

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Carpenter, Tailor, Shoemaker, Artist: Copley's Politics of Representation

Dr. Susan Rather

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She serves as an editorial consultant for several distinguished university presses. Her expertise ranges from the late 19th and early 20th century, all the way back into the earliest of the 18th century artists; both here in America and when they dabble overseas.

She has written and lectured extensively on John Singleton Copley, among others, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The National Portrait Gallery, and Winterthur Museum, among other distinguished locations.

In particular, she holds an interest in an artist's education and in the way he represents himself, and the way he gets along with his clients. She greets her topic with enthusiasm and humor. She is a genuine joy to hear and to listen to and I am sure we will all in fact derive a great deal of pleasure and enjoyment from the topic of this evening's lecture, *Carpenter, Tailor, Shoemaker, Artist, Copley's Politics of Representation*. Will you please join me in welcoming Susan Rather?

Susan Rather: That was a very nice introduction, probably softened by glasses of wine at dinner, so if I stumble over my words, you will understand why. This is an intimate group, and I hope you won't find this talk too terribly formal, and when I say formal, I don't mean that there won't be some funny moments in it.

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Only that it is -- well, it's sort of a formal talk. But let me begin without further ado, and we can go ahead and -- oh, I know what I need to do, hold on, just slip these slides in, since I came and saw the Focus show. These of course are the portraits of Mr. And Mrs. Woodbury Langdon from 1767 that have been recently acquired by this museum, and I understand that that's thanks to Mrs. McDermott and her art fund that made that acquisition possible.

The talk I am giving this evening belongs to my ongoing study on the representation of the artist in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world.

This is a study that comprehends both images, especially portraits and self portraits of artists, and text, which I think have something to tell us about the way artists saw themselves, and how they were seen, and about their perceived position and purpose in society. I will be focusing this evening on the rather tense relationship of painters to artists, and which I will explore through John Singleton Copley of Boston, though as you will see this issue is not at all limited to him or to Colonial American artists.

Now my study of this issue was launched by my curiosity about a much quoted, but never questioned statement that Copley made in a letter he wrote around 1767. In other words, right around time that he painted these pictures--and this was my point of departure with Copley. For those of you who aren't familiar with him, at that time 1767, he was just shy of 30 years old, but he was already very well established as the premier painter in the Colonial British America, and I show you here, as I make these remarks, two of my favorite Copley Portraits, Epes Sargent from 1760 on the left, which was painted when the artist was just 22 years old.

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And Mrs. Thomas Gage, later in his American career from 1771. So this is what Copley said that piqued my interest: "A taste of painting is too much wanting in America. Were it not for preserving the resemblance of particular person's, painting would not be known in the place. That people generally regard it no more than any other useful trade as they sometimes term it, like that of a carpenter, tailor or a shoemaker, not as one of the most noble arts in the world."

Thus, Copley lamented the lack of regard for painting among his fellow Bostonians who limited their patronage to the relatively utilitarian art of portraiture. At the same time, he rued their failure to recognize the nobility of art and artist. Copley's disgust was a gauge of the ambition that helped to make him Colonial America's premier painter but also led him, on the Eve of Revolution, to abandon his country for the artistically more supportive climate of London.

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Copley's complaint had foundation: colonial Americans, for the most part, did regard painters, who worked with their hands, as artisans. So did many Englishmen, judging from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, which defined *artisan* as: (1) "artist; professor of art," and (2) "manufacturer; low tradesman."

Verse cited by Johnson in support of the first definition identified the artist-artisan with portrait painting and this is the verse that Johnson cited, "Best and happiest *artisan*/Best of painters, if you can,/With your many colour'd art,/Draw the mistress of my heart." Even theorists who championed painting as a liberal

art had difficulty making the claim for portraiture, a genre debased in academic terms by its representation of unimproved rather than ideal nature.

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Artisan, mechanic and craftsman, all connoted manufacture of a "low," as opposed to "liberal" sort; such, the young Copley might have learned from art treatises, was the portraitist's art. But in choosing the comparison with carpenters, tailors, and shoemakers--and remember they are the people that he lambasted in that comment. In choosing therefore members of the lower artisanry, having meager wages, uncertain prospects for advancement, and little possibility of acquiring property, Copley willfully magnified the insult to his occupation. Artists, along with metalworkers like silversmiths, had considerably greater expectations.

