

## Mars, Venus, and Vulcan: The Forge of Vulcan

John Singleton Copley

1738-1815

John Singleton Copley was born in Boston in May of 1738. His parents had immigrated to America from Ireland and established a tobacco shop in Boston. When Copley was 10 years old, his father died, and his mother married Peter Pelham, a successful printmaker, skilled painter, and devotee of the arts. Pelham recognized Copley's innate, prodigious talent for drawing. He introduced Copley to ideas about art and art theory and exposed him to prints of European art. Under Pelham's tutelage, Copley became accomplished at mezzotint and engraving. Pelham also was instrumental in seeing that Copley had all the supplies and tools to begin painting. Pelham died when Copley was 13 years old, but by then Copley's desire to become a painter by trade was well focused.

Since the only art in demand in the colonies was portraiture, this was the primary exposure Copley had to fine art. He learned to make mezzotints by copying his stepfather's works and from mythical, allegorical, and historic engravings. He soon began creating paintings from the engravings. By the time Copley was 16 years old, he had painted three large mythological works using engravings of 18th Century paintings for reference: *Galatea Triumphs upon the Waves* by Gregorio Lazzarini, *The Triumph of Neptune* by Simon Francois Ravenet, and *The Forge of Vulcan* by Antoine Coypel. John Singleton Copley's painting, *Mars, Venus, and Vulcan: The Forge of Vulcan* is in the KIA permanent collection.

After his stepfather's death, Copley had a greater responsibility to look after his mother and young half-brother. He knew how to approach and engage with the upper class, so he began promoting himself as a portrait artist by the age of 16. Boston was growing in prominence, and wealthy citizens sought artists to paint portraits of themselves and their family members. Copley was soon recognized as talented, and well-to-do Bostonians commissioned him for portraits. Copley was familiar with the works of other colonial portrait painters, and, at first, he appropriated the styles and poses seen in these works. By the time he was 21, Copley had developed his own style. He became masterful at attention to detail and light, bringing a sense of life and realism to his paintings that surpassed the other portraitists works. By the time he was 21, he had the reputation of being among the finest portrait artists in the colonies.

Benjamin West, an American artist known as the "Raphael of America" was a contemporary of Copley's, and encouraged Copley to submit a painting to the Society of Artists in London to be exhibited and critiqued. Copley sent his portrait of his half-brother, titled *A Boy With a Flying Squirrel* to the 1766

exhibition. This painting was unusual in showing the subject in full profile and in giving significance to smaller elements relating to the subject. It received very positive criticism, and prompted Copley to become even more attentive to detail in his future portraits. West, who saw great potential in Copley, encouraged Copley to come to Europe to study the great works of European artists. Unfortunately, John Copley did not have the means to make such a journey because he was the sole provider for his mother and half-brother.

In 1769, Copley married Susanna Farnham Clark, daughter of a very wealthy merchant with the British East India Company. Marrying into this wealthy family relieved Copley of any financial worries. He and his wife moved to a comfortable home, and he was able to have a suitable studio to work in. He was also able to continue helping his mother and half-brother.

Copley painted portraits for the next 5 years in America. It is believed he painted upwards of 350 portraits of Bostonians. Among his most well known is a portrait of Paul Revere. Again, Copley seemed to have broken tradition. Rather than painting a person of high standing, well-dressed, in neo-classical surroundings he painted a tradesman, Paul Revere, who was a silversmith holding a work of his trade. Among other sitters who Copley painted were John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Although the portraits he painted were in a Neo-Classical style, he broke with tradition by including objects that were a part of the lives of his subjects. His attention to detail was so precise that he imbued an almost three dimensional quality to his paintings, and is said to have introduced realism into American art.

In 1773 the Boston Tea Party created particular conflict for Copley. His wife's father was a merchant whose tea was thrown into the harbor. Copley was friendly both with those who fiercely supported an America independent of England and with Loyalists who supported King George III. In 1774, Copley decided make his tour of Europe, perhaps to escape the discomfort of the politics at home. He traveled throughout France and Italy with the British painter, George Carter, who was eager to show his friend European Renaissance art. It was an overwhelming experience for Copley. When he finished his tour, the escalating conflict in America, as well as his desire to live, study art, and paint in London convinced him stay there. He brought his whole family to England in 1775, and never returned to America.

