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WOMEN OF COPLEY'S BOSTON

Changing Gender Roles on the Eve of the American Revolution

MARIA LAGORIO

IN THE TIME PERIOD SURROUNDING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, SOCIAL ROLES FOR WOMEN EVOLVED ALONGSIDE THE POLITICAL GAINS MADE BY THE COLONIES. NO LONGER RESTRICTED TO THE DOMESTIC REALM, AMERICAN WOMEN BECAME INTEGRAL TO THE SUCCESS OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, WINNING RESPECT IN TERMS OF MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, EDUCATION, AND EVEN BUSINESS. AS ALL CITIZENS RECOGNIZED THEIR OBLIGATIONS TO THE REPUBLIC, REPUBLICAN MOTHERHOOD EMERGED, CHALLENGING WOMEN TO EDUCATE THEMSELVES IN ORDER TO RAISE COMPETENT CHILDREN. WITH A FINE EYE TO THE PAST, ONE CAN SEE THEIR SOCIAL PROGRESS DOCUMENTED IN THE PORTRAITURE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED COLONIAL PAINTER, JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY. DURING HIS RESIDENCY IN BOSTON, COPLEY PAINTED THE PORTRAITS OF HUNDREDS OF WOMEN. WHILE MANY OF HIS SUBJECTS HAILED FROM THE UPPER CLASS, A SELECT FEW REPRESENT THE SMALL DEMOGRAPHIC OF SELF-MADE WOMEN. AS A WHOLE, A STUDY OF COPLEY'S PORTRAITURE OF BOSTONIAN WOMEN PROVIDES AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE OF HOW WOMEN PROJECTED THEMSELVES IN THE PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTIONARY ERA.

In 1771, three years before acclaimed American portraitist John Singleton Copley left the revolutionary fervor of his home in Boston for Great Britain, he sat in his studio at a blank canvas with a curious scene before his eyes. His model, lounging on the rich red sofa in front of him, was a beautiful young woman. She held a crinkled piece of paper in her hand and slight circles surrounded her deep-set, almond eyes. Both of these physical qualities indicated her intimidating intellectuality in a time when other women rarely read. He struggled to portray in paint all of the aberrant inner traits she exuded in person: wisdom, sensuality, and confidence. Though Copley was perhaps the most talented and popular artist in the colonies during the American Revolution he presented quite an anomaly.

While Copley had previously painted countless portraits of “ladies,” a term frequently used by colonists to describe women, this portrait of a visually self-sufficient woman would alone bear the distinguished title, *Portrait of a Lady*. Of Copley’s approximately 250 “sitters”—the name given to people that pose in a portrait—during the entirety of his American career, from roughly 1760 to 1774, women comprised nearly half (45 percent), and just in the years from 1762 to 1764, women made up two-thirds of his sitters.ⁱ Prior to this particular portrait done in 1771, Copley had captured the likenesses of commissioners’ daughters, young wives, older matriarchs, and widows. In typical colonial-era portraiture, according to historian Deborah I. Prosser, painters depicted the visual identity of women in contrast to that of the men who appeared next to them, either immediately on the same canvas or in matching paired portraits.ⁱⁱ This “lady” appeared alone and instead expressed an individualized sense of identity; she was a lady unto herself.

Copley frequently featured men in individualized, realistic scenes, surrounded by props that related to their lives. He painted men in action, working at their desks, poised to write with quill in hand. Women, conversely, often appeared at the men’s side as beautiful accessories or as figures that fulfilled common 18th-century stereotypes, such

as the ideal wife or mother.ⁱⁱⁱ An astonishing 35 percent of all of Copley’s American subjects were housewives.^{iv} These statistics, in addition to an understanding of the context and content of Copley’s American portraiture, reveal much about the condition of women during the time of the American Revolution.