Copley's were realized in 1769 with his marriage to the daughter of a prosperous merchant and his acquisition of substantial property on Beacon Hill. But Copley did not want to be identified with *any* artisan, a distancing that I believe can be teased out of a careful comparison between Copley's self-portrait of 1769 and his very famous roughly contemporaneous portrait of silversmith Paul Revere. Now this is not what I am going to be talking about today. Though, I think this is absolutely complementary material. What I will be doing this evening then, is to cast a net more widely to explore why the association with artisans, generally, so rankled Copley and other British artists, and to ask why beyond hyperbole, Copley and others singled out particular trades for disdain. I am going to need to cover some ground at the outset, political ground really, that doesn't easily lend itself to illustration, so I hope you'll bear with me for a little while on that. You will see plenty of slides.

Copley identified himself in the lament with which I started as the practitioner not of a "useful trade," but of a "noble" art.

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In his mind, undoubtedly, this made him a gentleman--a designation that, prior to the sixteenth century, had been reserved for those of noble birth. By the eighteenth century, and especially in colonial British America where few were titled, the term had wider application. Birth and parentage still counted for a great deal; so did wealth, though it alone did not the gentleman make, especially if gained in trade. Gentlemen, then, were never defined by what they did, by the usefulness of their trades, but by their "quality" and condition as men of learning, manners, taste, and character.

The vast majority, by contrast, ranked as the common people. No matter how respectable or how wealthy, if they worked for a living, especially if they worked with their hands, they could claim no more than was called at the time "middling" status. Nor did most of them aspire to a higher station. The prevailing desire among artisans as historian Gary Nash has argued was -- and I am quoting him, "not to reach the top but to get off the bottom."

Some artisans were nearer the bottom than others, engaged in crafts with limited earning power and for a variety of reasons, lesser prestige. Tailoring, for example, was thought suitable for the weak because its physical demands were few; and I show you here an eighteenth-century representation, a print of tailors at work. Tailoring, furthermore, required so little in terms of raw materials--needle, thread, tape measure--that virtually anyone could take up the trade. And I should tell you that customers usually supplied their own cloth, and this is simply an ad from 1760s Boston, which gives you --if you can read it, some indication of the very wide variety of materials that a customer might purchase, and then take to the tailor.

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Shoemaking, and obviously I am calling up the occupations that Copley despised, shoemaking, which was also called cordwaining in the eighteenth century, was likewise a lowly pursuit, its scant financial rewards undercut throughout the Colonies by the large number of practitioners. Carpentry required considerably more skill and commanded higher wages, but it was a more dangerous and decidedly seasonal pursuit, factors that offset its relatively greater prestige.

Carpenters, tailors, and shoemakers--these were the artisans with whom Copley deplored connection, and he was not alone in expressing contempt for them. William Henry Drayton of South Carolina found it inconceivable that gentlemen such as himself should have to accept the participation in government of men, who as he put it, "never were in a way to study" (and he meant to acquire a liberal education) and who knew little more than how "to cobble an old shoe in the neatest manner, or to build a necessary house." Likewise, the royal governor of Georgia decried the absence of "Gentlemen or Men of Property" among provincial leaders and found the composition of the revolutionary committee in charge of Savanna "a Parcel of the Lowest People, Chiefly Carpenters, Shoemakers, Blacksmiths etc." What concerned these patricians was fitness for political leadership, which the classical republican tradition--an important ideal in the English speaking world--denied working men. And I should say here that women, though of course completely disenfranchised, were equally inclined to scapegoat the lower sort as did a Philadelphia woman who, in condemning what she called the "rascally clergy" of Maryland, charged that "tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths and such fellows take orders when they cannot live like gentlemen by their trade."

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In classical republican discourse which was alive and well in eighteenth-century Britain and its colonies, working men like tailors and shoemakers could never act virtuously and in the public interest because they were necessarily concerned with promoting the interest of their occupation and with the concrete, which is to say the materials of the trade, rather than the abstract. This is the argument. I am not saying that I buy it, but this is what they said, that

people had to be too focused on their occupations, and they couldn't really think of the general good. The argument went that only who did not have to earn a living, traditionally associated with ownership of land, which of course was worked by others, only such people were thought capable of maintaining integrity in public office. Classed as gentlemen, these men were considered independent and in eighteenth-century parlance, disinterested. Therefore, fit to govern.

