

SEEING AMERICA: John Singleton Copley's *Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd*, ca. 1765

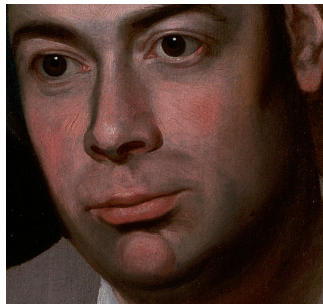
Copley's portrait of the colonial silversmith offers a view of pre-Revolutionary Bostonians: who they were and how they wanted to be seen.



John Singleton Copley (1738 – 1815)
Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd (1729 – 1777), ca. 1765
Oil on canvas
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 44.2
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

The Art

In 1765, John Singleton Copley began a portrait of Nathaniel Hurd, a successful silversmith and ornamental engraver in colonial Boston. Although it was never finished, Hurd's family carefully saved the painting. However, Copley in 1765 also painted another and quite different portrait of Nathaniel Hurd, which is now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Why the two portraits of the same subject in the same year? It was very unusual for an eighteenth-century artist to portray a man dressed in his working clothes, as in the Memorial Art Gallery (MAG) version, and Hurd may have asked Copley to do a new portrait more in keeping with his wealth and respectability as a highly successful businessman.



Normally, at this time in Europe and America, the artist would begin a portrait by painting the sitter's face and hands, as these were considered the most important parts of the likeness. This process is visible in the MAG's unfinished portrait, where Hurd's face is almost completely painted while the clothing and background remain sketchy. The gray underpainting, used to prime the canvas in order to enhance the subsequent colors, is left uncovered.



The unfinished portrait features the man in his work clothes, seated or standing at a table, his body slightly turned as he gazes off beyond the viewer. The completed face suggests much of Hurd's personality and character: the pensive expression, the rather sensual mouth, the informality of the visible shaved head, and that unexpectedly rakish hat. The hat is modeled after a Turkish turban, very popular among Boston's fashionable men, indicating intellect and capacity for creative energy and thought. The five-o'clock shadow of his shaved head suggests that Hurd did wear a wig on occasion, thus was not indifferent to the prevailing rules of proper dress. Portraying Hurd without wig, waistcoat, or tie, with his work shirt open and short sleeves revealing a bare chest and right arm, Copley has captured a sense of the engraver fully engaged in his work. Copley regularly filled his portraits with the traditional trappings of his clients' material success and status, and the other, finished portrait is in this tradition. However, in the 1760s he had begun experimenting with the form, and the MAG painting may have been a first step toward portraying his subjects in more natural settings—a direction that leads to his 1768 portrait of Paul Revere at work.

But Nathaniel Hurd the craftsman was also a very successful businessman, and chose in his other—and finished—portrait to be seen as one of Boston's prosperous elite. Dressed in a sumptuous stylish robe and sitting amidst his books rather than his tools, this Hurd stares directly at the viewer and artist. The loose fabric cap on his shaved head and the loose robe, the banyan, were popular men's fashions at that time. Based on the European fascination with Turkey, such clothing had been introduced to the colony about 1750 for use at home.

The two portraits of Nathaniel Hurd seem to tell two stories of the same man. One story, told through the props Copley paints with meticulous detail, is of a man comfortable with, and proud of, his material accomplishments. The other, of a man of thought, creativity, and sensitivity, is told chiefly through his face and its expression—a story in some ways the more eloquent for its being unfinished. Taken together, the two portraits present the colonial silversmith as a complex man, a private, hardworking artist, an enterprising businessman, a skilled craftsman, and a prosperous public citizen.