In London, John Copley's reputation as an artist was recognized, due to his "Boy With a Squirrel" painting. It was further fortified by Benjamin West's efforts in having him elected into the Royal Academy of artists. His first works produced for the Academy received a tepid reception, until he created his first historical painting, *Watson and the Shark*. Brook Watson, a wealthy British merchant, commissioned the painting. This 6' by 7.5' dramatic painting, Early Romantic in style, depicts the true story of

Brook's being rescued from a shark attack when he had fallen into the sea off the coast of Cuba. Copley captured the drama of this actual event, giving it mythological weight. It won critical praise, with the "St. James Chronicle" stating that Copley had proved himself, "a Genius who bids fair to rival the Great Masters of the Ancient Italian Schools." This painting was probably responsible for Copley's being elected to the top rank as Royal Academician in the Royal Academy.

Copley continued to paint portraits of British nobility, high ranking members of military and political stations, and prominent British subjects. However, he focused on historic paintings; *The Death of Major Pierson* being his most famous. He was subsequently commissioned to paint a portrait of the daughters of King George the III, a feat to which he had greatly aspired because he felt it won him court patronage.

Copley lost favor as a sought after artist in his later years, but he never left his easel. He died of a stroke at the age of 77 in London, on September 9th, 1815. Although his gifts as an artist diminished with his advancing years, he is remembered for having been the foremost American artist of the 18th Century and a noted painter of British historical events. He can also be remembered as a pioneer in a realistic style not seen in other Colonial portrait painters. He included artifacts relating to his sitters in his paintings, giving an intimacy to the portraits. He was a creative marketer of his works, being one of the first to make engravings of his paintings in order to sell copies of the prints to the general public.

John Singleton Copley was truly an artist of two countries. He is known as the finest of American Colonial portraitists. In England he is known as a British painter of the American school.

#### REFERENCES

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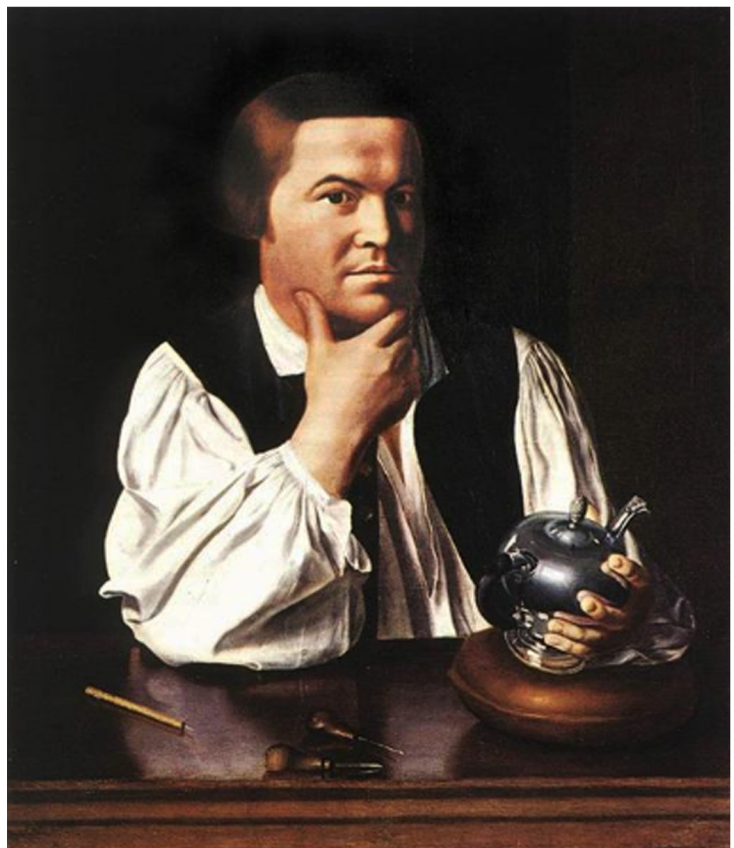
Internet references for images of Copley's paintings:

[www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org) Search John Singleton Copley to view 160 works in chronological order

[www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org)



John Singleton Copley  
Self Portrait  
1784



Paul Revere  
1768/70





A Boy with a Flying Squirrel  
1765



Watson and the Shark  
1782



The Death of Major Pierson  
1782/84