

Paul Revere, 1768

John Singleton Copley had emigrated to London by the time Paul Revere made his legendary midnight ride to alert the patriots that the British were coming. He had painted this portrait of Paul Revere some years earlier, when Revere was known as a silversmith with a flourishing Boston trade but not yet as an American hero. Although Revere had been active, even then, in revolutionary politics, Copley prudently kept the portrait free from any hint of controversy. In retrospect, we can see that the portrait captures the qualities that allowed Revere to play an instrumental role in colonial history: physical strength, moral certainty, intelligence, and unequivocal dedication to a cause.

In the American colonies, portraiture was generally considered more of a practical trade than a fine art, and a portrait's success was largely measured by its likeness to the person portrayed. Because John Singleton Copley had an extraordinary talent for recording the physical characteristics of his subjects, he became

the first American artist to achieve material success in his own country. Copley's portraits endure as works of art because they transcend pure documentation to reveal clues to a sitter's personality, profession, and social position.

Most of the colonial citizens Copley depicted were clergymen, merchants, and their wives—the aristocracy of early America—but *Paul Revere* is the picture of an artisan who, like Copley himself, took pride in the work of his hands. The portrait captures a critical moment in the silversmith's work: he appears poised to engrave the gleaming surface of a teapot (presumably one he fashioned himself) using tools that rest on the table before him. But would a working craftsman have worn such a spotless linen shirt or a woolen waistcoat (even if left casually unfastened) with buttons made of gold? And could that highly polished, unscratched table possibly be a workbench? Apart from the engraving tools, the setting is free from a craftsman's clutter or any other indication of an active workshop, which tells us that these are props to signify Revere's profession.

The fine mahogany table that distances Revere from the viewer and gives the workman in shirtsleeves an air of authority also serves an important compositional purpose. It forms the base of a pyramid, with the sitter's brightly illuminated head at the apex. The triangular shape is echoed in the arched brow of Revere's right eye, which commands attention with its steady, knowing gaze; his left eye remains in shadow. Copley may have chosen the pyramidal pose in allusion to Paul Revere's association with Freemasonry, an esoteric fraternal society based upon a shared set of moral and metaphysical ideals and a declared belief in a single god, or Supreme Being. As Copley would have known, Revere made engravings for the Masons featuring an omniscient eye emanating rays of light to symbolize God's creative power; that emblem was sometimes framed by a triangle or a pyramid. (The emblem, which can be found on the back of a dollar bill, was adopted in 1782 as part of the Great Seal of the United States.) This portrait, an idealized view of labor consistent with the democratic ideals of the New World, not only offers a record of Revere's powerful physical presence but suggests his moral dignity and spiritual illumination.

Revere's portrait remained in the family in an attic until the end of the nineteenth century, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous poem, "Paul Revere's Ride," finally brought the patriot's story back into the light. In 1930, Revere's descendants donated Copley's likeness of their famous ancestor to the Boston Museum of Fine Art.



2-A John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Paul Revere*, 1768. Oil on canvas, 35½ x 28½ in. (89.22 x 72.39 cm.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Joseph W. Revere, William B. Revere, and Edward H. R. Revere, 30.781. Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Allow students to look closely at the figure in this portrait, his environment, and what he is doing.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E | M | S

What is Paul Revere holding?

He is holding a teapot in his left hand and his chin in his right.

E | M | S

Find the three engraving tools on the table. Why do you think Copley included these tools and the teapot in this portrait?

They suggest that Revere was a silversmith.

M | S

How has Copley drawn our attention to Revere's face?

He placed Revere against a plain, dark background to contrast with his light face and shirt. The hand under his chin leads to the face.

What part of the face did Copley make the most important?

He made the eye on the left — Revere's right eye — the most important.

How did he do this?

He accomplished this by slightly turning Revere to the viewer and shining a light on that part of Revere's face.

M | S

Why did he emphasize the eye?

Students can speculate on this. Perhaps he emphasized the eye to get the viewers' attention and draw them into the painting, or perhaps to remind viewers that the eye is an important part of the artist's skills and a sign of talent (as in "having an eye for" something), etc.

INTERPRET E | M | S

We know that some artists (such as Leonardo da Vinci) were left-handed. Ask students if they can prove whether Paul Revere worked with his right or left hand according to clues in the painting.

If he is left-handed, why are the engraving tools to his right?

He is not working.

If he is right-handed, why does he hold the pot in the left?

He rests the pot on the leather pad in order to engrave on it.

M | S

By placing Revere's hand under his chin, what does Copley suggest about Revere's personality?

This pose usually indicates a thoughtful person.

M | S

What might the combination of these three things tell us about Paul Revere as an artist: the pot he made and prominently holds, the thoughtful gesture of the hand on chin, and the emphasis on his right eye?

His work is a combination of handiwork, thought, and artistic vision.

S

Paul Revere was a craftsman in a busy studio. How has Copley idealized the setting for this portrait?

If this were truly an artist's workbench, it would probably be littered with tools and bits of metal.

S

Some writers on art see a connection between Copley's portrait of Revere and the symbol on the dollar bill. Compare Revere's portrait with the eye on the back of a dollar bill. How are they alike?

1) *On the dollar bill, the eye is highlighted and set at the apex of a triangle; in the painting, Revere's arms and the table form a triangle with his head at the top.*

2) *The eye on the dollar bill is a Freemason symbol, and Revere, like many revolutionary leaders, was a Mason.*

Encourage students to debate this connection. Do they think the similarity between these two images is deliberate?

CONNECTIONS

History: Sons of Liberty; famous ride and ensuing battles in Lexington and Concord (American Revolution)

Historical Figures: Paul Revere; King George III; Patrick Henry; John Adams; Samuel Adams; Crispus Attucks

Civics: Whigs v. Tories

Geography: Massachusetts Bay; Charles River; Coastal Lowlands

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine (secondary); *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*,

Washington Irving (elementary);

"Paul Revere's Ride," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (elementary)

Arts: portraiture; American colonial art