John Singleton Copley, American, 1738 – 1815
Paul Revere, 1768
 Oil on canvas
 89.22 x 72.39 cm (35 1/8 x 28 1/2 in.)
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 Gift of Joseph W. Revere, William B. Revere, and Edward H. R. Revere, 30.781



John Singleton Copley (American, 1738 – 1815)
Nathaniel Hurd, ca. 1765
 Oil on canvas
 76.2 x 64.8 cm
 The Cleveland Museum of Art
 Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust,
 1915.534

The Artist



John Singleton Copley was the premier portrait artist in America prior to the American Revolution. Among his many subjects were John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and John Adams. During this time in American history, portrait artists were not valued for their intense creativity and individuality as they are

in today's society, but rather for their ability to portray their subjects in a realistic, pleasing manner. Artists were considered tradesmen, like silversmiths or milliners. They learned their skill as in any other trade, through an apprenticeship. Copley was the favorite of Boston's upper class because his amazing portraits were both realistic and flattering.

John Singleton Copley was born on July 3, 1738, in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of immigrants recently arrived from Ireland. Young Copley began producing works of art when he was only fifteen years old. He had been trained as an engraver by his stepfather, Peter Pelham, an engraver of portrait prints, and he learned to paint by copying works from European books and studying engravings of fashionable British portraits, particularly those done by Sir Joshua Reynolds. These subjects were shown in the poses favored by English aristocrats: ladies amidst fine furniture and textured draperies, men surrounded by books and tools, hunting dogs and guns. Copley similarly set his American patrons among the clothes, pets, books, flowers, and furniture he had seen in the European prints, all symbols of the sitter's social position and personal character. The portraits were deliberately intended to associate Boston's emerging merchant class with British nobility, and John Singleton Copley was very much in demand by Boston's elite.



John Singleton Copley (1737 – 1815)
The Copley Family, 1776/1777
Andrew W. Mellon Fund, 1961.7.1
National Gallery of Art © 2009

Copley also continued the European portrait painter's process of completing the face and hands of a sitter first. But for the clothing and background the sitter's presence was not required. Copley could then spend all the time necessary for the sumptuous clothing and settings his patrons wanted in their portraits.

A master of illusion, Copley was particularly skilled in his use of cloth, which he would drape over a mannequin, and then spend hours perfecting the appearance of realism. His lustrous fabrics, meticulously rendered,

glowed with reflected surfaces, even of the flesh and hair of his prosperous sitters. This attention to detail resulted in his taking a very long time to complete a portrait; and, unlike many European artists, Copley did not have any assistants.

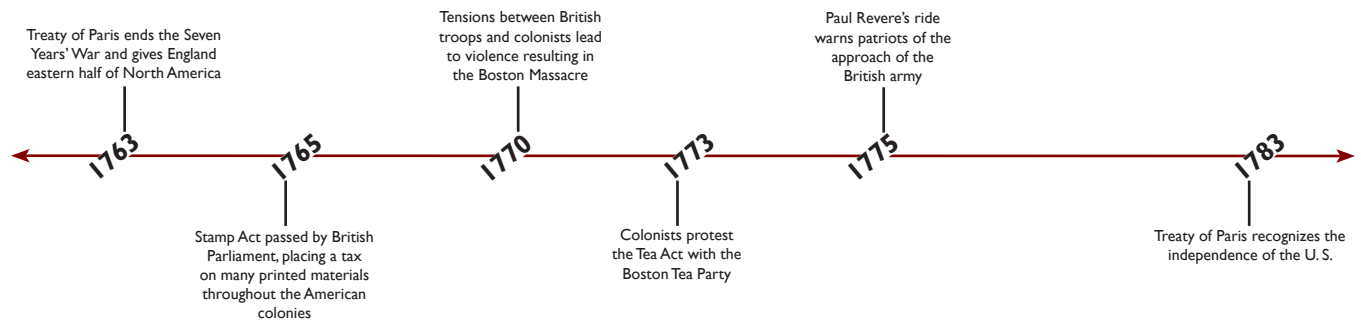
In 1769, Copley married Susanna Clarke, daughter of the British East India Company agent who would later be consigned the infamous tea shipment thrown overboard in 1773. As political conditions worsened in Boston, Copley was drawn into the disputes. His friends and clientele included Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams, but also Boston's most prominent merchant families. Encouraged by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the American expatriate, painter Benjamin West, Copley left Boston for Europe in 1774 to improve his skills and establish his reputation in a wider world. In America, he is reported to have said, painting was valued only as a useful craft.