In the absence of a hereditary aristocracy, these old notions were breaking down in America, and yet the old prejudices lingered. John Adams, writing in 1760 when he was a young lawyer, sarcastically called shoemaking too mean and diminutive an occupation to satisfy a legal client of his. This client, a shoemaker who should in Adams's words have diligently followed his trade, wanted instead to rise in the world and took as Adams put it, "to meddling with law" to his financial ruin. Now for someone who was himself -- and you may not know this--the son of a shoemaker and a farmer, Adams's condescension is I think quite striking. But what he had acquired was the "advantage of a liberal education," as he put it. For Adams this was a prerequisite to leadership and to membership in the natural aristocracy that he hoped would lead in the colonies.

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In the literature of art, the shoemaker had long exemplified the man mired in particulars and therefore unfit to judge the whole. The ancient author Pliny first told the tale of a shoemaker who criticized Apelles' representation of a sandal, and this is a late eighteenth-century engraving illustrating that event where the shoemaker is standing and you can see the stick he has with shoes and Apelles is seated before a painting that he had made. And Apelles, as you are maybe aware, was the most famous painter of antiquity known through ancient authors such as Pliny.

So in the story, this shoemaker criticized Apelles for how he represented a sandal. Acknowledging the shoemakers expertise in the matter of footwear, Apelles made the correction, but he refused to do so when the man returned to criticize his rendering of the leg, that being outside the shoemakers' expertise. So the whole point, of course, is that tradesmen were focused on the particular and could not see the whole.

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For Plato, painters were men of similarly narrow experience, disqualified from citizenship because they nearly imitated the appearance of material objects, and therefore did not develop higher faculties of mind. Eighteenth-century writers on art were at pains to refute this view and repeatedly retold Pliny's story, emphasizing the painter's superiority to what Sir Joshua Reynolds called, "ignorant, uneducated would-be critics."

Some painters, they did concede, were too closely bound to the particular. Portraitists especially face this problem, but others transcended that limitation by figuring the ideal, and by representing noble actions.

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According to eighteenth-century theory, such an abstract and intellectual art did not address the common person and could not be made by the common person. The artists who engaged historical subjects--that is, subjects with a moral purpose, which promoted virtue by representing virtue--such an artist acted as a gentlemen for the betterment of mankind and not just for himself or for another.

Now what does this have to do with Copley? On the face of it, political leadership does not seem to have been his concern, at least not in the narrow sense of partisan politics to which he maintained a studied neutrality throughout the imperial crisis. But even before he reached his majority, Copley had clearly absorbed, if not entirely digested, European aesthetic treatises that proclaimed the importance and socially redeeming character of historical subjects; such subjects number among his earliest paintings. This is *Mars, Venus and Vulcan* from 1754 when Copley was 15 or 16 years old. Not necessarily a great painting, but obviously one that shows his high ambition particularly in the absence of any art of this sort in the Colonies.

It was absent in part because there was no demand. So in the absence of this demand, history painting could neither provide Copley's living nor, once he was established, support the style of life to which he quickly become accustomed. Rather than being independent and disinterested then, he was dependent and he hated it, privately deploring his fellow colonists' preference for portraiture and the role that he, as a portraitist, took an appeasing personal vanity. And with that in mind I show you here a crude image of an obsequious artist which was reproduced with John Gay's fable, *The Painter Who Pleas'd Everybody and Nobody*, upon which addressed the portraitist's dilemma.

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The importance of flattery and generally ingratiating behavior by a portraitist in dealing with a client may be suggested in the recurrence of tailors and other clothing tradesmen in eighteenth-century artist narratives. A bitterness reminiscent of Copley's is evident in William Hogarth's notation that "a man of very middling talents may easily succeed in portrait painting. More of artifices and the address of a mercer is required than the painter's genius." Closely allied to the tailor, the mercer dealt in expensive textiles, especially silks, and assisted clients in selecting fabric for their clothes. Certain "artifices," to use Hogarth's words, evidently were required as essential to the mercer's success, judging by the job description in *The London Tradesman*, a book published in 1747 to guide parents in selecting a trade for their children.