As the 18th century approached its close and as the Revolution gained momentum, Copley and many other Americans noticed a shift in attitudes about women. Many citizens in the burgeoning republic applied the same ideologies that spurred the American Revolution—democracy, equality, and independence—to the traditional social order. As a result, new doors for American women slowly opened. Colonial women did not actively seek a complete social revolution to ensure equal rights and independence, but they did reach beyond their domestic realm, gain respect as moral agents, and earn themselves rightful roles in the new nation.

The majority of citizens, for instance, eventually considered mothers as the ethical educators of children who would become the next generation of participants in the democratic republic. As historian Lisa Kerber argues, this newfound responsibility, which she termed “Republican Motherhood,” called for mothers to educate themselves.^v Moreover, those involved and affected by the Revolution placed virtue above all personal traits, which led colonists to believe that “a virtuous man needs a virtuous mate,” and that “public good must grow out of private virtue,” according to historian Jan Lewis.^{vi} Consequently, the pervasive sentiment of equality found its way into American marriages after the Revolution, and married men and women began to enjoy more mutual partnerships. Each relatively small step toward women’s equality during the American Revolution advanced American society at large toward the greater goal of true equality for all.

Not surprisingly, these small steps are often evident in Copley’s portraiture of women at the time. However, it is important to note that he produced all of his American por-

traiture before his departure in 1774, which was before the colonies defeated the Mother Country and British troops finally evacuated in 1776.^{vii} A study of Copley's portraiture of colonial women, then, can only reveal the condition of and attitudes toward women in the mid-to-late 18th century, before and during the social shift that some contend accompanied the American Revolution. Furthermore, as men almost always commissioned portraits, women in 18th-century America did not control their depiction in portraiture.^{viii} Also, portraits are a product of visual perspectives and are susceptible to the prejudice of the painters, commissioners, and sitters. Nonetheless, portraiture provides an excellent tool to learn about the social condition of women during this era because it served as the sole means to capture a realistic likeness in the 18th century.

Those featured in colonial American portraiture, however, reflect a very small segment of the fledgling nation's population. Most of Copley's commissioners belonged to the upper class and constituted an overwhelmingly white, wealthy, privileged, and socially-connected minority, including Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock. Throughout Copley's entire career in America, 53 percent of his commissioners had incomes that one historian terms "high" or "very high" (which meant estimated incomes of £500-1,000 and over £1,000, respectively).^{ix} After 1765, after about a decade of steadily increasing his prices, 90 percent of Copley's patrons belonged to the "very high" income category.^x On average, a painting cost fourteen guineas, which would cost even a skilled artisan like silversmith Revere nine weeks' wages.^{xi}

The majority of Copley's commissioners, though, were not skilled artisans. In fact, merchants—commonly considered the elite of the colonial community—composed most of Copley's clientele at a whopping 55 percent, though these men made up a mere 16 percent of the population of Boston, the city where Copley and most of his sitters lived.^{xii} In fact, among male sitters, Copley painted five times as many merchants as the next most popular occupational group, ministers and government officials. The dis-

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proportionate number of merchants is evidence of the disparate cultures and wide gaps between social classes in the wealthy waterfront city of Boston at the time of the Revolution.

In order to interpret the content of Copley's portraiture, it is first necessary to understand the context in which it was created. For most of his American career, Copley lived and worked in Boston, the wealthiest port city of the time and the birthplace of revolutionary patriotism. Over half of Copley's sitters hailed from Boston, and 80 percent resided in the colony of Massachusetts.^{xiv} Citizens of Boston in the 18th century lived within the confines of a social hierarchy based on wealth and property ownership. By 1771, 80 percent of the commercial shiploads in Boston belonged to those who made up just the top quarter of the population.^{xv} Probably fewer than 75 people, as historian Benjamin L. Carp points out, owned the majority of wharfage in Boston.^{xvi} The economic elite of the city, including the traders and merchants, depended greatly on trade with the Mother Country to perpetuate their prosperity and lifestyle. They often mingled with imperial officeholders, and they

