



John Singleton Copley

Picture Study

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Portrait of Paul Revere
John Singleton Copley, c. 1768



Watson and the Shark
John Singleton Copley, 1778



The Three Youngest Daughters of King George III

John Singleton Copley, 1785



A Boy With a Flying Squirrel (Henry Pelham)

John Singleton Copley, 1765



Major Hugh Montgomerie, 12th Earl of Eglinton, 1739-1819.

Soldier, Lord Lieutenant of Ayrshire

John Singleton Copley, 1780



The Copley Family
John Singleton Copley, circa 1776



Samuel Reading to Eli the Judgements of God Upon Eli's House

John Singleton Copley, 1780



John Singleton Copley

ARTIST BIO NOTES

These notes are provided to aid the teacher's own background research on the artist and his or her works. This is not meant to be presented to students as a list of facts and dates. When you first introduce the artist, tell students where the artist fits into the timeline of history, and where the artist lived and worked. Add a few more details with each new picture, but the information you share should be short and simple unless your students ask questions or wish to know more. Keep the main focus of your Picture Study time on observation and narration of the details of the picture.

LIFE AND CHARACTER

Italicized portions indicate historical events affecting the artist's life.

- ◆ Birth date 1738, probably in Boston, Massachusetts. One source gives his birthdate as July 3, 1737, but this is not confirmed. His parents had emigrated from Ireland to Boston in 1736; his father died in the West Indies when John was a young boy, and possibly even before John was born.
- ◆ The Copley family lived in relative poverty, with his mother keeping a tobacco shop to support her young family. She eventually married Peter Pelham and the family's economic and social standing improved.
- ◆ After his stepfather's death, Copley supported his mother and younger brother with the income from his portraits. He became quite prosperous.
- ◆ 1769, married Sussannah Farnum Clarke, descendant of the Mayflower Winslows. Copley's portrait business thrived. Their house on Beacon Hill, "chosen with his keen perception of picturesque beauty," was the birthplace and childhood home of their six children.
- ◆ 1774, sailed alone to London after many invitations from prominent European artists. He visited the Royal Academy in London, and then traveled to Rome where he studied and painted. During this time, he toured the continent, visiting Paris, Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice, and the Low Countries.

- ◆ 1775, his wife and children left Boston for London amidst growing fears of revolution. The family settled in London.
- ◆ 1776-1783, *American War of Independence*
- ◆ 1803-1815, *Napoleonic Wars* and family concerns brought financial pressures; his extreme work ethic contributed to physical and emotional decline.
- ◆ 1815, died on September 29, London, England. “He was perfectly resigned,” wrote his daughter Mary, “and willing to die, and expressed his firm trust in God, through the merits of our Redeemer.”
- ◆ Copley died largely in debt, which was settled by his son, the later Lord Lyndhurst. He retained the family home in London and cared for his mother.

TRAINING & CAREER

- ◆ No definite record of his education, although his letters reveal him to be well-educated.
- ◆ Copley’s son says that he was “entirely self-taught” as an artist, “and never saw a decent picture, with the exception of his own, until he was nearly thirty years of age.” However, Copley’s stepfather, Peter Pelham, was a portrait painter, dancing master, and tutor. It seems reasonable to assume that he may have provided some of Copley’s education as well providing at least some of his early instruction in art.
- ◆ 1753-54, portraits of his brother and the local minister were among his first works; his reputation as a portrait painter began to grow.
- ◆ 1766, “A Boy with a Flying Squirrel” (portrait of his brother Henry) was exhibited in England. As a result, Copley was made a Fellow of the Society of Artists of Great Britain and began a regular correspondence with American-born artist Benjamin West.
- ◆ 1769-1774, painted subjects from prominent families in the colonies. He also made visits to Philadelphia and New York, and painted portraits in each city.
- ◆ 1774, traveled, studied, and painted abroad where his reputation as a portrait artist had preceded him. He began to paint historical subjects as well, which

were well-received both in Europe and America. He continued to paint portraits, including those of American dignitaries such as John Adams and John Quincy Adams when they visited London.

- ◆ By his own account, his work in Europe “could not surpass some of his early works.”

ART STYLE & ACHIEVEMENTS

- ◆ Main medium was oil on canvas, but also worked in pastels.
- ◆ Main subjects were realistic portraiture and historical art.
- ◆ One of the most influential and prolific colonial American painters, with around 350 works. His style was imitated by American artists well into the nineteenth century.
- ◆ His European legacy was in contemporary historical painting, where he strove for true likeness of his subjects, and accurate details, clothing, and accessories fitting the time period.
- ◆ Copley was a pioneer and ardent supporter of private art exhibition for the general public.

ARTIST BIO LINKS

<http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org/>

<http://www.anb.org/articles/17/17-00180.html>

<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg60b/gg60b-main1.html>

PICTURE SOURCES

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J_S_Copley_-_Paul_Revere.jpg

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J_S_Copley_-_Watson_and_the_Shark_\(Boston\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J_S_Copley_-_Watson_and_the_Shark_(Boston).jpg)

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Daughters_of_King_George_III.jpg

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Singleton_Copley_-_A_Boy_with_a_Flying_Squirrel_\(Henry_Pelham\)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Singleton_Copley_-_A_Boy_with_a_Flying_Squirrel_(Henry_Pelham)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Singleton_Copley_-_Hugh_Montgomerie,_12th_Earl_of_Eglinton,_1739_-_1819._Soldier;_Lord_Lieutenant_of_Ayrshire_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/john-singleton-copley/portrait-of-familie-copley-1776>

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