So, when we read this book we hear this of the mercer, "He must be a very polite man, and skilled in all the punctilio's of good city breeding. He must dress neatly, and affect a court air, however far distant he may live from St. James's. None are so fit for that branch of business, as that nimble, dancing, talkative nation, the French. Our mercer must have a good deal of the Frenchman in his manners."

The caricatured fawning, foppish Europeans in Hogarth's graphic work—and this is plate 2 from *The Rake's Progress*-- make clear his disdain for the type and suggest how deeply Hogarth abhorred strategic obsequiousness in a portraitist's relationship to patron. The American Benjamin West, who found fame in 1760s London, knew enough to shun any connection with such tradesmen, at least according to John Galt's heavily embroidered biography of 1816, in which the child West refused to play with a boy who wanted to become a tailor.

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The story, which surely was concocted to establish West's sense of his own destiny, makes clear that a future artist who would become an intimate of a king has no business forming such base associations.

West's social purity, however, was somewhat compromised by the tattle that, in preparing to portray King George in 1780,--and this is that portrait--the artist, and I am quoting here from this gossipy contemporary account, West "ascertained the exact proportions of his Majesty with a compass and tailor's measure from head to foot." Thus could the anonymous commentator pronounce the portrait "a stuffed pillow." Gilbert Stuart, the younger American to whom West deflected portrait customers in the early 1780s, was more sporting, and this is the portrait that launched Stuart's career in 1782.

When fellow passengers on an English stagecoach wondered about Stuart's calling, he teased them, saying that he "made coats and waistcoats for gentlemen" but that he was not a tailor. When an actual painting was at stake, however, Stuart would not compromise his art. He refused to alter portraits to satisfy clients, but painted, he said, "from his own vision and conception. A dressmaker may alter a dress, a milliner a cap, a tailor a coat, but a painter may give up his art if he attempts to alter to please. It cannot be done."

It should now be apparent that the specter of the tailor haunted more than a few painters; that we are in fact dealing with topos in artist narratives. Stuart's account reveals the shared ground between the two occupations.

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Like most eighteenth-century tailors and dressmakers, the portraitist's work was bespoke, that is, made to order for the individual client. In each case, then, there would have been considerable pressure to satisfy the client's wishes. The tailor's work, of course, had a literally material effect on the client's public

persona, for in the burgeoning consumer society of the eighteenth century, individuals negotiated status partly through cloth, a costly consumer item. And I show you plate 1 of Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress*, in which the young man, the Rake, of the tail is being measured for a new suit of clothes by a tailor because he has just come into his wealth. So the point is that he will negotiate his status through trappings such as clothes and new interior decoration.

The same point about the tailor is made as well in the title of a book published in Philadelphia in 1772 and this is that title, *The Miraculous Power of Clothes, and Dignity of the Taylors: Being an Essay on the Words, Clothes Makes Men*. From "a chaos of velvet, brocade, and other rich stuffs," the author tells us, the tailor "created illustrious personages, graces, honors, and other worthies." The tailor's skill, according to *The London Tradesman* again, lay in sizing up the customer and cutting the cloth to favor him. The master tailor the author noted "must be able, not only to cut for the handsome and well-shaped, but to bestow a good shape where nature has not designed it. His hand and his head must go together."

The tailor, it is clear, served as an agent of the client's self-fashioning. So, too, did the portraitist, and in ways uncomfortably aligned with the tailor, given the importance accorded costume in portraits of Copley's day.

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And I'll show you on the left, Copley's *Rebecca Boylston* of 1767, the same year as the new portraits here, and a portrait of Massachusetts Governor William Shirley made in London by Thomas Hudson in 1750. Obviously the costume is terrifically important in both of these works, and this is very characteristic of the period. What Mrs. Trollope observed in 1832 held true for 1762 or 1767, she said, "From all the conversations on painting, which I listen to in America, I found that the finish of drapery was considered as the highest excellence, and next to this, the resemblance in a portrait."

It is worth noting in this connection that in England a significant number of portraitists--including Sir Joshua Reynolds, the esteemed president of the Royal Academy--employed specialist drapery painters, a practice that appears to support the importance to sitters borne out by the visual evidence of painstakingly rendered costume.

