31.109), a woman of letters and wife of a Harvard University professor, Copley combined the symbolism of the rare nectarine with the act of writing: Mrs. Winthrop poises the sprig like a pen on the blank surface of the table in an allusion to her own life as an act of self-creation.

In Boston and New York, where Copley painted briefly, the possession of works of art—especially English-style pictures—by an artist as accomplished as Copley was of immeasurable social value. Typically displayed in the **halls, parlors, and dining rooms of homes** decorated with **Chippendale-style furniture**, Rococo **tea sets**, and other fine things, Copley's portraits became centerpieces in the stagecraft of elite, eighteenth-century life. As a result, Copley's work saturated the market to a degree perhaps unprecedented in the history of art and contributed vitally to the forging of social identity for the American merchant class.

Copley had another extraordinary skill: he achieved his position as portraitist to the merchant elite of Boston and New York because he thought and behaved like a gentleman. In an era of accelerating class divisions and political upheaval, Copley flourished. He closely identified with his patrons and, until their world collapsed on the eve of the American Revolution, captured and confirmed their values and hopes. And then, like a phoenix up from the ashes, rose to equal if not greater prominence in London by the deployment of the same remarkable artistic and social skills. Following a brief respite in Rome during the summer of 1774, where Copley studied the old masters and drew as he had rarely done before, he landed in London and remained for the rest of his life. There, his portraits proceeded from his American successes, employing, in likenesses such as that of *Midshipman Augustus Brine* (43.86.4), the same dazzling effects. He continued to amaze clients with his portraits even while establishing himself as a key player in the current rage for history painting. With the critical success of *The Siege of Gibraltar* (60.44.19) and his enormous tableau *The Death of Major Peirson*, Copley joined the top ranks of British painters, was elected to the **Royal Academy**, and won royal patronage that kept him painting until the very end of his extraordinary life.

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