also enjoyed authority within the local militia and government.^{xvii}

The most privileged people in America turned to Copley, the most prolific, prosperous, and sought-after painter at the time. He painted one portrait every two weeks^{xviii} for those fortunate Americans who had extra money to spare on investments such as portraits, which had no residual market value.^{xix} Moreover, Copley's own life reflected that of his clientele. As a well-connected, born-and-bred Bostonian, he did not venture far out of his social circle when he married Susannah Farnum Clarke ("Sukey") in 1769, the daughter of a successful Boston merchant.^{xx} His mother was a financially self-sufficient "she-merchant," or woman retailer, who held shop in Boston's Long Wharf.^{xxi} Both his in-laws and his mother remained loyal to the Crown throughout the Revolution, a sentiment that sometimes concerned Copley, who tried to stay publicly neutral throughout his American career. Historian Jules David Prown writes that Copley felt torn between his family's Loyalist inclinations and his commissioners' Patriotism: "He found himself cast in the role of mediator between his merchant in-laws and the radical revolutionaries."^{xxii} Finally, on June 10, 1774, Copley departed for England, and the rest of his family, including his wife and four young children, joined him the next year.^{xxiii} Copley never returned to America, a wise choice that later, according to Prown, "enabled him to refute any charges of Toryism."^{xxiv} A prolific collection of published letters between Copley and various acquaintances reveals how much his contemporaries esteemed him. A 1768 letter from Benjamin West, a well-known English artist at the time and Copley's friend, sings accolades and adoration for Copley. He praised Copley's artwork and applauded a recent exhibition of it in London. West raved: "The length to which you have advanced in the Art of Painting shows the High light you hold that noble art in . . ."^{xxv} Furthermore, West compared Copley to "the living masters" of Italy (probably referring to contemporary Italian artists like Giacomo Amiconi or Francesco Zuccarelli), among whom, he assured Copley, "you may not meet with a rival."^{xxvi} West's unabashed ad-

miration for Copley, as expressed in this letter and in others like it demonstrates the impact Copley had during his lifetime in the world of art, both in America and Europe. Copley, described by Lovell as a "ruthless empiricist," reportedly spent an average of 90 hours on one painting, far more than the estimated seven hours less prestigious portraitists of the time period spent on their work.^{xxvii} Copley's dogged professionalism and resolute work ethic made his artwork even more appealing and valuable to upper-class Americans.

Furthermore, Copley depended on word-of-mouth marketing to attract clients; upscale artists of this time period did not advertise, for their upper class targets viewed such a practice as unprofessional and lowly.^{xxviii} Consequently, Copley's Boston patrons consisted of a circle of elites that all knew one another and were often kin. In fact, over a period of 25 years, approximately 80 percent of Copley's clientele belonged to the same 28 family trees.^{xxix} It is no wonder, then, that Copley was never at a loss for work during his residency in America, for the families of his regular and loyal customers were constantly growing and changing.

Since the early 1750s, Copley could always count on loyal clientele who were almost all men to commission portraits, which often featured women. Many male commissioners hired Copley to portray them as commanding, authoritative, and noble. In contrast, women often appeared as spectacles on the side, especially in earlier portraits produced in the 1760s. Women acted as dazzling accessories next to men, showing off the patriarch's possessions. Wives dutifully sat alongside their commanding and accomplished husbands to accentuate the men's authority. Young brides posed as the archetypes of beauty and virtue covered in frilly white wrappings. In the years leading up to the colonies' gradual revolt against the Crown, portraiture of upper-class women adhered to these popular stereotypes.

