

Nathaniel Allen



Object Title: Nathaniel Allen

Date: 1763

Artist: John Singleton Copley

Active: American, 1738 - 1815

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm)

Credit Line: Purchase, Frank C. Atherton Memorial Fund, 1976 (4376.1)

Object Number: 4376.1

Description:

The skills responsible for John Singleton Copley's fame can be identified in this portrait of Nathaniel Allen. Boston's leading portrait painter before the Revolutionary War, Copley used precise realism to capture his subject's character. In this portrait of Allen, a successful merchant and respected citizen of Gloucester, Massachusetts, each object suggests the ability and confidence of the contemplative businessman. Copley emphasized the sitter's robustness to indicate his importance, while the ledger, documents, and opened letter demonstrate the merchant's hardworking attitudes. The two hairy moles on Allen's cheek reveal the extent of the artist's faithful realism. Copley painted some of the most famous figures in American colonial history, including Samuel Adams and Paul Revere.

John Singleton Copley (American, 1738–1815)

Nathaniel Allen, 1763

Oil on canvas

Purchase, Frank C. Atherton Memorial Fund, 1976 (4376.1)

Boston's leading portrait painter before the Revolutionary War, John Singleton Copley famously captured the appearance and character of his subjects with straightforward and impartial realism. Each element in this portrait of Nathaniel Allen, a successful merchant and respected citizen of Gloucester, Massachusetts, suggests the skill and confidence of the shrewd and exacting businessman. Allen is robust—an indication of his standing—and his work ethic is vigorous: on the table before him are a ledger and various documents, and he holds an open letter as if caught in the act of reading it. Far from idealizing his sitter, Copley has rendered Allen with resolute candor—right down to the two large moles on his right cheek. In addition to Allen, Copley painted some of the most illustrious figures in American colonial history, including Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, both of whom he captured, like Allen, deeply engaged in their chosen vocations.

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY

American, b. Boston, MA 1738; d. London, England 1815

***Nathaniel Allen*, 1763**

Oil on canvas

Purchase, Frank C. Atherton
Memorial Fund, 1976 (4376.1)

John Singleton Copley, who was essentially self-taught, became one of Boston's leading portrait painters before the Revolutionary War. Now considered the preeminent painter of eighteenth century America, Copley's stylistic characteristics emphasize directness in the representation of his subjects and heightened sense of realism conveyed through effects of chiaroscuro, reflecting the undercurrents of pragmatism and idealism in colonial America. The subject of this portrait, Nathaniel Allen (1718-1778), the Great and General Court Assembly Representative from Gloucester, Massachusetts, was an important businessman who would, nonetheless, soon be bankrupted by the commencement of the American Revolutionary War.

Portrait of Nathaniel Allen (#4776.1) GALIO
Frank C. Atherton Memorial Fund Purchase
oil on canvas

U.S.
1763

ARTIST: John Singleton Copley (b. probably Boston 1738; d. London 1815). Earliest exposure to art from his stepfather, Peter Pelham, a mezzotint engraver and importer of prints. Copley's earliest known work is a mezzotint portrait done in 1753; in the years that followed he executed more than 275 portraits in oil, pastel and miniature before leaving America for London, in 1774. Copley's early work shows the influence of other colonial artists and he is known to have used imported prints as source material. However, his original handling of form and color and his unique ability to capture personality and character in his portraits has made him America's most respected colonial painter.

In London, he imitated the European "Grand Style," concentrating on history painting and painterly brushwork. His work from this period is generally considered far less successful and lacking in the appealing directness of his American portraits.

SUBJECT: Nathaniel Allen was born in Gloucester, Mass., in 1718, to Joseph and Mary (Coil) Allen. He was the grandson of Joseph Allen, who came to Gloucester in 1674.

He was a moderate Whig, a Congregationalist and a Justice of the Peace, who engaged in mercantile and shipping businesses and held interests in the fishing industry. In 1744 he married Mary, daughter of the Reverend Joshua Gee of Boston; and in 1754 he married Sarah, daughter of Epes Sargent of Gloucester (see companion portrait now in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, also painted in 1763). Of his 12 children, no direct descendant remained by 1873.

The Old Long Wharf at Gloucester was built by Allen, who resided in a house near the head of it. From 1765-1770 he was a Gloucester representative at the Great and General Court and Assembly. Bankrupt at the commencement of the Revolution, he moved to Dover, New Hampshire where he died in 1778.

MEDIUM: oil on canvas

STYLE: Copley's portrait of Nathaniel Allen is an extremely honest one, with no attempt made to idealize the man's appearance. The careful realism of the hairy moles on his cheek, the heavy, jowled face and the unbuttoned vest create a very specific, personalized image that tells us a good deal about Allen as a person. Surrounded by the tools of his trade, he sits behind the table with dignity and importance.

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The smooth, anonymous handling of paint in the broad areas of the jacket and the highly reflective table surface contrasts with the thicker, more painterly treatment of the textured buttons and crisp white cuffs. The subtle sensuality of materials and rich coloring are important elements in Copley's painting of the 1760s, a period when he had also fully developed his mastery of 3 dimensional volumes.

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDS: What can you learn about Nathaniel Allen by closely studying this portrait? e.g. ledger and letters are clues to his occupation. What can you tell about how he thought of himself? e.g. lack of idealization, realistic details of moles, suggestion of 5 o'clock shadow, powder on the shoulder of his coat, etc. You might use the feelings the class gets from this painting to build an image of colonial America in the years before the Revolution.

Note Copley's love of materials in the handling of the cloth and letters and his careful treatment of the table top: tie in with the beautiful wood surfaces of the furniture in the room.

Compare with the William Jennys portrait of Colonel Cooke which hangs beside the Copley painting. Both tell us about the personalities

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portrayed; both are probably very good likenesses. Yet they are vastly different portraits. How and why? Compare light, shading, attention to detail, background, color, etc.