

# American Art

1700 - 1960

*SOURCES and DOCUMENTS*

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JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY: CORRESPONDENCE,  
1766-1767

*The letters below reflect a critical phase in the career of John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), the most gifted of our native-born Colonial portraitists. In them one finds the beginning of his resolve to leave Boston for study abroad and some of the doubts that beset him before he finally sailed, never to return, in 1774. The pictures he sent to London via Captain R. G. Bruce were the famous Boy with a Squirrel, shown in 1766 at an exhibition of the Society of Artists, and a Little Girl, subsequently lost, which followed in 1767. The paintings were generally well received in London, but the criticism that they were too "liney," opaque, and lacking in "Due Subordination of the Parts," only strengthened Copley's discontent with the provincial city of his birth.*

Captain R. G. Bruce to Copley

LONDON, 4TH AUGUST, 1766

DEAR COPLEY,

Don't imagine I have forgot or neglected your Interest by my long Silence. I have delayed writing to You ever since the Exhibition, in order to forward the inclosed Letter from Mr. West, which he has from time to time promised me, but which his extreme Application to his Art has hitherto prevented his finishing.

What he says will be much more conclusive to You than anything from me. I have only to add the general Opinions which were pronounced on your Picture when it was exhibited. It was universally allowed to be the best Picture of its kind that appeared on that occasion, but the sentiments of Mr. Reynolds, will, I suppose, weigh more with You than those of other Critics. He says of it, "that in any Collection of Painting it will pass for an excellent Picture, but considering the Disadvantages" I told him "you had labored under, that *it was a very wonderful Performance.*" "That it exceeded any Portrait that Mr. West ever drew." "That he did not know one Painter at home, who had all the Advantages that Europe could give them, that could equal it, and that if you are capable of producing such a Piece by the mere Efforts of your own Genius, with the advantages of the Example and Instruction which you could have in Europe, You would be a valuable Acquisition to the Art, and one of the first Painters in the World,

provided you could receive these Aids before it was too late in Life, and before your Manner and Taste were corrupted or fixed by working in your little way at Boston. He condemns your working either in Crayons or Water Colors." Don't imagine I flatter You. I only repeat Mr. Reynolds' words, which are confirmed by the public Voice. He, indeed, is a mere Enthusiast when he speaks of You. At the same time he found Faults. He observed a little Hardness in the Drawing, Coldness in the Shades, An over minuteness, all which Example would correct. "But still," he added, "*it is a wonderful Picture* to be sent by a Young Man who was never out of New England, and had only some bad Copies to study." I have begged of Mr. West to be copious in his Criticisms and Advices to You. Mr. Reynolds would have also wrote to You himself but his time is too valuable. The Picture is at his House where I shall leave it till I have your Directions how to dispose of it. I could sell it to advantage, but it is thought more for your Interest to keep it as a Specimen. You are greatly obliged to Lord Cardross, a Friend of mine, to whom I first sent it. He showed it to the most eminent Conniseurs, then gave it to Mr. Reynolds, who sent it with his own Pictures to the Exhibition. You are best Judge of your own Affairs, and whether you can with propriety accomplish a Trip for a few Years to Europe. Should you take that Resolution, I believe I may venture to assure You, that You will meet with much Encouragement and Patronage. Should it be in my little power to be of the least use to You, you may command me to the utmost. I am already very happy in having contributed to make your Merit so far known to the World, and hope it has laid the Foundation of your being the great Man Mr. Reynolds prognosticates.

I am obliged to write this in a very great hurry as I set out tomorrow on a Visit to Scotland. Pray remember me to my old Acquaintances at Boston. I have wrote to Mr. Scollay and Mrs. Melville. You have already my Direction, and I shall expect to hear from You. Perhaps I may see you in Boston next Year, but that at present is uncertain.

I had almost forgot to tell You, that in case you don't appear yourself, the Friends of your Art wish that you will paint another Picture to exhibit next Year, and Mr. West has promised to point out a Subject to You. Should you do so, send it to Mr. West who seems sincerely disposed to be your Friend. Mr. Reynolds is too busy and too great a Man to be active for You, though he is also much disposed to serve You.

