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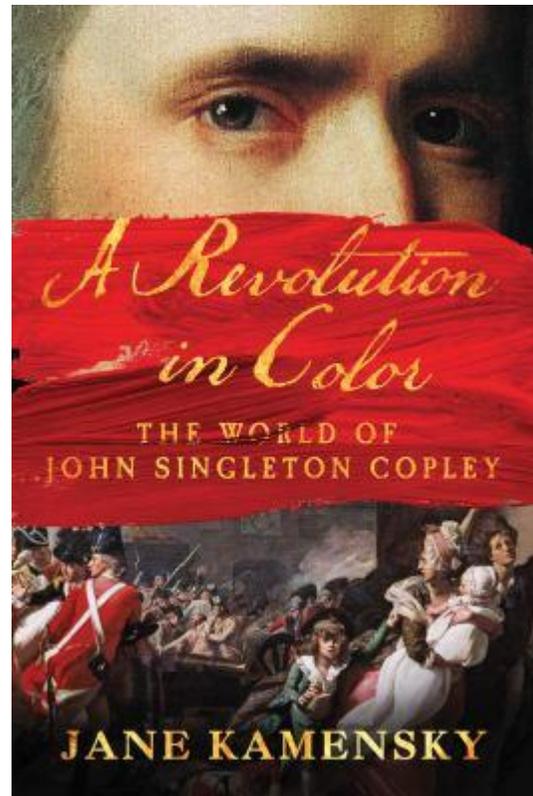
A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley

Jane Kamensky

New York: W. W. Norton, 2016; 544 pp.; 68 illus., 16 pp. color illus. \$35.00 hardback; \$19.95 paperback, available for Kindle (ISBN: 97803932400160)

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In *A Revolution in Color*, Jane Kamensky goes beyond biography, crafting a richly detailed account of the life and times of one of the most important painters in early Anglo-America: John Singleton Copley. With painstaking documentary research and—when that trail goes cold, as it does too often for those of us who explore the lives and times of eighteenth-century artists—using art as evidence, she unpacks the meteoric, challenged, complicated, emotional life of Copley, his subjects, his family (who were very often his subjects), his empire, its collapse, and the painter’s struggles to make it on both sides of the Atlantic during a time of profound ideological and military conflict.



Copley’s life has drawn extensive study, including scholarship by both art historians and historians, in order to reveal the complex nature of his story and his art. Beginning with the 1948 James Thomas Flexner biography, *John Singleton Copley*, more thorough studies, such as Jules David Prown’s influential *John Singleton Copley in America, 1738–1774* and *John Singleton Copley in England, 1774–1815*; Carrie Rebora Barratt and Paul Staiti’s *John Singleton Copley in America*; and Emily Ballew Neff and William Pressly’s, *John Singleton Copley in England*, have established the basic Copley narrative.¹ Building upon this scholarship, analyzing the paintings Copley produced, Kamensky goes beyond analysis of the characteristics of his art to place it within the culture and society in which he created it. Her fresh approach puts Copley more thoroughly within a transatlantic context and a longer chronological framework, which elucidates the transformations of the age in which he lived.

Kamensky—who is the Jonathan Trumbull Professor of History and Pforzheimer Foundation Director of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study—establishes this transatlantic context from the beginning. Born in 1738 and raised within the sights, sounds, and smells of Boston’s port, Copley was the son of immigrants; from the beginning, his life was molded by the transatlantic changes crossing those waters. His father probably became a soldier, one of the many victims of New England’s never-ending line of colonial wars. Copley’s mother, Mary Singleton Copley, a character who emerges throughout the narrative as a strong, dedicated person who assumed many roles throughout her life, later married artist Peter Pelham. This union exposed the young Copley to an artistic world that would lead to eventual fame and, occasionally, some fortune.

Kamensky shows that Copley’s life in Boston was a mixed bag. The young painter began to create vivid images in oil paint of Boston’s grandees—merchants, their wives, and eventually the officers arriving in the town to fight in yet more colonial wars. Thriving as an artisan, Copley was able to support his twice-widowed mother and younger stepbrother. But with the goods and people arriving in Boston came news of a wider world of art and opportunity an ocean away. Kamensky interweaves threads of Copley’s longing for this world, prompting the reader to ask: Will he go or won’t he? Or, as the narrative progresses, shouting at points, “get on the boat!” While Benjamin West, Charles Willson Peale, and numerous other young men went to Britain or Europe in order to experience the superlative collections and instruction available, Copley kept delaying his voyage.

