COLEY’S NEW YORK VISIT

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“I may be able to engage 12 or 15 half Lengths or in proportion to that, reck[on]ing whole Length as two half Length[s], and Half Length Dobb[le] the busts. More I could not engage without a Longer stay.”

With this concise estimate of contemplated production John Singleton Copley answered Captain Stephen Kemble’s letter in the early spring of 1771. At the latter’s insistence he was entertaining the idea of a summer’s visit to New York. The clever talents of this self-taught Boston artist were well known and admired by many of the wealthy families of the prosperous city on the Hudson. By this time Copley was at the peak of his portrait-painting career and had no peer in the Colonies. Many prominent personages in New England had found the way to his studio door, and in the mother country he was admired by the knowing public and held in great esteem by such artists as Benjamin West and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

If New Yorkers wished to see examples of his work for themselves, there were in the city the fine portraits of General Thomas Gage, Commander-in-Chief of the British North American Army, and the Reverend Myles Cooper, second President of Columbia College. So it was little wonder that Captain Kemble shortly was able to reply:

“I have now the pleasure to acquaint you that twelve 1/2 lengths are subscribed, . . . and I make no doubt as many more will be had as your time will permit you to take.” Unfortunately an original list of subscribers, dated April 17, 1771, is fragmentary, but from what remains it is evident that Copley arrived in New York, his contemplated sittings well over-subscribed, and with little doubt as to the financial success of his venture.

Soon he and Mrs. Copley were ensconced in “a very commodious House,” after a restful journey, and, fitting out his studio on lower Broadway, he plunged immediately into the work of this brief New York period.

Whether original subscribers or not, among the families of first rank none could have been more esteemed patrons during this short visit than the well-known Verplancks of Wall Street. In the American Wing, since the installation of the Verplanck Room in 1941, the fine portrait of Samuel Verplanck, head of the family in 1771, has hung amid the original furnishings of his house.

Now, through the generosity of Mrs. Bayard Verplanck, the Museum is able to place Copley’s portrait of Samuel’s young brother Gulian beside him, thus reuniting two people who were in life closely bound together in mutual esteem and affection.

Though the artist has obviously recorded the physical resemblance in this little-known study, the subtle portrayal of the differences in the character of the two men is the highest evidence of Copley’s genius. On one hand we have a mature, competent person, sobered somewhat by his years of responsibility after his father’s death, a thoughtful man, displaying none the less a quiet sense of good humor. In the new

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acquisition we see a younger man of more buoyant spirits, of equally refined nature, but perhaps more readily inclined to laughter; a well-traveled, well-educated person, poised and equipped to undertake a similar satisfactory life.

Painted at half length, Gulian Verplanck is seated in a side chair of the period. The refinements of dress that Copley loved so well to depict are represented here in the carefully powdered hair, worn in a roll over the ears, the white neckcloth, ruffled waistcoat, and coat of bright blue with filigree silver buttons. The color is a striking feature, remarkably brilliant and well preserved, and illustrates Copley's extreme interest and care in mixing pigments. The observer will do well, however, not to let the blue of the coat distract him from the beautifully modeled face and right hand. At this time little trace remained of Copley's primitive methods of recording the texture of flesh in light and shadow. Unlike most colonial artists of his day, he conveyed to the canvas a realistic feeling not only of the outer surface but of the bone structure underneath. This work truly calls to mind the artist Matthew Pratt's exclamation to Copley on seeing his finished portrait of Mrs. Gage: "It will be flesh and blood for two hundred years to come!"

Gulian Verplanck was born on February 11, 1751, the youngest of the six children of Gulian and Mary Crommelin Verplanck. His father died nine months later. From that time Samuel, the eldest, seems to have taken the father's place in the small child's world, later on assuming the responsibility of educating his young brother and training him for a business career. Gulian attended King's College, graduating in the class of 1768, and was then sent by Samuel, Bishop Moore, and Gouverneur Morris to Holland to receive the same mercantile and banking training that had been so helpful to his elder brother. What better place could be found than the Amsterdam banking house of Daniel Crommelin and Sons, whose head was their maternal uncle, Daniel Crommelin. During this period he traveled much in Europe to round out his education.

He returned to America a self-assured, cosmopolitan figure, to take up what proved to be an unfortunately short but highly successful life, combining business and politics. He served as Representative in the New York State Assembly in 1788 and as Speaker in 1791 and 1796. His business career as stockholder, then member of the Board of Directors, of the venerable Bank of New York culminated in his election in 1791 to the presidency of the bank, a position he held until his death on November 20, 1799.

Gulian Verplanck's married life, unhappily of a scant fifteen years' duration, was an equally successful one. On March 29, 1784, he wed Cornelia Johnston, who bore him seven children. Their home was on the land that is today approximately 123rd Street and Riverside Drive. The property included the now famous resting place of St. Claire Pollock, known to New Yorkers as "the amiable child," though the title to the little graveyard was conveyed to Mrs. Verplanck after her husband's death.