I have now a Favor to beg of You in turn, which is, that you will make me a Copy of my Picture I left with Mrs. Melville. I hope

this will find You and your Family well—And either in Europe or America assure yourself of my sincere Friendship while I am

R. G. BRUCE

Benjamin West to Copley

LONDON, AUGUST 4TH, 1766

SIR,

On Seeing a Picture painted by you and meeting with Captain Bruce, I take the liberty of writing to you. The great Honor the Picture has gained you here in the art of Painting I dare say must have been made known to You Long before this Time, and as You have made So great a Progr[ess] in the art I am Persuaded You are the more desirous of hearing the remarks that might have been made by those of the Profession, and as I am here in the Midst of the Painting world have the greater opportunity of hearing them. Your Picture first fell into Mr. Reynolds' hands to have it Put into the Exhibition as the Performance of a Young American: he was Greatly Struck with the Piece, and it was first Concluded to have been Painted by one Mr. Wright, a young man that has just made his appearance in the art in a surprising Degree of Merit. As Your Name was not given with the Picture it was Concluded a mistake, but before the Exhibition opened the Particulars were received from Capt. Bruce. While it was Exhibited to View the Criticism was, that at first Sight the Picture struck the Eye as being too liney, which was judged to have arose from there being so much neatness in the lines, which indeed as far as I was Capable of judging was somewhat the Case. For I very well know from endeavoring at great Correctness in one's outline it is apt to Produce a Poverty in the look of one's work. Whenever great Desition [decision] is attended to the lines are apt to be too fine and edgy. This is a thing in works of great Painter[s] I have remark[ed] has been strictly avoided, and have given Correctness in a breadth of outline, which is finishing out into the Canvas by no determined line when Closely examined; though when seen at a short distance, as when one looks at a Picture, shall appear with the greatest Beauty and freedom. For in nature everything is Round, or at least Partakes the most of that form which makes it impossible that Nature, when seen in a light and shade, can ever appear liney.

As we have every April an Exhibition where our works is exhibited to the Public, I advise you to Paint a Picture of a half figure or two in one Piece, of a Boy and Girl, or any other subject you may fancy. And be sure take your Subjects from Nature as you did in your

last Piece, and don't trust any resemblance of anything to fancy, except the dispositions of the figures and the adjustments of Draperies, So as to make an agreeable whole. For in this Consists the work of fancy and Test [taste].

If you should do anything of this kind, I beg you may send it to me, when you may be sure it shall have the greatest justice done it. Let it be Painted in oil, and make it a rule to Paint in that way as much as Possible, for Oil Painting has the superiority over all other Painting. As I am from America, and know the little Opportunities is to be had there in the way of Painting, made the inducement the more in writing to you in this manner, and as you have got to that length in the art that nothing is wanting to Perfect you now but a Sight of what has been done by the great Masters, and if you Could make a visit to Europe for this Purpose for three or four years, you would find yourself then in Possession of what will be highly valuable. If ever you should make a visit to Europe you may depend on my friendship in any way that's in my Power to Serve.

Your Friend and Humble Servant,

B. WEST

Copley to Benjamin West

BOSTON, NOV. 12, 1766

SIR:

Your kind favor of Augst. 4, 1766, came to hand. It gave me great pleasure to receive without reserve Your Criticisms on the Picture I sent to the Exhibition. Mr. Powell informed me of Your intention of writing, and the handsome things You was pleased to say in praise of that little performance, which has increased my estimation of it, and demands my thanks which previous to the receipt of Your favor I acknowledged in a letter forwarded by Mr. Powell. It was remarked the Picture was too lined. This I confess I was conscious of myself and think with You that it is the natural result of too great precision in the outline, which in my next Picture I will endeavor to avoid, and perhaps should not have fallen into it in that, had I not felt too great timerity at presenting a Picture to the inspection of the first artists in the World, and where it was to come into competition with such masterly performances as generally appear in that Collection. In my last I promised to send another piece. The subject You have since pointed out, but I fear it will not be in my power to comply with Your design, the time being too short for the execution of two figures, not having it in my power to spend all my time on it, and the Days short and weather cold, and I

must ship it by the middle of Feby. at farthest, otherwise it will come too late for the exhibition. But I shall do something near what you propose. Your c[a]utioning me against doing anything from fancy I take very kind, being sensible of the necessity of attending to Nature as the fountain head of all perfection, and the works of the great Masters as so many guides that lead to the more perfect imitation of her, pointing out to us in what she is to be copied, and where we should deviate from her. In this Country as You rightly observe there are no examples of Art, except what is to [be] met with in a few prints indifferently executed, from which it is not possible to learn much, and must greatly enhance the Value of free and unreserved Criticism made with judgment and Candor.

It would give me inexpressible pleasure to make a trip to Europe, where I should see those fair examples of art that have stood so long the admiration of all the world. The Paintings, Sculptors and Basso Relievs that adorn Italy, and which You have had the pleasure of making Your Studies from would, I am sure, animate my pencil, and enable me to acquire that bold free and graceful style of Painting that will, if ever, come much slower from the mere dictates of Nature, which has hither to been my only instructor. I was almost tempted the last year to take a tour to Philadelphia, and that chiefly to see some of Your Pictures, which I am informed are there. I think myself peculiarly unlucky in Living in a place into which there has not been one portrait brought that is worthy to be called a Picture within my memory, which leaves me at a great loss to guess the style that You, Mr. Reynolds, and the other Artists practice. I shall be glad when you write next you will be more explicit on the article of Crayons, and why You dis[ap]prove the use of them, for I think my best portraits done in that way. And be kind enough to inform me what Count Algarotti means by the five points that he recommends for amusement and to assist the invention of postures, and whether any prints after Corregios or Titianos are to be purchased. I fear I shall tire Your patience and make you repent your writing to one who makes so many requests in one letter.

