

John Singleton Copley

Portrait Painter

John Singleton Copley was a prolific portrait painter, born in Boston, Ma. in 1738 and died in London, England in 1815. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were a number of portrait painters who were contemporaries of John Singleton Copley. One of them was Jeremiah Theus. On the wall panel for Theus' painting of Elizabeth Allen Deas 1755, which was in the Fine Arts Gallery at the Mint Museum until 2012, and is currently owned by Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia, the panel stated that Theus was a successful painter in Charleston, SC. It continued to say that: "Theus often painted the bodies and basic details of his portraits first, before accepting a commission, and then added the heads of the sitters and other personal details as work came in." <sup>1</sup> The text continues to make a comparison of Theus' painting to that of another portrait in the collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art, where that dress and body pose is similar to the one owned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Based on the assumption that most portrait artists of the 1700 and 1800 did the same, the object of this research was to see if John Singleton Copley did pre-paint bodies, and then add the heads of the sitters. Here are five paintings that had similar dresses, similar chairs, and other similarities which gives the impression that he did.

The first portrait is that of Mrs. James Russell (Katherine Graves) painted in 1770 (currently at the N.C. Museum of Art, Raleigh, N.C.). The brown dress, which appears to be of silk, was a favorite of Copley during the period prior to the American Revolution. The chair is slightly visible against the dark background which Copley uses to frame Mrs. Russell pensive look. She appears to be caught while reading a book, signifying her educated status [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



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((1 Colonial Williamsburg, Museum Label for Jeremiah Theus, Elizabeth Allen Deas, Virginia, 2012)

The second portrait is that of Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait (Elizabeth Lewis) painted in 1771 (currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City). In this portrait you can see the same brown dress, as that worn by Mrs. Russell. The chair is the same as the other portrait. In this painting, Copley has Mrs. Goldthwait touching the fruit on the plate which alludes to the fact that she was very prolific as a gardener. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



The third portrait is that of Mrs. Paul Richard (Elizabeth Garland) painted in 1771 (currently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Texas). Here again you see the same brown dress but here Copley has her wearing a white apron and in her left hand she appears to have a small book. The chair is different than the previous chairs. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



The fourth portrait is that of Mrs. Sylvanus Bourne, painted in 1776, (currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City). Here she is wearing the same brown dress, in the same chair as the first two portraits, and the book she is holding appears to be the same as Mrs. Russell. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



The fifth portrait is that of Mrs. Thomas Boylston (Sarah Morecock), painted in 1766 (currently at the Harvard University 1<sup>st</sup> Gallery of Art). The dress is the same brown dress, but the chair is different. She has a cloth in her hands which does not appear to signify anything. But in all five poses Copley uses a similar lace head scarf, and hat. The background in all five portraits is dark, and he uses a light source from the left side of the face. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



Three additional examples of a dress used by Copley on three different ladies confirm the fact that he probably had a small inventory of dresses, chairs, and other props which he used for painting the countless number of portraits. During his painting career in America, he was constantly aware of what was needed to please his customers. Most of his clients were not impressed with painters, as they were thought of as nothing more than journeymen, so he always presented himself in fashionable clothing, and painted his clients using the mode of the day.

In portrait number six, Copley painted Mrs. Thomas Gage (Margaret Kemble) in 1771 (currently at the Timken Museum of Art, San Diego, CA), Here Copley paints her using a salmon-pink silk dress which he also uses in the next two portraits. Notice again, his use of a dark background, and light which comes from the left side of the model. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



Portrait number seven, Copley paints Mrs. Roger Morris (Mary Philipse) in 1771 (currently at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware). In this painting the dress is the same, but he changes the color to that of a cream silk version. The sash is the same. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



In portrait number eight, Copley paints Mrs. Joseph Hooper (Mary Harris) in 1767 (currently at the Baltimore Museum of Art). Here you see the same dress, and sash, with the addition of a blue shawl. Even though this portrait was painted before Mrs. Thomas Gage's, according to the writers of "[John Singleton Copley in America](#)"<sup>2</sup>, Copley painted all three models but only Mrs. Thomas Gage dress seems to be real. This studio dress looked real in the other two portraits, but it appears to be only a representation of the dress. [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013.



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((2 John Singleton Copley In America by Carrie Rebora, Paul Staiti, Erica E. Hirshler, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., and Carol Troyen, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., NY)

All these similarities would make you conclude that Copley did, in fact, pre-paint the bodies, and subsequently painted the various ladies. But, from the research, the opposite conclusion is reached.

Nowhere in the research, was there any mention of Copley actually pre-painting any portrait. Copley did use the same dresses, chairs, and props in many of his portraits. The use of these dresses was as a result of his knowledge of existing English fashion. Since his clients were from the high Boston society, who wanted to be painted in the latest European fashion, he used his inventory in a way to please them.

Therefore, the conclusion reached is that Copley did not pre-paint his bodies before accepting any commissions, as Theus did.

Before leaving for England in 1774 he had painted about 350 portraits in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. He was considered one of the most popular portrait artists in America.



John Singleton Copley – Self Portrait 1769 Winterthur Museum [www.johnsingletoncopley.org](http://www.johnsingletoncopley.org) copied March 2013