

The Making of a History Painting – The Process of John Singleton Copley

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Background

Copley had seemingly always been slightly disparaging of the American art scene. As early as 1767, Copley was complaining about the painting in America, claiming it was regarded as merely “a useful trade...like that of a Carpenter, Tailor or shoemaker, not one of the most nodal arts in the world” and his growing dissatisfaction with “preserving the resemblance of particular persons”. He hoped to leave his successful Boston art career feeling American art to be distinctly stuffy and limited, and longing for the honour of being a highly regarded history painter. It was this dream that led him across the Atlantic to pursue these lofty ambitions in England, where he immersed himself in the works of the high renaissance, notably those of Titian and other Venetian masters. He frequently wrote to his half-brother, artist Henry Pelham, attempting to decode their materials and techniques, before his own foray into more ambitious multi-person history paintings with these masters as inspiration, such as *Watson and the Shark* (1778), *The Death of Chatham* (1781), and *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1787).



Smithsonian, National Portrait Gallery, John Singleton Copley, Oil on Canvas

Tate, *Death of Chatham*, Oil on Canvas



Copley's Process for Depicting History

One thing that sets apart Copley's history paintings from his other works is the time he dedicated to creating them as well as the level of preparation that he utilised. While many of his portraits have extensive pentimenti, such as *Thomas Hancock* (1758), including changes to positioning and background made very late in the paintings process, his history paintings have significantly less changes, many of which are almost unnoticeable within IRR images. This is bolstered by the number of preparatory sketches and paintings he employed with works like *Death of Chatham*, and *Siege of Gibraltar*, as well as the comparative time he spent working on these paintings. *Death of Chatham* took up the majority of 1779-80, and there were six years between Copley being commissioned for *Siege of Gibraltar* and its completion.



Studies for *Death of Chatham*, chalk on paper, via John Singleton Copley II, Jules Prown

Richard Brocklesby, Oil on canvas, Ella Cook

Preparatory paintings for *Siege of Gibraltar*, oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums

Preparatory Sketches

Copley's first step for history paintings such as *Death of Chatham* is to create a rough colour sketch. While the original sketch created for *Death of Chatham* was never identified with most found preparatory works being colourless it was described by a contemporary as “a sketch in colours, representing Lord C in the unfortunate moment ... which comprises of fifty-six different figures, all executed in a masterly manner”. These were then followed by in depth studies from models experimenting with positioning, as well as portraits of the subjects in black and white chalk, for which he oddly uses a straight line to note the individuals' facial dimensions. This is consistent with other sketches.

Painting Experimentation

The third stage of Copley's process of creating a history painting involves the creation of oil paintings depicting figures involved in the historical events. These are less consistent than his preparatory sketches which follow the same format of facial studies with dimensions and pose experimentation. These may appear as completed paintings, with many being sold as commissions and residing in private collections. Others have a more experimental, sketch-like format, depicting different iterations of the same individual on one canvas, with changes in pose and visible line work, such is the case in the painting studies for *Siege of Gibraltar*, or the incomplete portrait *Nathaniel Hurd*.