A successful drapery painter could earn a better living than many portraitists, though in stature he ranked, according to *The London Tradesman*, as "the lowest degree of a liberal painter, a workman with but a dull genius and a mere mechanic head."

Hogarth called drapery painters "painter tailors," but saved his venom for the portraitists who relied on them as he wrote "for nine parts in ten and perhaps the best part of their pictures." That portraitists would be willing to delegate or relegate substantial portions of their work to acknowledged inferiors is

significant. Clearly, we confront here a conception of art that is not modern and I mean that word in its emergent romantic sense.

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The practice of using drapery painters alerts us instead to the academic valuation of idea over execution, the latter considered merely mechanical and beneath the dignity of the artist.

Reynolds, always concerned to elevate the rank of painter, associated artistic dignity especially with history painting, in which the painter addressed general truths rather than the particularities of unrefined nature. And you saw that Copley was thinking about history painting at an early point, long before he really knew much about it. And I'll show you here just this connection: one of Benjamin West's fairly early history paintings from his -- soon after he came to England in 1768. In his fourth "Discourse" before the Royal Academy in 1771, Reynolds warned "the historical painter does not debase his conceptions with minute attention to the discrimination of stuffs. With him, the clothing is neither woolen, nor linen, nor silk, satin, or velvet" -- think of Copley's portraits as I say this. But he says, "it's not these things, it is drapery; it is nothing more."

The portrait painter who wishes to dignify his subject, according to Reynolds, will likewise forgo modern costume in favor of dress, he said, "with the general air of the antique; he may, in effect, undo the work of the tailor," who, in Reynolds's alliterative words distorts, disfigures, disguises, and deforms nature in the service of fashion. The artist followed his own advice in such works as *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* of 1765 but the strategy left Reynolds and his sitters open to wisecracks. Lady Sarah, according to one of her contemporaries, "never did sacrifice to the Graces; her face was gloriously handsome, but she used to play cricket and eat beefsteaks on the Steyne at Brighton."

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Even so, Reynolds knew that the painter who paid too much attention to drapery left himself open to the charge Cardinal Albani supposedly made about the famous seventeenth-century painter Guido Reni, that he was rather a tailor than a painter.

This slur on Reni appeared in Francesco Algarotti's *Essay on Painting* of 1764, a book Copley evidently had read by November 1766, when he requested clarification of an unrelated point from Benjamin West. Copley was even less informed about Continental and English art theory in practice than he himself suspected. He defended what he called the "simplicity of dress" in a pastel he sent West on the grounds that he had no access to that "variety of dress here as in Europe, unless I should put myself to a great expense to have them made." Copley seems not to have recognized that such defensiveness was unnecessary. Emphasis on fashion was at that moment, at least among the theoretically inclined in England, increasingly unfashionable. Even more peculiar was Copley's

imagined dependence on the tailor, a relationship that seems indeed to cast Copley as a "painter tailor"

This was after all in an age in which artists including Copley himself freely copied costumes from other sources such as mezzotints and this is by the way in the show next door, there are mezzotints to demonstrate exactly this point. This is Copley's *Mrs. Jerathmael Bowers* of 1763, which as you can see is clearly based on the mezzotint after Reynolds's *Lady Caroline Russell*. It's also time in which people -- in which the same costume appeared in multiple portraits.

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So here are two of three ladies who wear the same dress in portraits by Copley's, leaving one to wonder whether Copley really did commission a dressmaker. The point was that or is that according to contemporary British practice, he should not have been so specific in the first place, that this demeaned him.

Copley's reading of aesthetic treatises was probably responsible for and certainly fueled his dissatisfaction with the practice of portraiture. He surely noted, for example, the absence of portraiture in Algarotti--especially striking given the Italian author's extended dedication to the Society of Arts, a new organization based in London where portraits, above all, sustained the business of painting. But Algarotti insisted that the ideal painter, alone, is a true painter; and his discussion of the elements of painting, its proper models and subjects, simply left no room for portraiture.

West, working in England had finally broken the mold, gaining recognition as a history painter and Copley, marooned in provincial Boston, looked to this fellow American as model and mentor. Attempting to position himself as an informed insider, Copley parroted the inflated language of art treatises, writing of West to the artist and entrepreneur John Greenwood who also had left America to pursue fortune abroad -- it's a long sentence: "I sincerely rejoice in Mr. West's successful progress towards the summit of that mighty mountain where the everlasting laurels grow to adorn the brows of those illustrious artists that are so favored of Heaven as to be able to unravel the intricate mazes of its rough and perilous ascent." So a sentence like that tells us Copley was reading these aesthetic treatises that condemned portraiture, and his desire to be a history painter comes out of that.