But I shall be exceedingly glad to know in general what the present state of Painting in Italy is, whether the Living Masters are excellent as the Dead have been. It is not possible my curiosity can be satisfied in this by anybody but Yourself, not having any correspondence with any whose judgment is sufficient to satisfy me. I have been painting the head of a Dissenting Clergyman and his friends are desirous to subscribe for it to be scraped in mezzotinto in the common size of 14 inches by ten, but I cannot give them the terms till I know the price. I shall take it kind if when you see any artist that You approve You mention it to him, and Let me know. I have seen a well

executed print by Mr. Pether of a Jew Rabbi. If You think him a good hand, be kind enough to desire him to let me know by a few lines (as soon as convenient) his terms, as the portrait waits only for that in my hands, and I shall send it immediately with the money to defray the expense when I know what it is.

I am Sir with all Sincerity Your friend and Humble Sert.

J:S:COPLY

Benjamin West to Copley

LONDON, JUNE 20TH, 1767

SIR:

Don't impute the long Omission of my not writing to you [to] any forgetfulness or want of that Friendship I first Showed on seeing your works. My having been so much engaged in the Study of my Business, in particular that of history Painting, which demands the greatest Care and intelligence in History imaginable, has so entirely Prevented my taking up the Pen to answer your Several Agreeable favors, and the reception of your Picture of the Little Girl you Sent for the exhibition. It came safe to hand in good time. And as I am Persuaded you must be much interested in regard to the reception it met with from the artists and Public opinion in General, I as a Friend Take this opportunity to Communicate it to you.

In regard to the Artists they Somewhat differ in Opinion from Each Other, Some Saying they thought your First Picture was the Best, others Say the last is Superior (which I think [it] is as a Picture in point of Execution, though not So in Subject). But of those I shall give this of Mr. Reynolds when he saw it he was not so much Pleased with it as he was with the first Picture you Exhibited, that he thought you had not managed the general Effect of it so Pleasing as the other. This is what the Artists in General have Criticized, and the Coloring of the Shadows of the flesh wants transparency. Those are thing[s] in General that have Struck them. I Can't say but the Above remarks have some justness in them, for the Picture being at my house some time gave me an opportunity of Examining it with more Exactness.

The General Effect as Mr. Reynolds justly Observes is not quite so agreeable in this as in the other; which arises from Each Part of the Picture being Equal in Strength of Coloring and finishing, Each Making too much a Picture of its self, without that Due Subordination to the Principle Parts, viz., the head and hands. For one may Observe in the great works of Van dyke, who is the Prince of Portrait Painter[s],

how he has managed by light and shadow and the Color of Draperies made the face and hands appear almost a Deception. For in Portrait Painting those are the Parts of Most Consequence, and of Course ought to be the most distinguished. There is in Historical Painting this Same attention to be Paid. For if the Principle Characters are Suffered to Stand in the Crowd, and not distinguished by light and shadow, or made Conspicuous by some Piece of art, So that the Eye is first Caught by the Head Character of the History, and So on to the next as he bears Proportion to the head Character, if this is not observed the whole is Confusion and loses that dignity we So much admire in Great works. Your Picture is in Possession of Drawing to a Correctness that is very Surprising, and of Coloring very Brilliant, though this Brilliancy is Somewhat misapplied, as for instance, the Gown too bright for the flesh, which overcame it in Brilliancy. This made them Criticize the Shadows of the Flesh without knowing from whence this defect arose; and so in like manner the dog and Carpet too Conspicuous for Accessory things, and a little want of Propriety in the Back Ground, which Should have been Some Modern ornament, as the Girl was in a Modern dress and modern Cherce [skirt?]. The Back Ground Should have had a look of this time. These are Criticisms I should not make was not your Pictures very nigh upon a footing with the first artists who now Paints, and my being sensible that Observations of this nature in a friendly way to a man of Your Talents must not be Disagreeable. I with the greater Freedom give them, As it is by this assistance the art is raised to its height. I hope I shall have the Pleasure of Seeing you in Europe, where you will have an opportunity of Contemplating the great Productions of art, and feel from them what words Cannot Express. For this is a Source the want of which (I am sensible of) Cannot be had in Ameri[c]a; and if you should Ever Come to London my house is at Your Service, or if you should incline to go for Italy, if you think letters from me Can be of any Service, these are much at your Service. And be assured I am with greatest Friendship, Your Most obedient Humble Servant

BENJN WEST

PS. I have Spoke to Several of our Mezzotinto Scrapers, and their Prices for a Plate after a Picture of that Size is from fifteen Guineas to Twenty Guineas. There are Scrapers of a less Price than that, but they are rather indifferent. I hope you will favor us with a Picture the next Exhibition. Enclosed I Send you a Copy of our Royal Charter and list of fellows, amongst whom you are Chosen one. The next which will be printed your name is to be inserted.