As the Revolution approached, however, the tables turned slightly in women's favor. Educated women like the sitter in *Portrait of a Lady* (1771) posed by themselves and pro-

jected their own self-image. Family scenes became popular as a result of a newfound shift in popular attitudes towards dynamics within the nuclear family. These scenes often exalted the mother as the central figure in the compositions. Additionally, some women even paid for their own portraits, such as financially autonomous “she-merchants” and widows.^{xxx} In the majority of Copley’s portraits, the demeaning perceptions of women were portrayed through the canvas. In some rare examples, however, the sitters enjoyed the most freedom to express their own self-images, and this considerable social autonomy is evident in their depictions on canvas.

tic likeness of all his sitters. Thus, the term “realism” only applies to Copley’s portraits of men in the time of the American Revolution. If one examines his range of portraiture in depth, it is obvious that he used a different approach for painting women.

Upon study, it seems that Copley’s sitters belonged to a land far-removed from the Revolution, where luxury, beauty, and image were valued more than democracy, fraternity, and equality. Some historians, like T.H. Breen, argue that Americans with disposable incomes communicated perceptions of status via items of everyday material culture and took part in a consumer revolution, which “pro-

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Scholars like historian Margaretta M. Lovell tend to regard Copley as a realist and even see his work as the beginning of a three-century tradition of realism in American painting.^{xxxii} To be sure, he painted men in biographical settings engaged in their actual work, usually at their desks with logical instruments like quills in their hands. Portraits portraying women, however, often ended up improved, modified, “Stronger, and more Perfect,” as an 18th-century century art manual instructed painters to make their subjects.^{xxxiii} Women sitters for Copley typically posed in anonymous dark settings, wearing costumes from another era, and glowing with creamy white skin and unnaturally red cheeks. They often have empty, idle hands, and sometimes they hold or reach for fruit or flowers, items which many art historians argue symbolize women’s multiple roles as nurturers in the garden and at home.^{xxxiii} The omnipresence of such unrealistic props in Copley’s portraiture of women shows that he did not intend to portray a realis-

vided a common framework of experience.”^{xxxiv} Despite some of his sitters’ patriotic sentiments, Americans of the upper class embraced a decidedly Anglophilic style that shows up through the type of clothing, make-up, hair, and poses. Upper-class colonial Americans thus created their own subculture—a safe haven distant from the reality of revolution—by surrounding themselves with items denoting luxury.

Colonists frequently commissioned portraiture during the time of the American Revolution to mark life-changing achievements. These pivotal transitions often involved the families and included such events as births, new jobs, and, most often, marriage. Lovell argues that patriarchs commissioned portraits at such pivotal times because they marked the movement of “family substance—that is, money—between generations or along the line of inheritance.”^{xxxv} Marriage was an occasion that particularly called

for a portrait of the bride-to-be. In the 18th century, women viewed marriage as “the defining life event”, Lovell asserts, “whereas men had a wider lexicon of achievement.”^{xxxvi} Thus, Copley frequently captured images of young women on the verge of wifehood, but never painted a portrait of a man soon to wed.

The portrait of *Mary Turner Sargent (Mrs. Daniel Sargent)* (1763) represents one such painting commissioned to cele-

Similar to the women in her family who had posed for marriage portraits in the past, Sargent appears as the archetypal young bride. She radiates the ideal feminine characteristics of an 18th-century woman of the upper class: refined, graceful, and virtuous.

Copley used a number of artistic techniques to portray these inner qualities. The blush on her cheeks, for example, suggests female virtue. In many popular British novels of the day—ones that literate, upper-class women like