Who was Nathaniel Hurd?

Hurd was a talented ornamental engraver whose skill and craftsmanship made him one of the most sought after silversmiths in Boston. His customers were the wealthy merchants and administrators of the colonies, the same men and women who came to Copley's studio. In 1776, at the outset of the American Revolution, Hurd's fortunes declined as many of his patrons, loyal to the English king, chose to leave Boston. Despite the loss of his customer base, Nathaniel Hurd stayed in Boston. He was not known to have actively participated in the Revolution, although he sat on the grand jury in the trial of the British soldiers for the death of Crispus Attucks, the first casualty of the Boston Massacre. Hurd's shop was very near the site of the Massacre and it is thought that he was out in the street and bumped into by one of the fleeing participants!

After taking the painter’s “obligatory” tour of Italy, he settled in London where he began a second career doing historical and religious paintings on a grand scale. Although he remained in England the rest of his life and was moderately successful, his historical paintings never had the vitality of his Boston portraits. John Singleton Copley died in London on September 9, 1815.

America



Much of what we visualize of eighteenth-century America comes through the eyes of colonial artists such as John Trumbull, Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin West, and John Singleton Copley. Portraits were particularly popular but paintings of landmark events such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the Boston Massacre were reproduced as engravings and widely distributed.

An engraving of a table titled "COINS" showing weights and values for various types of coins. The table is organized into columns for different coin types and their corresponding weights and values. The coins listed include Guinea, Half Crown, Moidore, Royal Piece, Half Crown, Pistole, and various types of silver coins like Half Lillo, Dollar, and Quarter. The values are listed in pounds, shillings, and pence.

Nathaniel Hurd (1729/30 – 1777)

Exchange Table, undated

Engraving

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society

Colonial Boston was a thriving city of some 16,000 people in the 1760s and as an international harbor, with over forty wharves, it was the busiest port in the colonies. Tea from India and the East Indies, porcelain and silks from China, and fashionable fabrics from Turkey could all be purchased in eighteenth-century Boston. To raise the currency to buy these goods, Bostonians exported rum, iron ore, fish, lumber, and other foods and provisions. To help his fellow Bostonians navigate the varied and complicated specie (gold and silver coins) involved in these transactions, Nathaniel Hurd engraved an exchange table or table of conversions with the different weights and values for the most common coins then in use.

As the colonists pressured England for more control over North American trade, the British reacted with increasingly repressive laws. Boston itself was the storm center of both British restrictions and growing colonial resistance. Colonial merchants, fishermen, and farmers had to decide whether to cooperate or to defy the new mercantile constraints.

Boston boasted of a moneyed class who lived lives of luxury and patronized local artists and craftsmen such as John Singleton Copley and Nathaniel Hurd. Commenting on his fellow Bostonians’ love for exotic—and expensive—products, Benjamin Franklin wrote:

When you incline to buy China Ware, Chinzes, India Silks, or any other of their flimsy slight manufactures; I would not be so hard with you, as to insist on your absolutely resolving against it; all I advise is, to put it off (as you do your repentance) till another Year; and this, in some respects, may prevent an occasion of repentance.

Benjamin Franklin, “Plan for Saving One Hundred Thousand Pounds,” *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1836), 90. This work has been digitized by Google.

Nathaniel Hurd and John Singleton Copley typify the colonists' dilemma. In the end, the two Bostonians chose different paths, Copley to leave and settle in England, Hurd to stay and cast his lot with his uncertain young country.

See also Marjorie B. Searl, "John Singleton Copley: Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 20–24.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you who, where and when this is?

