

Copley did, however, seek the approval of the British art establishment. In 1765, Copley painted a portrait of his younger half-brother Henry Pelham, and sent the painting to the annual exhibition of the Society of Artists of Great Britain.¹²³ Titled [Boy with a Flying Squirrel](#), the painting attracted the attention of Benjamin West, an American-born artist who had moved to London. The painting's realism highlighted Copley's ability to convincingly paint a range of textures and surfaces. West wrote to Copley and implored him to come to London and learn the European painting tradition.¹²⁴ Copley would eventually take West up on his offer, but not for nine years. Until then, he continued to earn a good living by painting portraits of members of Boston and New York society.

In 1769, Copley married Susanna Farmham Clarke, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. The couple would eventually have six children together, and due to Copley's success as a portraitist and his wife's family money, they were able to purchase property on Beacon Hill next door to John Hancock, one of the wealthiest men in Boston.¹²⁵ The 1770s were a turbulent time in the city, as tensions with the British were increasing. Copley maintained friendships with both revolutionary and loyalist factions. One of his best-known portrait subjects was [Paul Revere](#), a member of the Sons of Liberty. However, Copley's father-in-law was a loyalist whose cargo was tossed into Boston Harbor during the Boston Tea Party. As tensions in the city reached a fever pitch, Copley left the country for London in 1774. His entire family followed, and they never returned to America.



John Singleton Copley Self-portrait.

Subject Matter and Visual Analysis

Not long after his arrival in England, Copley began to work on a historical commission. Whereas in eighteenth-century America the key to artistic success lay in portraiture, expectations in Europe were different. The art world was dominated by art academies like the Royal Academy in London. Founded by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the academy was where artists would train, exhibit artwork, and make connections with patrons. The academies propagated the hierarchy of genres, which established history painting as the most elevated subject of art, followed by portraiture, genre painting, landscape, animal painting, and lastly, still life. Benjamin West, who was a founding member of the academy, played a pivotal role in introducing the idea of history painting based on contemporary events, with his 1770 painting of [The Death of General Wolfe](#).

With this precedent in mind, Copley began work on *Watson and the Shark* in 1776. The painting was a commission by Brook Watson to commemorate the dramatic day he lost his leg. Watson had been orphaned as a child and sent to live and work with a relative who operated a merchant ship in the West Indies.¹²⁶ The fourteen-year-old Watson went for swim while the ship on which he was serving was docked in Havana but was attacked by a shark. A group of nine men in a boat attempted to rescue him. Watson was dragged underwater three times and lost his leg before his fellow crewmen were able to save him by stabbing the shark with a boat hook. Despite the traumatic injury, Watson would go on to become a British merchant and politician. He wanted to commemorate his triumph over adversity through the commission of this painting