

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON 25 DC • REpublic 7-4215 extension 247

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WASHINGTON, D.C., May 11, 1962: John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today that "the most important group portrait by an American artist" has been acquired by the Gallery and will go on exhibition today, in honor of the visit by Mrs. John F. Kennedy and His Excellency André Malraux, French Minister of State for Cultural Affairs.

The picture, The Copley Family by John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), was acquired with the Gallery's purchase fund, and will be put on temporary exhibition just off the Rotunda on the main floor. This is the first time that a newly acquired painting has been exhibited in this place. "The lobby where we hung our new Fragonard last fall," Mr. Walker said, "turned out to be too small for the crowds that came to see it."

A monumental canvas measuring over six feet high by seven and one-half feet wide, the picture is a portrait of his own family by the man who is widely considered America's greatest artist of the colonial period. The seven figures represented include Copley's own self-portrait, as well as a portrait of his father-in-law, the prominent Boston merchant, Richard Clarke, who was one of the consignees of the tea in the Boston Tea Party incident of 1773. Among the children is John Singleton Copley, Jr., who was later to become three times Chancellor of England, receiving the title of Lord Lyndhurst.

Painted in 1776, the picture has never been out of the possession of the Copley family until its recent acquisition for the Nation.

The occasion for the picture was the reunion of the artist with his family after a separation of almost two years. Copley had left his family in Boston in 1774 to further his artistic training in Italy, and began the picture shortly after re-joining them in London in December of 1775.

Historically, the picture represents the first time Copley attempted a pure group portrait; prior to this he had never put

(more)

more than two people into a single canvas. It marks a turning point in the artist's development, being one of the first pictures to show the influence of his studies outside the colonies. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1777.

"Unlike most portraits, which are done to please a paying patron," Mr. Walker said, "Copley's portrait of his own family is a labor of love. Particularly the children have been painted with an intimacy and a tenderness that few artists not painting their own family have ever achieved. The canvas is painted with marvelous fluency and warmth, without sacrificing, however, any of the Yankee realism that Copley had learned on American soil."

A key to the people portrayed in the picture is attached.

End.

Color transparencies, separations, and black and white glossy photographs on request.

People Portrayed in The Copley Family

John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) - to left, above, holding papers; the artist of the portrait.

Richard Clarke (1711-1795) - seated to left. Loyalist and wealthy Boston merchant, one of the consignees of tea that figured in the Boston Tea Party of 1773. The artist's father-in-law, who lived with the Copley family in London from 1775 until his death.

Susannah Copley (1776-1785) - on Richard Clarke's lap. Copley's first child born in England. Died of scarlet fever at the age of nine.

Elizabeth Clarke Copley (1770-1866) - standing in center. In 1800 she married Gardiner Greene of Boston, and it was her daughter, Martha, who married Charles Amory of Boston who brought the painting to the United States in 1864. Up to that time the portrait had hung in the Copley home in London.

John Singleton Copley, Jr. (1772-1863) - his arm around his mother's neck. Later Lord Lyndhurst and Lord Chancellor of England.

Mrs. John Singleton Copley (died 1836) - Born Susannah Farnum Clarke; known as "Sukey." Married John Singleton Copley in 1769.

Mary Copley (1773-1868) - lying on sofa to right. Never married, devoting her life to her mother and brother. Died at the age of 95.

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The Copley Family, by John Singleton Copley

American (1738-1815)

National Gallery of Art, Purchase Fund
Andrew W. Mellon Gift

(Canvas, 72-1/2" x 90-7/16")

Most portraits are commissioned. John Singleton Copley's portrait of his own family is obviously a labor of love. It hung in the room in which his son (the little boy in the picture with his arm around his mother's neck) died in 1863. Since then it has come down through Copley's family in Boston, Massachusetts, until acquired recently to be enjoyed as the inheritance of all Americans in the country's National Gallery of Art.

The picture was begun shortly after Copley was reunited with his family following an absence of almost two years. Mrs. Copley had remained in Boston with her father and four children when the artist left for Italy in 1774 to further his artistic training. As the storm-clouds of the impending Revolution grew darker, it was considered safer for the family to move before war broke out. In May of 1775 Mrs. Copley, her father, and the three children considered old enough to make the voyage set sail to join a colony of Americans in London. By the end of that year, 1775, Copley arrived in London to join them, and soon

afterwards, with his family safe around him, began work on the portrait.

Standing with draughtsman's paper in hand, the artist himself looks out at us with a smile in his eyes. Just below is his father-in-law, the prominent Boston merchant, Richard Clarke, who had been one of the consignees of the tea in the Boston Tea Party incident of 1773. On his lap is little Susanna, born after the family's arrival in London, holding her coral-handled, silver-gilt christening rattle. Standing in the center is Elizabeth, the eldest child. Between her and her mother is John Singleton Copley, Jr., who was to stay in London, and to become three times Chancellor of England and received the title of Lord Lyndhurst. On the cushion at the far right is Mary, who never married, and lived on to the age of 95.

John Singleton Copley, born on the Boston waterfront of humble origins in 1738, is widely considered America's greatest artist of the colonial period. The Copley Family represents the first time he attempted a pure group portrait; prior to this he had never put more than two people into a single canvas. The picture is on a monumental scale, measuring over six by seven-and-one-half feet. It marks a turning-point in the

artist's development, being one of his first pictures to show the influence of his studies outside the colonies. Although the concern with strict realism that had marked his early work remains, the picture shows a new freedom, fluency and warmth. This can be seen particularly in the representation of the children, who are portrayed with an intimacy and a tenderness that few artists not painting their own family have ever achieved.