By mid-summer Copley was well into the work that had been subscribed. As was only due a person of his prominence he was wined and dined on many occasions by his numerous patrons. In his letters home to Boston we find names of those who entertained him, Mr. Yates, the Verplancks, Mr. Apthorp; he mentions an invitation to Long Island to Mrs. Gage's and more than one visit to Mrs. McEvers at Blooming Dale. Time passed quickly in such an agreeable existence, combining work and pleasure. The artist's own words describe a typical day: "We commonly rise by six o'clock in the morning, breakfast at 8, go to our respective Labours till 3, when we dine; at six ride out and since we have be[en] here I have by no accident Lost more than one Day, as there is so many that are impatient to sit I am never at a loss to fill up all my time." Later: "I have began painting to the amount of 3 hundred pounds Sterg. shall take four more and then Stop."

Indeed Copley did not stop or lose a day until the middle of September. With his wife he took a two weeks' trip to Philadelphia for rest and relaxation, which gave him a chance to see some fine paintings. It should be remembered that during his life in America he had, with
few exceptions, little opportunity to see art of quality superior to his own and so had little chance to improve his technique from observation.

No doubt this was one of the strongest reasons for his decision to go to England when he considered himself sufficiently skilled and financially able to do so. That he had enough talent
was made very evident by the enthusiastic reception in London of his well-known portrait of Henry Pelham, the Boy with the Squirrel.

Again, in another recent addition to the Verplanck Room, the gift of Bayard Verplanck, Copley has made use of the same animal that helped to bring him fame in England. In this painting the artist has depicted nine-year-old
Daniel Crommelin Verplanck sitting on a broad flight of porch steps, holding his captured pet on a chain. According to family tradition the setting is the Verplanck home at Fishkill, New York, and the view in the distance a typical one of that locale.

The painting is rich in color, though subdued in tone. The boy wears a plum-colored suit and embroidered waistcoat. The far landscape is verdant green. There is a glint of gold from the buckles on his shoes and the chain in his hand. The huge brownstone pillars in the background dwarf the small figure.

Though Copley shows him wearing handsome clothes there is no attempt at flattery in the portrayal of the boyish countenance with the closely cropped hair. The observer catches the feeling of pride with which the youthful owner displays his magnificent bushy-tailed pet, so realistically drawn, clinging to his master's knee.

Daniel Crommelin Verplanck was the eldest son of Samuel and Judith Crommelin Verplanck. He was born in New York and lived in the family house on Wall Street during his boyhood days. Following family custom he attended Columbia University in the class of 1788.

His private life was marred by one tragedy. While still in college he had married Elizabeth Johnson, daughter of the first president of Columbia and granddaughter of the first president of King's College. Their happy marriage was terminated by her death the year after his graduation. Ann Walton became his second bride. Altogether he had nine children, two during his first brief marriage and seven during his second. In 1804 he moved his family to Mt. Gulian near Fishkill. His house there has historical interest as the first formal meeting place of the Society of the Cincinnati in 1783. Baron Steuben of Revolutionary fame was quartered there at the time.

Though perhaps not as prominent in public life as others of his family, Daniel Verplanck from 1803 to 1809 represented Dutchess County in Congress. Most of the time he preferred to live a quiet life, enjoying the role of farmer and a reputation as a silver collector and connoisseur of wine. At the age of seventy-two he died from a sudden heart attack.

It might not be mere surmise that this last-described portrait was among the unplanned work that forced Copley to extend his stay in New York. But finally in mid-December the artist wrote back to Boston of his hope for a quick return, summarizing his accomplishments:

"At last I can inform you this week finishes all my Business, no less than 37 Busts, so the weather permitting by Christmas we hope to be on the road." His New York venture had certainly taken more time than he had expected. However, the above-mentioned output was fairly rapid work for this notoriously slow and painstaking limner, who demanded many sittings of his subjects.

The Museum is fortunate in being able to add these two paintings to its collection, not only for the unusual association with their present surroundings but as products of Copley's last years in America. Within a relatively short time, in 1774, he sailed for England, never to return. While he accomplished a great deal of admirable work, including some of his masterpieces, in Europe, it is generally conceded that the individuality that is admired in his American efforts was gradually lost in his attempt to paint in the flattering and rather extravagant mode of the day.

Today a visitor, pausing in the Verplanck Room, must surely find himself in close accord with Captain John Small's sentiments, so aptly expressed in a letter to our artist, dated May 5, 1770: "Nothing Indifferent can Come from the hands of the Ingenious Mr. Copley."

The quotations in this article are from The Copley-Pelham Letters, published by the Massachusetts Historical Society. Other material is from John Singleton Copley by Parker and Wheeler, John Singleton Copley by John Hill Morgan, and the Columbia University Quarterly of September, 1907.