

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

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JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY'S BRILLIANT CAREER  
IN ENGLAND HIGHLIGHTED AT NATIONAL GALLERY  
WITH MASTERWORKS OF PORTRAITURE AND HISTORY PAINTING

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- American John Singleton Copley, well known as the finest portraitist of the colonial era, followed this achievement with another long and successful painting career in England. John Singleton Copley in England, on view in the National Gallery of Art's West Building October 11, 1995 - January 7, 1996, presents forty-one masterpieces of history painting and portraiture that helped establish Copley as one of the foremost painters of the era.

The exhibition is made possible by Republic National Bank of New York, Safra Republic Holdings, S.A., and Banco Safra, S.A., Brazil.

"Although Copley is more often recognized for his colonial portraits, in England he made pivotal contributions to contemporary history painting. As with his fellow American Benjamin West, Copley's considerable talent and ambition brought him well deserved international recognition," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery.

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copley...page two

"We are proud to sponsor John Singleton Copley in England and honor the work of this great American artist," said Walter H. Weiner, chairman of the board and chief executive officer, Republic National Bank of New York. "With this sponsorship, Republic continues its longstanding commitment to bring arts and culture of the highest quality to audiences from around the world." This is the seventh exhibition to be sponsored by Republic National Bank of New York at the National Gallery.

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where it will be seen February 4 - April 28, 1996. It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Copley (1738-1815) abandoned a highly successful portrait-painting business when he left America in 1774. He acted on his longstanding desire to pursue artistic goals abroad as the impending struggle between the colonies and England threatened to disrupt the art market. Largely self-taught, Copley had surpassed the paintings and painters in his native Boston; to advance he needed to study the works of the old masters, which he knew only from engraved reproductions. Also, he objected to what he saw as the limitations on painting in colonial America, and complained that painting was thought of like "any other usefull trade...like that of a Carpenter or shew maker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World."

-more-

copley...page three

After more than a year in Rome sketching classical art and studying Renaissance and baroque masterpieces, Copley settled in London and reunited with his family. In 1777 he exhibited at the Royal Academy The Copley Family, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art. It was his most ambitious and complex group portrait and his largest painting up to that time, intended to announce his abilities as a portrait painter in England. The realism of the faces and skillful representation of fabrics are still typical of Copley's American style, but the brushwork is more varied, from thickly brushed passages to transparent glazes. Copley's portraits remained an important source of income for him in England.

It was his dramatic depiction of a contemporary event, the rescue of a young English merchant seaman from a shark attack in Havana harbor, that established Copley's reputation in England. Watson and the Shark (1778), also in the National Gallery collection, helped to broaden, popularize, and redefine history painting by transforming an episode in the life of an ordinary man into a parable of salvation.

The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781 (1783), from the Tate Gallery, London, is the centerpiece of the exhibition. On January 6, 1781, twenty-four year old Major Francis Peirson, who was leading a counterattack against French troops invading Jersey in the English Channel, was killed at the moment of his victory.

-more-

copley...page four

In a departure from the usual idealized image, Copley combined reportorial accuracy with the drama of traditional history painting. In so doing, he opened the way to a new conception of the genre that would have repercussions throughout nineteenth-century art.

Curators for John Singleton Copley in England are Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., curator of American and British paintings and deputy senior curator of paintings, and Franklin Kelly, curator of American and British paintings, National Gallery of Art; with Emily Ballew Neff, assistant curator of American paintings and sculpture, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. William Pressly, eighteenth-century British painting expert and professor, University of Maryland, serves as advisor. A fully illustrated catalogue, published by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, includes an essay on Copley's English career by Pressly and one focusing on The Death of Major Peirson by Neff.

Previous exhibitions at the National Gallery sponsored by Republic National Bank include An American Perspective: Nineteenth-Century Art from the Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr. (1981), Renaissance Master Bronzes from the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (1986), Berthe Morisot: Impressionist (1987), Frans Hals (1989), Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration (1991), and Cesarini Venus (1993).

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copley...page five

The National Gallery of Art, located at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For general information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), weekdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at (202) 842-6176. For information on visitor services, call (202) 842-6690, weekdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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