A PAINTING OF COLEY’S ENGLISH PERIOD

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Sir Brook Watson, English politician and one-time Lord Mayor of London, bequeathed to Christ's Hospital, the famous Bluecoat School, a painting described in his will as the "picture painted by Mr. Copley which represents the accident by which I lost my leg in the harbour of the Havana in the year 1749." This work, painted in 1778, is one of the earliest of Copley’s English period and one of his first historical subjects. The Museum has been fortunate in acquiring, as the gift of Mrs. Gordon Dexter, whose late husband was a descendant of the artist, the original sketch for this picture.

According to tradition, Watson and Copley were fellow voyagers when the latter left America for England in 1774, and during the trip Watson described at length the circumstances of his encounter with a shark. Records indicate, however, that Watson never made such a trip that year, but there were evidently many Londoners from whom Copley might have heard the story. It was familiar enough to be used by one of Watson’s political adversaries, generally believed to be the famous English radical John Wilkes, in his satiric lines:

Modest Watson on his wooden leg,
That leg on which such wondrous art is shown,
It almost seems to serve him as his own.
Now had the shark that took his luckless limb
His nobler noodle took,
The best of workmen and the best of wood
Had scarcely made a head so good.

For the subject of his picture Copley chose the dramatic scene when the shark, which has already devoured Watson’s leg, is returning to finish its victim. From a near-by boat two men reach out in vain toward the agonized youth and a rope thrown to him dangles useless in the water. At this critical moment, a resolute figure, poised heroically at the bow, plunges his harpoon into the monster and saves the boy from death. Sir Brook’s canvas was a vast one, measuring six feet by seven and a half, and one wonders that he should have wished to own so emphatic and graphic a reminder of such an unpleasant experience.

Born in England in 1735, Watson was orphaned at the age of ten. Shortly after, he was sent to Boston to the care of a distant relative, who in turn sent him on a trip to the West Indies in a small trading vessel. It was on this voyage, at the age of fourteen, that Watson encountered the shark while swimming in the harbor at Havana. After recuperating in a Cuban hospital he returned to Boston only to find his relative bankrupt and himself homeless. A Captain Huston, pitying the one-legged boy, took him with him to Nova Scotia. There Watson was taken into his benefactor’s family and business. It was the beginning of a long period of association with Canada. In 1759 he went to London and established himself as a merchant. He must have proved a valuable citizen, for in 1775, on the eve of the Revolution, he was sent to the colonies as a secret agent. According to the bitter account of William Dunlap, written in 1834, "the traitor," ostensibly traveling on business, "infratated himself with many leading Americans, obtained as much information on their designs as he could, and transmitted it to his chosen masters." Watson visited America again in 1782 as commissary general to Sir Guy Carleton, who replaced Clinton as commander in chief of the English forces in America, and was largely responsible for the evacuation of the Loyalists to Canada after the final defeat of the British. The offices he held after his return to England were numerous and distinguished, including those of Member of Parliament, agent of the Province of New Bruns-
wick, commissary general to the Duke of York's army in Flanders and later to the army in England, alderman of the City of London, director of the Bank of England, and, in 1796, Lord Mayor. In recognition of his services he was made a baronet of the United Kingdom a few years before his death in 1807. Watson's unfortunate experience as a youth had proved no obstacle to the realization of his ambitions, and when Copley painted him again in his Lord Mayor's robes he portrayed a confident and stately gentleman with little resemblance to the naked boy contorted with pain and terror.

Watson and the Shark was well received in London. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1778 and was engraved by Valentine Green the following year. Copley himself painted two replicas of it, one of which is now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the other in a private collection.

Our version of the subject is a welcome addition to the Museum's collections, in which Copley has previously been represented only by American portraits. Not only is it interesting as a work of his English period and a figure composition, but as a sketch it affords a commentary on the artist's method and a contrast to his finished pictures. With the exception of the masts of three of the ships in the background, which have been omitted, every detail of the completed painting is indicated in our small picture, only one third its size. The artist, who is known to have de-
manded sixteen sittings for a portrait and whose style is characterized by a painstaking regard for detail, here suggests the features with a few broad strokes and the fabric folds with pencil lines.

In his native Boston the young Copley had mourned the lack of any great pictures from which he might learn. From 1766, when his Boy with a Squirrel was shown at the Society of Artists in London and acclaimed by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Benjamin West, the godfather of American artists in London, Copley yearned to go abroad. At home he was developing the realistic and penetrating portrait style which made him Boston's most fashionable and prosperous artist, but that style, for which he is generally esteemed today, did not completely satisfy him, despite the remuneration it brought. He sought firsthand the inspiration and lessons of the old masters and, urged by West, he finally left America in 1774 at the age of thirty-seven and never returned. After making the grand tour of the continent he settled in London, where he remained until his death.

While Copley had concerned himself primarily with portraits during his American period, when he reached England he turned his attention to large historical and spectacular themes, the vogue for which had been introduced by West. It is upon these rather than upon his portraits, which are more elegant and less sincere than those of his American period, that his reputation as one of England's leading artists rests. Watson and the Shark was the forerunner of his more ambitious pictures, The Death of Chatham, The Death of Major Pierson, and The Siege and Relief of Gibraltar, and its melodramatic and romantic character anticipates the works of the French Romanticists of the nineteenth century. It antedates by over forty years Géricault's famous Raft of the Medusa, which likewise depicts in graphic terms an actual catastrophe at sea and which caused a sensation in Paris when exhibited at the Salon in 1819.