AN ENGLISH COPLEY

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There have been several colonial portraits by John Singleton Copley in the Museum's collection for a number of years, but until 1942 we had nothing of his English period. In that year we received a sketch for his large sea tragedy, Watson and the Shark, and last year the bequest of Richard De Wolfe Brixey brought the portrait of Midshipman Augustus Brine.

The American War of Independence cut the life and work of Copley in two, giving a first-rate painter to two countries. When he sailed from America in June, 1774, Copley left behind him a formidable body of solid, finely painted portraits, in which he owed very little to any other artist. Indeed, there were few painters to influence him and practically no works of the Old Masters to see. He felt this isolation keenly, and his desire to study abroad was the most compelling factor in his decision to go. He had no idea then that he would never return to America. Two months after his arrival in England he started on his long-planned European tour, which lasted until late in 1775. That he was affected by his contact with English and European painters was soon apparent in the change in his style and also in his subject matter.

A comparison of the portraits of Joseph Sherburne, painted in 1770, or Mrs. Winslow, painted in 1773, with Midshipman Brine, which is dated 1782, illustrates this change. The American portraits are clear, painstaking statements of appearance and personality. In the British painting a mood of high adventure suitable to a youngster starting his life in the British Royal Navy is suggested by a background of rocky coast and stormy seas. The juicy brush strokes in the hair and the high lights of the dress, reminiscent of Reynolds, give the painting an effect of freshness and ease. Copley had found that a dramatic pose could replace careful character study.

At that, we have a pretty good impression of Master Brine, a blond, wiry twelve-year-old with a belligerent gleam in his eye. Doubtless there were thoughts in his mind of what he would do to pirates, mutineers, and Americans. The times made such encounters an actuality, not a childish fancy of cops and robbers. The Belliqueux, of sixty-four guns, captained by his father, James Brine, on which Augustus entered the navy, had taken part the year before in Sir Thomas Graves's action against the Comte de Grasse at the mouth of the Chesapeake. His younger brother George, serving in his turn under their father on the Glory, was unwittingly instrumental in foiling a plot to throw all the officers overboard. There is a Gilbert and Sullivan touch to that story. The mutineers were betrayed by a seaman "who had taken offence at their refusal to spare the Captain's son, a young gentleman about 14 years of age, from whom he had received frequent acts of kindness."

We know only a few high spots in Augustus Brine's own naval career. He was made a lieutenant in 1790 and a commander eight years later. He held an appointment in the Sea Fencible service, commanding the Medway during Napoleon's attempted invasion of England. About 1822 he received his commission as rear admiral. He died in 1840. While commanding the Medway, a seventy-four gun ship, he captured the American brig Syren off the coast of Africa. I am indebted to the librarian of the United States Naval Academy for details of this encounter. The Syren had been built at Philadelphia in 1803 and had taken part in the expedition to Tripoli in 1803 and 1804. Brine's report of the capture to Vice Admiral Tyler at the Admiralty Office in London reads:

"His Majesty's Ship Medway at sea, July 12, 1814
Sir—I have the honor to acquaint you, that cruizing in the execution of your orders, I this
Midshipman Augustus Brine, by John Singleton Copley (1737-1815). Bequest of Richard De Wolfe Bixey, 1943
The following year another captain on his return to the United States brought news of the officers and crew of the *Syren*, who were at the Cape of Good Hope. The ship had been sold for $10,000 and had sailed for Calcutta as a merchantman. When taken she had had a considerable quantity of gold dust and ivory on board, having made several captures on the coast of Africa.

The seventeen-eighties, to which our portrait belongs, were a period of great brilliance and productivity for Copley. The grandiose portrait of Henry Laurens is dated 1782 and the impressive Earl of Mansfield the year after. The extravagant and delightful *Three Princesses* was completed in 1785. At the same time Copley was working prodigiously on large historical canvases. His *Watson and the Shark*, done in 1778, was only moderately successful, but the Death of the Earl of Chatham in 1780 and the Siege of Gibraltar and the Death of Major Pierson in 1783 brought him great acclaim. As time went on, however, vast canvases jammed with figures crowded out the simpler portraits, which had brought him a steady income, and his public would not follow him. This was a rock on which many American painters snagged their lines—West, Trumbull, Allston, Copley, and Morse. Except for Trumbull’s Signing of the Declaration of Independence, the subjects were too ephemeral to ensure lasting interest, and the portraits they thought little of remain the foundation of their fame.