

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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## COPLEY MASTERPIECE EXAMINED

### IN NATIONAL GALLERY FOCUS EXHIBITION

Washington, D.C. -- Watson and the Shark (1778), John Singleton Copley's dramatic painting of a real-life adventure, is the focus of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art exploring the picture's intriguing historical origins. John Singleton Copley's Watson and the Shark is on view in the West Building from January 17 to April 11, 1993.

Among the most popular works of art in the Gallery's collection, the painting will be joined by Copley's most important known versions of the subject -- one in a similar grand, horizontal format from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a smaller, vertical rendition from the Detroit Institute of Arts. Also in the show are five of the artist's preparatory drawings, his oil study Head of a Negro, and six engravings that Copley may have consulted as inspiration for the painting.

"Watson and the Shark is the latest in the Gallery's series of focus exhibitions illuminating important works of art in our collection," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery. "It brings together for the first time the major oil paintings and several studies for this legendary masterpiece that has fascinated generations of adults, children, and scholars."

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America's leading colonial artist, Copley (1738-1815) was an established portrait painter in Boston by the late 1750s, numbering among his eminent sitters Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams. In 1774 the artist left Boston for London. He traveled and studied painting in Italy for a year before settling permanently in London in 1775 on the eve of the American Revolution.

Watson and the Shark was the first large-scale history painting that Copley created abroad. Commissioned by Brook Watson, a wealthy merchant and one-time Lord Mayor of London, the picture dramatically portrays the moment in Watson's youth when he was attacked by a shark while swimming in Havana harbor, an incident resulting in the loss of part of his right leg.

Copley drew upon classical sources in his heroic portrayal of a man caught between life and death. While the painting recalls Renaissance pyramidal geometries in its arrangement, its animated, spotlighted figures and strong diagonal accents infuse the painting with a modern, romantic tension.

Shown at the 1778 Royal Academy exhibition in London, Watson and the Shark is a critical work in American art historical studies as well as the focus of numerous recent intriguing interpretations. The existence of two closely similar paintings, both measuring six by seven-and-a-half feet; the presence in the composition of a single black man; the suggestion of several allegorical interpretations of the imagery, including possible allusions to the War of Independence and slavery, have lent

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an aura of unresolved mystery to the meaning and purpose of  
Watson and the Shark.

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art in cooperation with the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., curator of American and British paintings, is coordinating curator for the Gallery. Ellen G. Miles, curator of painting and sculpture at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, is guest curator and author of the exhibition brochure.

The show premiered at the Detroit Institute of Arts before arriving at the National Gallery. It also will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from May 13 to August 1, 1993.

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