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Copley's imagery in that passage conflates Parnassus and the mountain that represents "the arduous and rocky way of Virtue" in so many paintings of the *Choice of Hercules*, a subject valued for dramatizing the moral dilemma of choosing between virtue and vice, and I am showing you West's version of 1764, the year after he settled in London.

After seeing Copley's portrait of his half-brother Henry Pelham sent to the Society of Artists Exhibition for 1766, Reynolds himself had laid out Copley's choice relayed to the American by his compatriot West. Reynolds said that Copley should travel to Europe to study the masters and become, as he said, "a valuable acquisition to the art." This we understand is the path of virtue. Or have his "manner and taste corrupted and fixed by working in his little way at Boston," that in Reynolds's terms is vice. But Reynolds left out what was for Copley an important part of the equation: in Copley's words, "the profits of the art." Should he risk financial instability in the more competitive European art market or should he preserve his lucrative Colonial portrait practice? "I make as much as if I were a Raphael or a Correggio," Copley boasted, and he saw little point in acquiring European improvements only to "bury" them, that's how he put it, in the colonies. He went so far as to seek West's assurance that he might in London equal his American income of 300 guineas a year. The directness with which Copley addressed the subject of money betrays both his practicality and his provinciality, his marginality to an elite discourse of taste which suppressed commerce and the material.

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Of course, even an artist at the center, in London, could position himself outside that discourse by rejecting it, as Hogarth did. Hogarth's resistance to academic rhetoric, evident in almost everything he did, can be bluntly summarized in his pronouncement that, "till fame appears to be worth more than money, I will always prefer money to fame." Copley echoed this position to which virtue obviously has little relevance, and, for all his disgust with portraiture, faced up to the realities of the marketplace. Self-interest overcame his yearning for elusive glory as a painter of ideal and morally uplifting subjects. "Painters cannot live on art only," Copley wrote, unwilling to, as he put it, "purchase fame at so dear a rate." Copley sacrificed pride to financial security.

He made the choice between inspiration and decoration that the famous English actor and theatrical manager David Garrick was accused of making at Drury Lane theater. Witness the engraving showing Garrick between the muses, and the legend tells you this -- between the muses and the carpenters and tailors, tradesmen who, in this formulation, pander to a debased public in commercial society

And of course the reference here is again to the representation of the choice of Hercules, though here in this parody it's been stripped of heroic virtue. In his frank pursuit of material well-being, Copley was even more closely matched with his self-satisfied portrait subjects than he would have liked to admit. By staying in America, Copley, in effect, allied himself with the tailors as the servant of his clients' vanity.

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Copley's own vanity and sense of self worth were not inconsiderable; and by the late 1760s, he had distanced himself in many ways from any artisanal connection. His clientele had narrowed to the most wealthy and prominent residents of Boston and its surrounding communities. Men such as Nicholas and Thomas Boylston, Ezekiel Goldthwait, Jeremiah Lee, Isaac Smith, and their wives, and these are the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Smith of 1769. In 1769, Copley allied himself with these prosperous Bostonians through his marriage to Susanna Clarke, daughter of the successful merchant Richard Clarke.

To commemorate this important life event, Copley made portraits in pastel of himself and his bride, and of course you should be seeing them the same size, which they in fact are. Through the late eighteenth century, paired portraits were the most common format for representing a married couple, typically in works of equal size and equal visual weight. Owing to the relatively small dimension of his works on paper, Copley's pastel portraits of husbands and wives, most dating to this period of the late 1760s, show bust-length figures without the full array of gender-specific attributes that generally distinguish portraits of men and women, whether by Copley or others.

Strikingly, however, by comparison to his other pairs in pastel -- and you'll have to take my word on this -- Copley is more richly clothed than his wife. Other wives in these paired pastels wear ermine, pearls, lace, ribbons, or flowers tucked into their bodices; here only a few flowers adorn Susanna Copley's hair, and a plain wrap covers her upper body. Copley, by contrast, is sumptuously attired in an elaborate waistcoat and a fashionable banyan of glossy blue-green silk damask.