“A biography is in many ways like a portrait. The genre traffics in the individual, the irreducible, the extraordinary,” the author writes in her introduction (7–8). Like her subject, Kamensky’s biographical brush provides rich detail and the bright color of life in colonial Boston. It is a subject into which she has delved before, and as she crafts her narrative, the reader is reminded that she has broken from historical nonfiction in the past, coauthoring the novel *Blindspot* with fellow Harvard historian Jill Lepore (Random House, 2008), a narrative that walks some of the same streets and squares, filling canvases in some of the same rich parlors in both her fiction and nonfiction. As with Stuart Jameson, the protagonist of *Blindspot*, Copley was a portrait painter who seems drawn into almost every aspect of the coming storm of revolution. Unlike the fictional Jameson, however, Copley is no rake, and it is his commitment to one woman, and the connection to her extended family and their political ties, that leads to a watershed in his life.

As Copley finds success, he also finds love with Susanna Farnum Clarke, daughter of a prosperous Boston mercantile family, and the two begin a quickly growing family that anchors the artist to the American colonies. Yet Europe continues to beckon. Correspondence with American-born Benjamin West and others inspires him to send his work to exhibitions in London, a city experiencing a growing fervor for art after the ascension of George III in 1760.

Copley, as drawn by Kamensky, is a complex character, and she does not shield him from judgment over decisions he made that might seem strange, or perhaps even heartless, to modern readers. The painter finally crosses the Atlantic just as his family by marriage was increasingly getting swept up in the Revolution, a conflict in which they sided with England, to their immediate risk and eventual banishment. Copley clearly loved “Sukey,” but we can only speculate what he was thinking when, in 1774, he left her in a house full of their offspring, pregnant, and surrounded by a father and kin who seemed likely candidates for

tarring and feathering. We do, however, know his thoughts on the artistic culture that England, France, and especially Italy had to offer, as Kamensky makes rich use of the correspondence among Copley family members. The creation, survival, and discovery in 1914 of these documents is, of course, a key aspect of this narrative, a rare situation wherein detailed documentary evidence exists, a situation in which proximity often led to silences within the paper trail that lasted for years.



Fig. 1. John Singleton Copley, *The Copley Family*, 1776–77. Oil on canvas, 72 1/2 x 90 1/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Copley spent months touring European collections, adopting the ways of a dandy, striving for excellence as a copyist of masterpieces that supported his sojourn, and writing to his family members across the Atlantic. In December 1775, these travels came to an end and he returned to London and made his home there. Settling in the metropole also brought about a complex family reunion, as his wife, most of his young children, and his in-laws all settled there too, refugees from an expanding revolution that for them was a civil war. That war would separate most of the family permanently from Massachusetts, where they were born. Copley commemorated this reunion in one of his first multifigure Grand Manner paintings, his 1776–77 *The Copley Family* (fig. 1). As Kamensky explains, “The painting . . . was the painter’s most ambitious work to date . . . as intricate in composition as a history painting” (266). This large and complex work shows the painter’s new skills gained from his Grand Tour studies, his sense of familial love, and his respect for his now-refugee father-in-law, Richard Clarke. It also demonstrates a grasp of reality that might make later, post-Freud analysts, ponder: included in the painting is the child whom his wife was carrying when he left Boston in 1774. When Susanna left the colonies, she left the baby, Clarke Copley, in the care of family members, perhaps awaiting a later, safer passage. The child died—never seen by its father, but portrayed by him as beautiful, healthy, and surrounded by the loving family that was absent when he died. Copley’s work veils, as well as reveals, many stories.

Copley's establishment in London provided ample ground for artistic masterpieces that made his name as an English artist. His earlier colonial work, largely portraiture, was meant for the private sphere, and following in the analytical work of Margaretta Markle Lovell and others, Kamensky strives to reveal meaning in his portraits of Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, Margaret Kemble Gage, and others. In contrast, London was a place of public exhibitions and art organizations, and there, Copley's ambition and talent evolved in both scale and achievement. His work had come before the public even before he saw the city, in the form of his brotherly portrait [*Boy with a Flying Squirrel*](#) (1765; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), which was exhibited a decade earlier at the Royal Society annual exhibition. But immediately upon his return from the continent in 1775, he began work on larger and more complex paintings, massive canvases including his 1778 *Watson and the Shark* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) and his 1782–84 *Death of Major Pierson* (Tate Gallery, London). These exhibition works, conceived as modern history paintings, show Copley exploring and relating the complex social, cultural, visual, and racial composition of the world of Britain, always in the vivid color of words as well as images that is the recurring theme of Kamensky's book.