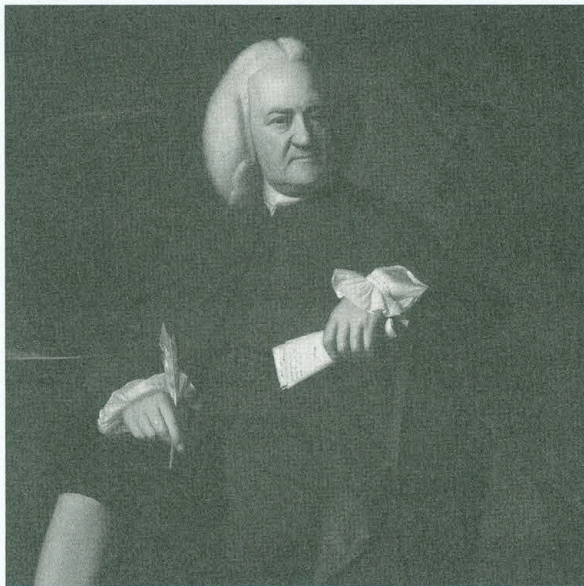


FIGURE 1. JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, EZEKIEL GOLDTHWAIT (1771)



FIGURE 2. JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, MRS. EZEKIEL GOLDTHWAIT (ELIZABETH LEWIS) (1771)

brate the sitter’s entrance into her new life as a wife. Sargent, who posed for this portrait on the eve of her wedding, came from a well-connected, established, and prosperous family.^{xxxvii} Predictably, she married into a similar one, for both the Turners and the Sargents were among Copley’s most loyal and regular patrons. In fact, six members of her family and seven from her husband’s family commissioned portraits from him in the years between 1758 and 1774.^{xxxviii} When Sargent posed for Copley, she most likely already knew how the portrait would turn out.

Sargent read—authors frequently described female protagonists with pink cheeks, “the most becoming clothing and best ornament of a woman.”^{xxxix} Thus, painters like Copley utilized the socially accepted connection between the blush and the feminine ideal as symbolism to communicate desired messages in his portraits of women.

In addition, Sargent’s body language depicts her place in the society of colonial Boston. She stands with impeccable posture, her notably long neck aligned with her torso and

her left hand resting delicately on her hip. Her stance signifies the buoyant pride with which she carried herself, but she looks humbly to the side and slightly down. Sargent's body language, simultaneously confident and modest, indicates her social status as a woman of gentility.^{xi} Even her adornments show high status, for the stomach-skimming, breast-lifting, elegant corset she wears beneath her dress creates lines down her torso and denotes refinement.^{xii} Her dress of heavy blue silk came either from continental Europe or Asia, and undoubtedly cost a fortune, since such fabrics were either heavily taxed or smuggled.^{xiii} The fact that Sargent models such a valuable commodity suggests to the viewer that she, as well, has value and intrinsic worth. Portraiture not only functioned as a visual reminder of important moments within the immediate family sphere, but also served to preserve the likeness of sitters for generations. In Lovell's words, portraiture can sometimes bring "the sitter into the presence of the viewer."^{xliii} Thus, many 18th-century commissioners hired painters so that their images would transcend time and serve as physical reminders for onlookers. Furthermore, commissioners instructed Copley to portray them as commanding figures to assert the "old money" mercantilist authority in the face of the new laboring population. Various visual cues—props, poses, and settings—all coalesce to transmit messages, and in most of Copley's portraits of upper-class male Americans leading up to the Revolution, the finished products communicate messages of power, superiority, and status.

Copley's clientele interested in conveying these messages most often opted for paired portraiture, in which husband and wife mirror each other in scale, context, and position.^{xliv} The finished products typically hung next to each other in the room with the most foot traffic in the household to function as surrogate hosts to welcome in guests.^{xlv} These portraits ushered in guests and served as a reminder to the figure of authority in the household. The patriarch, via his likeness in a portrait, constantly kept guard over the goings-on in front of him. His obedient wife patiently and effortlessly sat beside him.

Copley's *Ezekiel Goldthwait* (1771) [Fig. 1] and its companion portrait of the same year, *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait* (*Elizabeth Lewis*) [Fig. 2], provide excellent examples of how wealthy Boston men wanted themselves and their wives to appear in paired portraiture in this time period. The former appears professional and focused as he sits at a desk in his biographical and realistic setting. He firmly grasps handmade instruments, a book and quill, which he would have used in his life as a Bostonian businessman. Ezekiel appears intelligent, accomplished, and worthy of respect.