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A banyan being a garment associated by eighteenth-century British commentators from Steele to Goldsmith with men of leisure, gentility and education--and there is a Smibert portrait next door showing a man in a banyan. This association of the banyan with leisure, gentility and education would have been reinforced by the fine fabric and intense color of Copley's garment.

Seventeenth-century sumptuary laws, although widely ignored in colonial British America, forbade common people such sartorial riches, which even into the eighteenth century bestowed on the wearer the cachet of genteel birth and wealth. Eighteenth-century Britons were bound up in an empire of goods and Americans were especially hungry for fine textiles imported from England. Benjamin Franklin had chosen an apt metaphor when he observed that until the time of the Stamp Act crisis, Americans "were led by a thread."

The trappings of status concerned Copley as much as the next person and he impressed even the "emphatically well-born" (in William Dunlap's phrase) John Trumbull, who recalled their first meeting around 1772: "We found Mr. Copley dressed to receive a party of friends at dinner. I remember his dress and

appearance. An elegant looking man, dressed in a fine maroon cloth with gilt buttons. This was dazzling to my unpracticed eye!"

The banyan Copley wears in his self-portrait is apparently identical to the one in which he had depicted wealthy Boston merchant Nicholas Boylston two years earlier. Indeed, in thirteen other male portraits executed between 1767 and 1770, he or his clients chose precisely the same costume. We should not be troubled by the repetition, since portrait subjects frequently appeared in attire "borrowed" as it were, from other works usually in the service of fashion and status.

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When an artist's self-image resembles his portraits of other sitters, its self-reference is easy to overlook. In other words, we might easily imagine the Copley portrait not to be a self-portrait. It looks like other portraits of wealthy men. But when the portraitist's clientèle belongs overwhelmingly to the upper levels of society as Copley's did--and as painters themselves rarely did - we concede the point: Copley has fashioned himself a gentleman.

The same point is also made by Copley's carefully dressed and powdered hair, which he elected over the caps that men in banyans often wore on their shaved heads as they do in most portraits of that type by Copley. Whether in his self-portrait Copley wears his own hair or a wig is not easily determined. Large and elaborate wigs are obviously that. For example, the old-fashioned physical wig, a heavy frizzed type favored by merchants and professionals and here worn by *Judge Martin Howard* in a Copley portrait of 1767. Furthermore, Copley frequently represented the edge of a wig with a distinct line and sometimes a cast shadow, neither of which appear in the self-portrait.

Although evidence suggests that men at any stratum in colonial society might wear wigs, only the well-to-do had the means to wear them well. Fine wigs were expensive, troublesome, and time-consuming to maintain, and they also demanded physical poise in the wearer. Wigs began to decline in fashion around 1770 except among professional men, by which time Copley represented more of his sitters in their own hair; even then, it remained common for men to dress and powder their hair in a manner imitative of wigs.

[00:41:51.16]

In the self-portrait, Copley, in effect, hedged his bets. To show himself with a bald head in cap might have seemed excessively informal, inappropriate to his new social position. A man with a shaved head, furthermore, required a wig in public, but nothing guaranteed that he would choose a fashionable wig. Copley eliminates any possible doubt by showing himself alone among his men in banyans, in a powdered coiffure, a look that complements his expensive costume to mark him unambiguously as a gentleman.

Hanging within the Copley home, the self-portrait also, in effect, represented the newly affluent thirty-year-old as the owner of property, the traditional source of a gentleman's wealth. In the year of his marriage and probably with the resources of a dowry, Copley began to acquire property on Beacon Hill, then still substantially open country on the outskirts of Boston. And this is a black and white slide of a contemporaneous watercolor showing Copley's property which totaled about 20 acres in the upper left portion. It was a property that he purchased with a barn and three houses for £860, which was at the time a substantial sum of money. In 1771, Copley initiated an extensive remodeling of his residence, bringing the house up to fashion and adding an impressive painting room, thereby advertising the artist's taste and success to the upscale clientèle he cultivated.

Copley's immediate neighbor on Beacon Hill -- let me just go back for a second, the house of that man who you probably recognize as John Hancock is the large one at the right in this watercolor. So John Hancock here was Copley's immediate neighbor on Beacon Hill.