Kamensky makes a particular contribution to Copley scholarship by exploring his use of African American subjects, particularly in *Watson and the Shark*. She states, "like very few central figures acting heroically in eighteenth-century paintings, he is black: a sailor who embodies the African diaspora, the engine driving the Atlantic trade" (282). From this unidentified figure, Kamensky expands the narrative of race and art, connecting the changing ideas of slavery in Georgian England to the images Copley created.

Kamensky's previous works have explored the economic transformations that abounded in the period, and her expertise adds additional strength to her study of the artistic world of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglo-America.² Copley was an artisan who had to earn his keep while still in the colonies, and he did so, rising to attain economic stability and land ownership before departing for Europe. His transatlantic move shifts the narrative, allowing his biographer to lead readers into the economic and social echelons of Augustan London. Copley fit into this world, an artistic community more crowded and often more aggressive than anything he could have imagined in New England. Like other artists of the period, he understood art to be a commodity: in the rooms of the Royal Society, members jockeyed for wall space, at the annual exhibitions, and for subjects, as portrait painters sought patrons and vied to produce the definitive version of the latest hero of the hour. Copley never gained West's access to George III and Queen Charlotte, but he did attain a growing audience of sitters just outside the highest ranks of society. His massive history painting of 1779–81, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords* (fig. 2), established him as an artist with widespread popular appeal. Stepping around convention, Copley rented a room and charged the London public to see the massive work, leading to widespread recognition and no little amount of concern from those who saw themselves as the art establishment. "But," Kamensky writes, "as his critics recognized, Copley had not painted for them alone. The display of *The Death of Chatham* was an amusement for the middling thousands who bought prints as much as for the scores of nobles and gentry who commissioned large-scale works of art. Copley's single-picture exhibition was pathbreaking—indeed, revolutionary" (306). Today's visitors to the National Portrait Gallery in London can follow in the footsteps of this public, and they continue the tradition of art for the mass market that Copley helped create when he opted to put his art on view for a large, paying audience.



Fig. 2. John Singleton Copley, *The Death of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords*, 1790–81. Oil on canvas, 90 x 121 1/8 in. Tate Gallery, London

Kamensky reveals the complexities of Copley’s personality, showing that he was a quirky, argumentative person who made bad decisions on a regular basis, losing friends and money along the way. She also demonstrates that the painter’s life, exposed as he was to the compounds and chemicals necessary for his paintings, proved painful, and—although he lived a long time—his later years included illness and disappointment. As she relates, “Copley died almost inconceivably far from the rooms on Boston’s Long Wharf where he had spent his first years, surrounded by art that mapped almost the whole of his journey. . . . The pictures, which had failed to take him everywhere he wanted to go, formed a complex legacy. But it was nonetheless a wholly astonishing one” (392–93).

His death on September 9, 1815, of course did not end Copley’s story. Leaving a remarkable artistic catalogue behind, his fame grew as masterworks left his family via sales and portraits left private parlors and entered the public sphere. Kamensky concludes her biography with that narrative, showing how a Bostonian with artistic skill and ambition achieved fame beyond his wildest imagination in the centuries after his death. His paintings are exhibited around the globe, gaining him recognition and record sales prices.

In *A Revolution in Color*, Kamensky presents a wide-ranging and beautifully written exploration of the life and times of an artist who painted as revolutions raged around him. It is a colorful book, rich in images painted with words as well as in reproductions of works by Copley and others, and valuable both to the professional scholar and to readers who want to know more about this singular person, who lived in a fascinating time and left us an incomparable legacy.

Notes

¹ James Thomas Flexner, *John Singleton Copley* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948); Jules David Prown, *John Singleton Copley in America, 1738–1774* and *John Singleton Copley in England, 1774–1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Carrie Rebora Barratt and Paul Staiti, eds., *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995); and Emily Ballew Neff and William Pressly, *John Singleton Copley in England* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1995).

² In addition to *Blindspot*, Kamensky has explored the social ramifications of material culture interconnecting with biography in *The Exchange Artist: A Tale of High-Flying Speculation and America's First Banking Collapse* (New York: Viking, 2008).