Copley to [Captain R. G. Bruce?] \*

[1767?]

But What shall I do at the end of that time (for prudence bids us to Consider the future as well as the present). Why I must either return to America, and Bury all my improvements among people entirely destitute of all just Ideas of the Arts, and without any addition of Reputation to what I have already gained. For the favorable receptions my Pictures have met with at home has made them think I could get a better Living at home than I can here, which has been of service to me, but should I be disappointed, it would be quite the reverse. It would rather lessen than increase their opinion of my Works which I ought by all prudent methods strive to avoid. Or I should set down in London in a way perhaps less advantageous than what I am in at present, and I cannot think of purchasing fame at so dear a rate. I shall find myself much better off than I am in my present situation. (I would be here understood to speak of the profits of the art only, for as I have not any fortune, and an easy income is a necessary thing to promote the art. It ought to be considered, and Painters cannot Live on Art only, though I could hardly Live without it). But As it is not possible for me, Who never was in Europe, to settle sufficiently in my mind those points, I must rely on Your Friendship and Mr. West to inform me. I have wrote You and Mr. West in the plainest and most unreserved manner what the difficulties are, and doubt not Your friendship and prudence will lead You to give all Due weight to the objections I have proposed; and if You think they are still sufficient to keep me in this Country, I shall strive to content myself where I am. I have been the more particular in this Letter Least the other should have miscarried, and doubt not You will write me answer as soon as possible, and prevail on Mr. West to Lay aside the pencil to remove my Doubts, for You cannot but know a state of uncertainty in affairs of consequence (as these are to me,) are very perplexing and disagreeable. Beside if Your Answer [be] such as to favor my going, you know I have a Real Estate which I must dispose of, and a Great Deal of Business to settle, which must take up much time and will detain me another Year, unless I can hear soon from You.

Copley to [West or Captain R. G. Bruce?]

[1767?]

I observe the Criticisms made on my last picture were not the same as those made on the first. I hope I have not in this as in the

\* A fragment of the letter.

last by striving to avoid one error fallen into another. I shall be sorry if I have. However it must take its fate. Perhaps You may blame me for not taking anothe[r] subject that would have afforded me more time, but subjects are not so easily procured in this place. A taste of painting is too much Wanting to afford any kind of helps; and was it not for preserving the resembla[n]ce of particular persons, painting would not be known in the plac[e]. The people generally regard it no more than any other useful trade, as they sometimes term it, like that of a Carpenter tailor or shoemaker, not as one of the most noble Arts in the World. Which is not a little Mortifying to me. While the Arts are so disregarded I can hope for nothing, eith[e]r to encourage or assist me in my studies but what I receive from a thousand Leagues Distance, and be my improvements what they will, I shall not be benefitted by them in this country, neither in point of fortune or fame. This is what I wrote at large in my last letter Dated [ ] as the only reason that discourages me from going to Europe, least after going I shall not find myself so good an artist, as to merit that encouragement that would make it worth my while. It would by no means be [ ] to go th[er]e to improve myself, and then return to America; but if I could make it worth my [while] to stay there, I would remove with Moth[er] and Broth[er], who I am bound by all the ties of Duty and Affe[c]tion not to Desert as Long as I live. My income in this Country is about three hundred Guineas a Year, out of which I have been able to Lay up as much as would carry me through and support me handsomely for a Couple of Years with a family.<sup>1</sup>

**CRITICAL COMMENT ON GILBERT STUART  
IN LONDON, 1787-1805**

*The anonymous passages below are comments drawn from London periodicals on the painting of Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). Although two of them were written after Stuart's return to America, they all appear to have been based on personal contact with the painter or his work. Stuart's own remarks here quoted reflect his distrust of critical and pictorial fashion, and although Stuart mastered the English portrait techniques to such a degree that one of his pictures, Gentleman Skating (Washington, National Gallery of Art), was exhibited in the nineteenth century as a Gainsborough, he is praised for his visual accuracy and*

<sup>1</sup> "Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Peter Pelham," *Col-lections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, No. 71 (1914), pp. 41-45, 51-52, 56-58, 64-66.