[00:43:51.17]

And he was at the time one of the richest men in America having recently inherited an estate valued at about £700,000. And remember I just told you that the £860 it took Copley to purchase his 20 acres with three houses was a lot of money. So £700,000 settled on John Hancock in 1764. In that same year Hancock commissioned from Copley a grand portrait of Thomas Hancock, his deceased uncle and benefactor, and this more modest one of himself. In this transaction between the portraitist and the client, it is difficult to imagine Copley showing Hancock the deference expected of an artisan, and for an example of that, we can look to shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, who recalled that as a 21-year-old shoemakers' apprentice, he was scared as he said, "almost to death" to pay a bidden visit on New Year's Day 1763 to Hancock, whose shoe he had repaired.

This was not a social visit between equals but a custom through which the working members of society, in effect, acquiesced in their own social subordination. Again we can hardly envision Copley playing that role, certainly not after his advantageous marriage in 1769.

Once more Copley's self portrait makes clear that he regarded himself as Hancock's equal as a gentleman and as a superior of many. In his fine banyan and elegant coiffure Copley appears not as producer, as he showed Paul Revere to be--and this is very unusual, the Revere portrait--not as a producer, but as a consumer, traditionally both a gentlemen's privilege and his obligations, since in that role he provided work for the common folk.

[00:45:51.09]

A worker who also consumed, and conspicuously so, Copley showed himself fully a product of his time. Following a course unimaginable before the

consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, he bought the trappings of gentle status and, through the labor he denied, fixed the image of his own leisure. As a portraitist who played an active role in his client's self-fashioning, Copley was acutely aware of the power of visual representation. Despite his own insistence on the dignity of his profession, he never risked tarnishing his carefully cultivated image by [audio gap 46:29 – 46:39] ...two paintings.

His skill in rendering materials reinforces his identification with the artisan producers of such objects and goods as he includes in his paintings. At the same time, Copley struggled with anatomy, contriving figures whose occasionally anomalous proportions counter transparency, counter the fiction that the people are before us, pulling the viewer back to the artist at his easel. Without exception, Copley's works betray work, painstaking craftsmanship and labor to which his varied sitters often attested, and we know that he could take 20 sittings just to get someone's head right. *Spretzzatura*, an Italian term signifying the gentleman's graceful ease, which was used in art criticism to signify painting that appeared effortless. This term *spretzzatura* signified something that was neither part of Copley's images nor of his image.

When flashy brushwork became a prominent measure of genius, as it certainly did in England by the late eighteenth century, artists had then at their disposal an obvious sign of difference to be flaunted in their battle over craftsmen, because they were then free from adherence to certain manual standards that governed artisan labor.

[00:48:01.23]

Thus, when a client of Gilbert Stuart's returned a picture complaining that the cravat had been painted too coarsely, Stuart sarcastically retorted that he would buy a piece of cloth of the finest texture, have it glued on the part that offends their exquisite judgment, and send it back again. It is unlikely that an artist of the 1760s or 1770s could have formulated such a retort.

What did independence for the former colonies bring American artists? William Dunlap and his triumphant *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (published in 1834) proclaimed American artists' independence, too--their freedom to succeed by virtue and talent and not according to the whims of aristocratic patrons to whom the artist was little more than a servant, or as Dunlap put it, "an appendage to my lords tailor."

Dunlap was perhaps too optimistic. A rise in status did not come as quickly as some American artists would have liked, nor did painting acquire the important position in the United States they believed it warranted. In 1800, John Trumbull decrying the indifference to the arts that even educated Americans displayed, turned the tables on Copley's lament with which I opened this talk. Remonstrating to a young man who thought to become an artist, Trumbull said,

“you have left the study of law for painting, a certainty for an uncertainty. I would sooner make a son of mine a butcher or a shoemaker, then a painter.”

Copley’s son in a certain respect fulfilled his father's longings, gaining a knighthood, and later the title Baron Lyndhurst in nineteenth-century England, to which the Copley family had fled on the eve of Revolution, never to return.

Thank you.

Any quick questions, I have to catch a cab to the airport, but if anybody has a question? Well, thank you for coming.

Total Duration: 53 Minutes

Audio file: CopleyPolitics_01_public.Mp3