

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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WASHINGTON, D.C. February 21, 1965: John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, today announced the acquisition of Watson and the Shark by John Singleton Copley (1738-1815). The picture was acquired through a fund established by the late Ferdinand Lamot Belin, Trustee of the Gallery from 1938 to 1961, and its Vice President from 1939 to 1961. Mr. Walker has called the painting "one of the most important works painted by an American in the 18th century."

The painting dramatizes the attack on Brook Watson by a shark. Horror, fear, and pity register on the faces of the sailors who are trying to rescue the young man. The harbor of Havana, Cuba, in the background, with Moro Castle to the right, is clearly recognizable.

Painted in 1778, this large-scale picture, 7 ft. 6-1/2 in. wide by 5 ft. 11-3/4 in. high, belonged originally to Sir Brook Watson himself. At his death in 1807, Watson bequeathed the picture to Christ's Hospital, London, an educational and charitable foundation devoted to orphaned children. After acquiring the picture directly from the Hospital, the National Gallery of Art commissioned C. Gregory Stapko to paint an exact copy of it, which now hangs in Christ's Hospital in place of the original.

Born in 1735 in England, Watson had been orphaned at the age of 6. It was at the age of 14, while earning his living aboard ship, that he had the disastrous encounter with a shark in Havana harbor that is recorded in the painting.

Later, during the Revolution, he was commissary general to
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Sir Guy Carleton, the commander in chief of the English forces in America. In the following years he held many positions of responsibility in England as a Member of Parliament, commissary general to the Duke of York's army in Flanders and England, Alderman of the City of London, a Bank of England director, and finally in 1796, Lord Mayor of London. In 1803 he was made a Baronet.

Copley's Watson and the Shark was the painting that made the artist's reputation in London when it was exhibited in 1778 at the Royal Academy.

John Singleton Copley early exhibited the talent that was to make him one of America's outstanding painters. He was the most fashionable and prosperous portrait painter of his day in colonial Boston. He longed, however, to emulate his fellow American, Benjamin West, who was enjoying great success in England as a painter of scenes from history, literature, and the Bible. At the urging of both West and Sir Joshua Reynolds, he left America in 1774 to study art in Europe. He was never to return to this country. In London he received critical acclaim for his dramatic and historical narrative painting, using the Neo-classic themes of heroism, devotion and courage.

Mr. E. P. Richardson, authority on American art, has written of Watson and the Shark,

It is...the first, and still one of the most notable, expressions of one of the fundamental themes of the American tradition - that of outdoor adventure and the life of man in contact or conflict with nature. It is somehow significant that Copley, the greatest figure produced by the eighteenth century colonial portrait tradition, in his very first attempt to transcend that tradition should have painted a drama in the life of man in the face of nature, which Winslow Homer might have chosen and which is, in fact, closely parallel to one of Homer's best known

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subjects. Watson and the Shark is thus in both its imaginative attack and its distinction of style, a notable picture in American history.

The painting antedates Géricault's Raft of the Medusa by some 40 years, and has been said to anticipate the Romantic revolution precipitated by the latter painting, which was the sensation of the official French Salon in Paris in 1819.

Copley treated the same theme in two other paintings. One, identical save for a few minor changes, is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Another, smaller version, now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, treats the subject in a vertical format. Scholars agree that Watson's own picture, now in the National Gallery of Art, was Copley's first painting of the subject.

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