While Ezekiel's portrait might inspire or intimidate viewers, his wife's portrait fails to stir any emotion. Instead, Elizabeth appears stripped of setting, duties, and personality. She sits on an embroidered chair wearing an ornate dress in a seemingly uncomfortable pose. She looks neutrally at the viewer from under her bonnet, and rests primly at a polished table in an anonymous black setting. Both her hands are empty, but one gently reaches for the topmost piece of fruit from a tidy pile on the table. While Ezekiel's are appropriately chosen considering his employment,

FIGURE 3. JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, *MRS. ISAAC SMITH (ELIZABETH STORER)* (1769)



Elizabeth's prop of a fruit bowl merely symbolizes certain traits stereotypical to colonial housewives. Given Elizabeth's domestic duties, fruit might symbolize hospitality, wealth, and fertility.^{xlvi} Even the round shape of her props implies amplitude and plenty.^{xlvii} Elizabeth's life supports this portrayal; she gave birth to thirteen children.^{xlviii}

The mere contrast between props and poses in Copley's separate portraits of Ezekiel and Elizabeth Goldthwait show how Ezekiel controlled viewers' perceptions of him and his wife. Through his portrait, Ezekiel exudes a commanding presence and indirectly asserts his hegemony of the household. Elizabeth, accordingly, represents her husband's ideal wife: a generous, accommodating matriarch unaffected by affairs outside of her own domestic realm.

Contemporary viewers of Copley's work can learn a great deal about its social context, especially the treatment and perception of women in 18th-century upper-class American society, even if viewing only the woman's half of a standard paired portrait. One can aptly interpret *Mrs. Isaac Smith (Elizabeth Storer)* (1769) [Fig. 3], for example, without its companion portrait, *Mr. Isaac Smith* (1769). Copley linked the husband and wife duo through harmonious color schemes and poses, but Elizabeth's depiction by itself is filled with symbolic minutiae that one could easily overlook in a comparison viewing.

Each aesthetic characteristic of this portrait transmits a message about Mrs. Isaac Smith. Elizabeth lies back on a roomy upholstered seat, an expensive and imported Chippendale chair, to be exact. Her relaxed and reclined pose indicates she is content with her life as the wife of a Justice of the Peace with a "high" income.^{xlix} She holds a bunch of grapes, a symbol of fertility, alluding to her husband, who imported wine. At the time of this portrait, Elizabeth, age 43, was pregnant, and it is possible that Isaac, afraid his wife might die in childbirth, commissioned these paired portraits as a final effort to capture her image. Regardless, Elizabeth sits in an indoor setting satu-

rated by rich colors that lighten up the otherwise somber scene: the yellow of the upholstery, the blue of her dress, and the green of her collar.^l This environment indicates the household, where she spent most of her time. Beyond Elizabeth, in the landscape outside her window, stand two entwined trees, which symbolize Smith's status as a married woman.^{li} As she sits contently in her realm, Elizabeth casts a steadfast gaze directly at the viewer with an expression of seriousness, tranquility, and fulfillment.

As revolutionary ideologies swept through colonial society, traditional family roles started to change. Many historians contend that a shift in the mother's role occurred after 1760, when patriotic colonists truly mobilized against the mother country. As historian Jan Lewis points out, many saw the family as a microcosm of the state: "society writ large", or the "little commonwealth".^{lii} The forces that motivated the colonies to claim independence from Great Britain also proved propitious for mothers of the Revolutionary era who yearned to gain more control. Mothers found a way to indirectly influence the world outside the home—children, the future citizens of the new Republic. As more Americans recognized the mother's role in family and political life during the Revolution, art-work became increasingly "matricentric", or centered on the mother.^{liii}

FIGURE 4. JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, *THE COPLEY FAMILY* (1776)





FIGURE 5. JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY, *MRS. JAMES SMITH (ELIZABETH MURRAY)* (1769)

