Copley in Colonial America

The latter half of the 18th century was doubtless a watershed era in American history, one characterized by mounting political and social tensions between a massive European empire and its New World colonies. The resulting Revolution marked an awkward coming-of-age for the British subjects in America, as colonists sorted out their conflicting loyalties, struggled with forming their own cultural identity, and ultimately founded a nation independent from – but nonetheless modeled after – its former mother country. No artist’s career better exemplifies the anxiety and uncertainties of the time than Copley’s, despite his desire to remain wholly neutral and paint sitters of both nationalities.

Born to Irish parents in Boston, Massachusetts, Copley honed his artistic ability without the advantage of formal training. Copley’s stepfather was a noted printmaker, and thus as a youth he learned his craft by painting copies of European engravings; in addition to studying the portraits of Boston-area artists such as Smibert and Robert Feke, this was the only means by which Copley could foster his love of, and talent for, art. Though the colonies were meant to be virtual echoes of the homeland, they were still fledgling
settlements and no official art academies yet existed for the benefit of these early American artists.

Copley quickly surpassed his colonial contemporaries in skill, detailing his subjects with precise clarity and mastering qualities of texture, light, and the illusion of depth. While he produced historical and mythological paintings during his career, Copley was most celebrated for his portraiture, his sitters rendered less stiffly and more naturalistically than those of American artists past.

His technical talent and gift for subtlety can be seen in Boy with a Squirrel (Henry Pelham) of 1765, a portrait of the artist’s half-brother that Copley intended to showcase his artistic finesse. Henry sits daydreaming, his poise elegant and relaxed as he absent-mindedly toys with the leash of a pet squirrel. In eighteenth-century portraiture, the sitter’s surroundings were often as imperative to visualize as the painting’s human subject; note the polished mahogany tabletop, golden chain, glossy curtain swag, and myriad textures of the boy’s outfit. Here Copley stresses the sumptuous tactile surfaces and bold colors of luxurious materials as visual allusions to status and wealth. Furthermore, the mahogany wood and water glass also serve as tools for Copley to highlight his dexterity in painting reflections, a talent he exercised again in his 1768 Portrait of Paul Revere.

Copley shipped Boy with a Squirrel to England only to find that his London-based contemporaries deemed his obsessive attention to detail too excessive; Joshua Reynolds criticized its “over minuteness,” and fellow American Benjamin West judged it to be “too line-y” (a rather comical statement in light of West’s own hard-edged linear style). As much as Copley wished to test the waters for a career abroad, he could not fully mimic the more painterly techniques of the English-school painters. One visual inclusion nods directly to his colonial upbringing: the squirrel, long an emblem symbolic of diligence and patience, is in Copley’s painting a species native to eastern America.

Text by Meg Floryan