How does knowing the title, *Unfinished Portrait of Nathaniel Hurd*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

John Singleton Copley and Gilbert Stuart were the two preeminent artists in colonial America. Like Copley, Stuart left America during the Revolution, but he returned in 1793 and opened a profitable studio near Philadelphia. Russell Sturgis was a prominent Bostonian fur and clothing merchant one generation younger than Hurd. Compare Copley's and Stuart's portraits of the two men. While there are many similarities between them, there are also interesting distinctions.



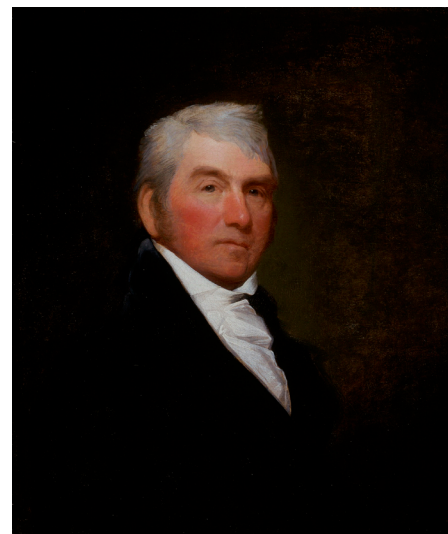
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Gilbert Stuart (1757 – 1828)

Russell Sturgis (1750 – 1826), ca. 1806

Oil on canvas

Purchased through the R.T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 41.34

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Historical portraits provide a picture of an individual and also of a time period. Compare John Singleton Copley's painting of the silversmith Nathaniel Hurd with other historical portraits. Portraits of such notable historic figures as John Hancock, John and Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin can be found at <http://www.earlyamerica.com/portraits/index.html> and the National Archives site <http://www.archives.gov/research/american-revolution/pictures/#portrait>. Unlike today's photographs, painted portraits are expensive and take the artist and the sitter a long time. Who would have his or her life recorded by a portrait painter? What is the purpose of the portrait? Who arranged for it to be painted? Where was the painting to be displayed? Who chooses the details included in the painting? How is the painting affected by the values and styles of the time?

Making Connections and Drawing Conclusions

Nathaniel Hurd's *Exchange Table* is evidence of Boston's extensive global trading networks. Specie exchanged in Boston included:

- Guinea:** English gold coin valued at 21 shillings or 4 crowns
- Moidore:** Portuguese gold coin
- Dubloon:** Spanish gold coin
- Pistole:** Gold coin from Spain (Pistole was also the French name)
- Johannes Joe or Jo:** Portuguese gold coin
- Crown:** English silver coin bearing the figure of a crown and worth 5 shillings
- Dollar:** New silver coin introduced by George III and worth 4 shillings nine pence

What products did the colonists buy from England and other mercantile nations?

GOLD COINS			SILVER COINS		
COINS	Weights	Value	COINS	Weights	Value
Guinea	0.5.9	21.0.0	Engl Crown	0.19.8 1/2	2.10.0
Half D.	2.16 1/2	3.5.0	Half Ditto	9.16 1/2	1.5.0
Moidore	6.2.2	13.10.0	Dollar	17.12	2.5.0
Half D.	3.11	6.15.0	Half Ditto	8.18	1.2.6
Dubloon	17.8	33.0.0	Quarter D.	4.9	11.3
Half D.	8.16	16.10.0			
Pistole	4.8	8.5.0			
Half D.	2.4	4.2.6			
Spanish Pistole	18.10	36.0.0			
Spanish Pistole	9.5	18.0.0			
Half D.	4.14 1/2	9.0.0			
Quarter D.	2.7 1/4	4.10.0			

Nathaniel Hurd (1729/30 – 1777)

Exchange Table, undated

Engraving

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society

Exploring the Context

John Adams wrote of Copley's portraits, "You can scarcely help discoursing with them, asking questions and receiving answers."! The artist's choices of pose, facial expression, clothing, accessories and the setting all help to tell a story. What would you like to talk about with Nathaniel Hurd?

"John Copley: Painter by Necessity," <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171865466,00.html> (accessed November 2009).

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