One of the most telling matricentric family portraits of the Revolutionary time period is *Copley Family* (1776-1777) [Fig. 4], which Copley painted of his own family. Many wealthy Americans desired family portraits to celebrate the new optimistic attitude toward the family that emerged during the Revolution. Copley's family portrait reflects the respect with which Copley treated his wife and the harmonious relationship he maintained with each member of his family. *Copley Family* features the seven members of Copley's family and glorifies his wife, Sukey, as its central figure. Copley's four small, energetic yet elegant daughters clamor in the foreground. His father, on the left side, appears disinterested in the granddaughter that seems poised to fall off his knee. His look to the side indicates that something off the canvas has distracted his attention. Copley sits behind and above him, alone, in the background. The painter distinguished his own figure in the composition by setting him on what seems like a completely different plane from the rest of the group. Unlike the other six, moreover, Copley directs his formidable gaze at the viewer, as if he

were claiming possession of the beautiful scene encapsulated within the composition.

Despite Sukey's position just right of center, she manages to attract the viewer's attention immediately. Her highlighted skin has the lightest hues in the entire composition. Also, she tilts her head into the center at an angle running parallel to one daughter's face, nearly touching as they wrap their arms around each other. As she embraces her two daughters, Sukey's facial expression remains composed, patient, and loving. The body language in *Copley Family* suggests affection, intimacy, and respect. Copley's aesthetic exaltation of his wife and family shows how much the artist valued them.

Although the majority of Copley's female sitters were housewives, he also painted the likenesses of women who departed from social norms and established themselves as accomplished citizens in their own right. Among these anomalous sitters was a Bostonian "she-merchant," or female shopkeeper, named Elizabeth Murray, who hired Copley to paint her portrait in 1769. She posed for *Mrs. James Smith (Elizabeth Murray)* [Fig. 5] in 1769 at age 43, just after the death of her second husband, James Murray. In her life, she had played various roles: single woman, wife, widow, and businesswoman.^{liv}

The artistic elements of Murray's portraiture can instruct onlookers today about the life and style of an exceptional, multifaceted 18th-century American woman. She strikes a dynamic pose in motion, mid-step towards her left. Her draped scarf dramatically sways in the wind, and she coolly clasps one side of her dress to avoid tripping. Meanwhile, Murray safeguards two pieces of round fruit and a bunch of grapes in the folds of her dress in front of her stomach, which probably suggests her benevolence and wealth.^{lv} Her forward motion signifies that she was a woman of progress, while the props she holds denote respectable qualities that she apparently valued in herself.

Copley painted the portrait of Mercy Otis Warren, a Patriot who became one of the most respected and renowned

poets, playwrights, and historians during the Revolutionary Era. In addition to her life as a wife and mother, in the words of historian Carol Berkin, Warren was “Boston’s leading propagandist for the colonial cause.”^{lvi} The sister of one of Massachusetts’s leading radicals and wife of another, she penned political satires leading up to the Revolution that undoubtedly helped turn her fellow colonists—men and women—against the Crown’s officials and policies. In 1772, under the pseudonym “A Columbia Patriot”, Warren published her first work, a propagandistic dramatic sketch called *The Adulateur*, which quickly gained attention amongst colonists.^{lvii} Then, in 1805—less than 20 years after Great Britain recognized the United States as a sovereign nation—Warren published *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* under her own name.^{lviii} From the start of the Revolution to its conclusion, Warren’s career as an influential writer evolved from anonymous to renowned.

“Both women symbolize progress, were intellectually and professionally accomplished in their own right, and were hopeful of a bright future.”

Warren posed for *Mercy Otis Warren (Mrs. James Warren)* at age 35 in 1763, the year that some historians note as the turning point in popular opinion in Boston, when new imperial policies like the Stamp and Sugar Acts caused a shift in climate and made the waterfront city the official site of colonial rebellion.^{lix} Warren seems to project her own inspiring self-image in this portrait, greatly resembling Elizabeth Murray. Both women symbolize progress, were

intellectually and professionally accomplished in their own right, and were hopeful of a bright future. Like Murray, Warren strikes a dynamic pose marking movement. Also, both women stand outdoors in front of landscapes of blue skies and swaying trees. This refreshing environment suggests their position as people worthy of respect outside of the home. Also, Warren holds a blossoming branch of flowers, which signifies her role as a mother of three sons.^{lx} Although Warren and Murray had opposing political inclinations, different careers and family lives, they enjoyed lives of considerable freedom in a pre-Revolutionary society that rarely entrusted women with responsibilities outside of the domestic realm.

Thus, it is clear that the depictions of colonial American women in Copley’s portraiture depended largely on the intentions of the commissioners. Unlike the majority of Copley’s representations of women, Elizabeth Murray and Mercy Otis Warren had the ability to communicate their own self-perceptions through the canvas. Their portraits reflect the fact that they earned their own living and, thus, functioned with considerable autonomy in society. At this time of otherwise heightened anxiety and image consciousness, most of Copley’s women sitters appear as unrealistic illustrations of female stereotypes, according to the commissioners’ desires.

Copley, therefore, often adhered to the instructions of an early 18th-century art manual, which advised students to portray women as “Stronger, and more Perfect.”^{lxi} In a sense, Copley followed his commissioners’ orders by painting what they wanted to see. He transformed apprehensive young brides-to-be into immaculate wives, made middle-aged housewives look like ideal personifications of virtue and obedience, and glorified patriarchy by depicting their admiring wives at their side. In an effort to fulfill the impossible task of improving a superlative, Copley embellished, erased, and amplified his scenes. In other words, he manipulated the images of average people to create a more favorable likeness that would transcend their lives and exist for eternity in the form of oil-on-pastel on canvas.

In the words of historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, objects help us read the “unseen technologies, interconnections, and contradictions that lie beneath audible events.”^{lxii} When one contextualizes Copley’s portraits and analyzes the motives for commissioning them, it is evident that these paintings are more than mere commodities. They are rich primary resources, products of a complex culture, and windows through which today’s viewers can come to appreciate and understand the lifestyles of some of the first American “ladies”.

ENDNOTES

- i. Prown (1966)
- ii. Prosser (1995)
- iii. Ibid.
- iv. Prown (1966)
- v. Kerber (1980)
- vi. Lewis (1987)
- vii. Bourne (2006)
- viii. Prosser (1995)
- ix. Prown (1966)
- x. Ibid.
- xi. Lovell (1994)
- xii. Prown (1966)
- xiii. Ibid.
- xiv. Ibid.
- xv. Henrietta (1965)
- xvi. Carp (2007)
- xvii. Ibid.
- xviii. Lovell (1994)
- xix. Lovell (Art in a season 2005)
- xx. Letters and Papers (1914)
- xxi. Cleary (2000)
- xxii. Prown (1966)
- xxiii. Ibid.
- xxiv. Ibid.
- xxv. Letters and Papers (1914)
- xxvi. Ibid.
- xxvii. Lovell (2005)
- xxviii. Lovell (1994)
- xxix. Ibid.
- xxx. Cleary (2000)
- xxxi. Lovell (2005)
- xxxii. Richardson (1722)
- xxxiii. Prown (1966)
- xxxiv. Breen (2004)
- xxxv. Lovell (1994)
- xxxvi. Lovell (2005)
- xxxvii. Kerber
- xxxviii. Lovell (2005)
- xxxix. Lovell (2005)
- xl. Ibid.
- xli. Lovell (2005)
- xlii. Ibid.
- xliiii. Ibid.
- xliv. Lovell (Reading)
- xlv. Lovell (1994)
- xlvi. Prown (1966)
- xlvii. Ibid.
- xlviii. Prown (1966)
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